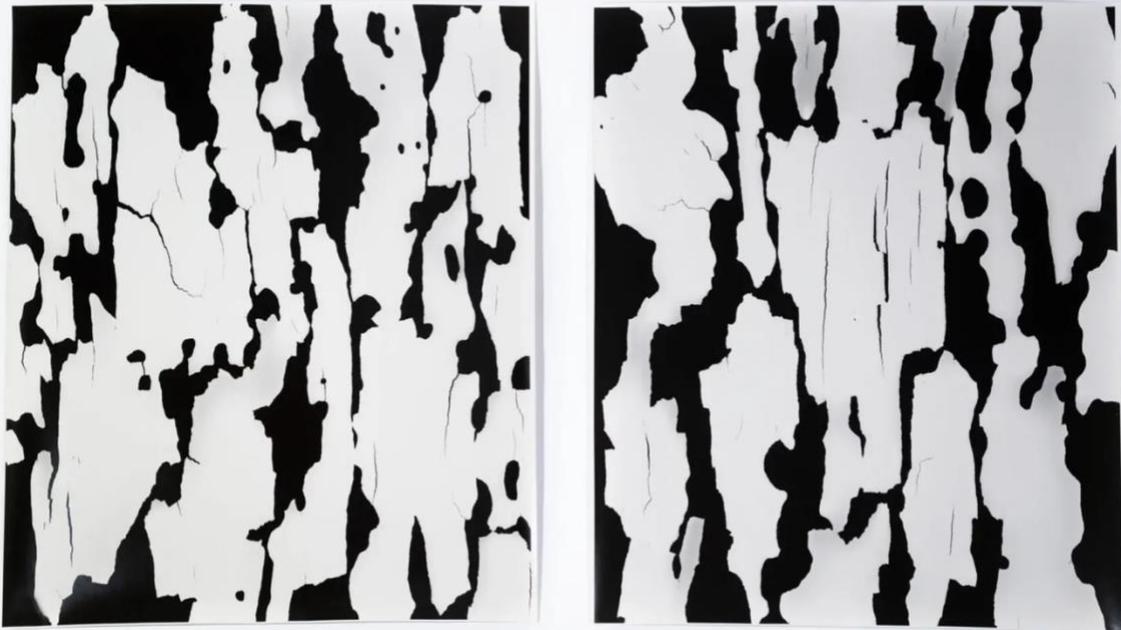


ART, ACTIVISM, POLICY, POWER: URBAN TREE CANOPIES



Colleen Plumb, *Untitled (Sycamore, no.27)*, 2022

OVERVIEW

Art, Activism, Policy, Power is a program that connects MoCP exhibitions and collections with high school students to help them discover how artists use research-based creative practices to make change in their communities. In Fall 2025, students from South Shore College Prep and Prosser Career Academy will work with environmental artist activist, Colleen Plumb, in partnership with [Openlands](#), to learn about the importance of trees in combatting climate change and maintaining healthy urban ecologies.

Introductory questions for discussion:

- What elements of nature do you use or see on an everyday basis?
- Where do you go to experience or be close to nature?
- In thinking about these outdoor spaces you go to, do you think they are safe from the threats of climate change?

ART

About the Teaching Artist: Colleen Plumb



Colleen Plumb

Colleen Plumb creates photographs, videos, books, and public video projections about the contradictory relationships people have with other species and the land. Working to increase empathy and unity across species, she explores themes of power imbalance and the human appetite for domination of nature. By partnering with nonprofit organizations advocating for animals and ecological healing, Plumb works to shift dialogue around what is considered humane.

Plumb's work has been exhibited around the world, including at the Portland Art Museum, Milwaukee Art Museum, Center for Fine Art Photography in Fort Collins, Blue Sky/Oregon Center for the Photographic Arts, Southeast Museum of Photography in Daytona Beach, and the Notebaert Nature Museum in Chicago, among others.

WATCH:

[Interview with Colleen on her process of projecting work throughout Chicago](#)

Questions for discussion:

- Colleen Plumb's earlier work is about unhealthy human relationships with animals. How do you observe people relating to nature at large?
- After learning a bit about Colleen Plumb's work in public art, how might seeing something in a public space compare to art you might see in a museum or gallery?

ACTIVISM



Student at Prosser Career Academy editing a portrait in the Art, Activism, Policy, Power program in 2024.

What does it mean to be an artist activist?

Activism can take many forms—from marching in protests and boycotts, to withdrawing time and money from organizations that do not align with your values, to simply learning more and raising awareness about the systems of oppression that shape our world, both historically and today. Artmaking, too, can serve as activism. It may be quiet or loud, depending on how the work is created, shared, or displayed.

Consider the role of art in environmental activism. Artists can amplify conversations around healing and caring for the planet, using beauty to foster deeper connections between people and nature. In this session of *Art, Activism, Policy, Power*, students will participate in workshops centered on trees to spark learning, creativity, and care for the Earth, while also reflecting on the role of art in advancing justice movements.

Questions for discussion

- What forms of activism have you seen, taken part in, or felt drawn to?
- Besides spending time in nature and taking care of the Earth, what are other forms of environmental activism?
- What are changes in habits or daily actions you can take to help the environment?

Environmental Justice

Some communities deal with pollution and environmental problems more than others, and usually not by accident. These communities are often made up of people who are already facing other challenges, like being low-income, people of color, immigrants, Indigenous groups, or those living in rural areas. They tend to live in places with more toxic waste and unhealthy conditions which can seriously harm their health over time.

This unfair pattern is called [environmental racism](#). It occurs when governments or companies make decisions—such as where to build polluting industries—that disproportionately affect communities of color. These decisions are often rooted in long histories of systemic racism and inequity.

Alternatively, environmental justice is defined by the American Public Health Association as “...the idea that all people and communities have the right to live and thrive in safe, healthy environments with equal environmental protections and meaningful involvement in these actions.”



POLICY

Why Are Trees Important in our City and Neighborhoods?

Carbon dioxide (CO₂) is a natural and essential component of Earth's atmosphere, playing a key role in absorbing and radiating heat. However, since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution in 1760, CO₂ levels in the atmosphere have increased by 47%, according to the [National Forest Foundation](#). This rise, largely driven by human activity, has caused the average global temperature to increase by 2 degrees Celsius, or approximately 35.6 degrees Fahrenheit. The consequences of this temperature rise are far-reaching: extreme weather events, diminished snow and sea ice cover, intensifying natural disasters, and shifting habitat ranges for both plants and animals.

Trees powerfully combat the challenges posed by increased carbon emissions. Through the process of photosynthesis, trees absorb CO₂ from the atmosphere and convert it into oxygen, directly reducing the amount of greenhouse gases in the air. They also prevent soil erosion by absorbing rainwater and provide habitats for countless animals, and provide a wide array of emotional wellness benefits to humans.

As shared by our program partner, [Openlands](#), "Trees are shown to have a positive impact on mental health, and they also increase property values, cool your home in the summer, create oxygen, and clean the air of pollutants."

Incorporating more trees into urban and suburban landscapes can play a critical role in lowering CO₂ concentrations, mitigating climate change, and improving quality of life for communities.

Questions for discussion:

- What businesses, practices, systems, or structures do you believe contribute to environmental injustices?
- Where do you see polluting industries in your city or town? What else is happening in these neighborhoods? Are there many trees, parks, and playgrounds here? Are there grocery stores, public transit stops, and libraries? How might the polluting industries connect to larger systemic inequities?

POWER



Tree Reverence and Stewardship

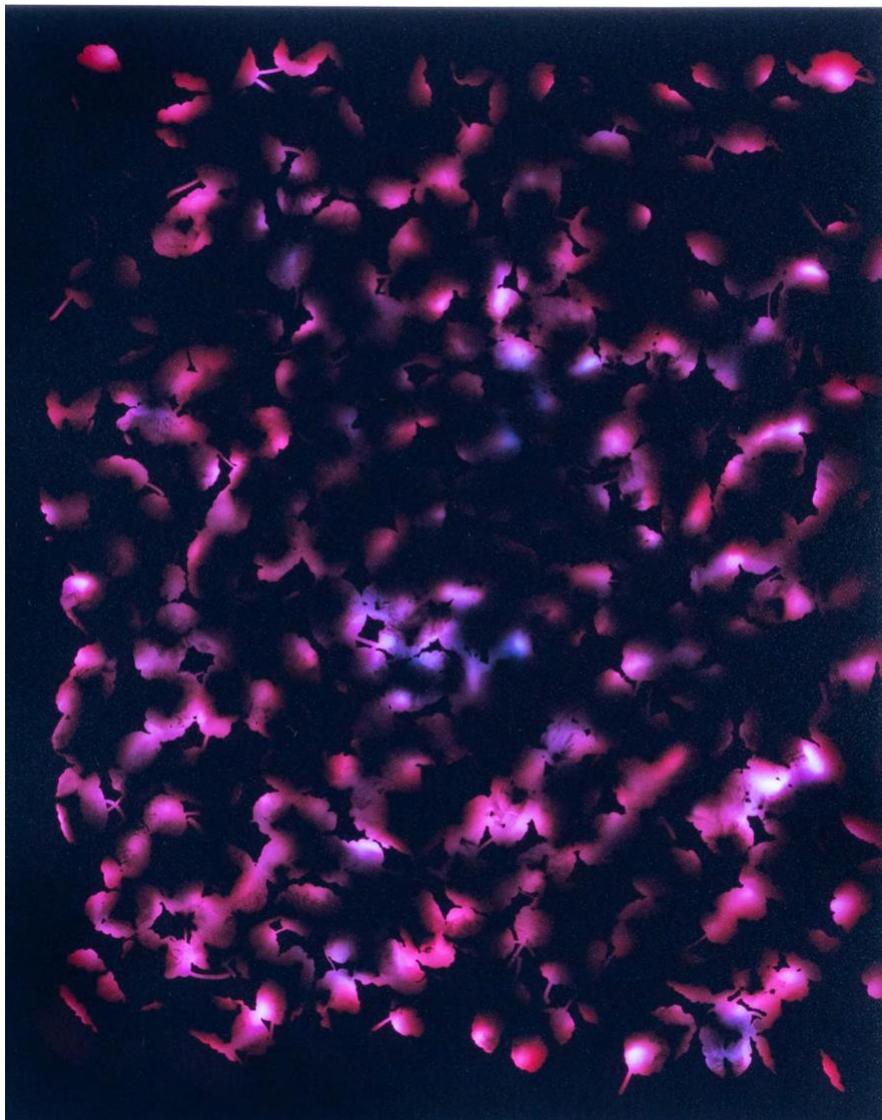
When we plant and take care of existing trees, we help ensure a healthier environment for ourselves and future generations. Teaching artist Colleen Plumb is a [TreeKeeper](#) with program partner, Openlands, where she has been trained in urban forestry and certified to care for, protect, and plant trees around the city.

While observing or caring for trees in Chicago, Plumb collects tree specimens (such as leaves, seeds, and bark) to create unique camera-less [photograms](#). The photographs appear as abstract depictions of her reverence for their forms.

Plumb states in her [artist statement](#):

Collecting tree material offered by the forest that exists within Chicago—along sidewalks, parks, backyards—is an attempt at listening. Can the voices of trees be translated through light poured onto photographic paper, and appear as image? I recognize the invisible forces and elements of the Earth, and pay attention to the more-than-human beings that entangle and connect us. I acknowledge time scales beyond human perception that can teach us how to live in closer connection to the Earth.

The invention of photograms as an early photographic technique paralleled development in biology and modernism—disciplines that explored new visual forms and sought to understand the natural world through art and science. My photograms connect with that lineage but belong to this moment. We now know that trees communicate with each other through fungal networks, chemical signals, root systems. This knowledge reshapes how we understand the intelligence of trees, especially now, as ecosystems edge toward collapse. My photograms aim to extend that awareness—an attempt at dialog with urban trees— to feel their presence, importance, and plight—



*and our connectedness. In the darkroom, using Colleen Plumb, *Untitled (Mulberry, no.3)*, 2025*

flashlights, gels, and movement—jumping around in the dark—asking trees to speak or participate energetically through waves of light.

When I first brought the Sycamore bark into the darkroom, the resulting photograms evoked bones and mark-making. It felt like a language from the trees. In the color darkroom, another voice emerged—through hue, shadow, and chance. I intentionally relinquish control over variables, embracing accident and intuition. This process echoes trees' own relationship to light: responsive, adaptive, a condition for survival.

Colleen Plumb, 2025

POWER

CREATE YOUR OWN TREE PHOTOGRAMS

Colleen Plumb works with photograms to create her *Marrow* series about trees. A photogram is a photographic process that does not require a camera. Instead, objects or transparencies are placed directly onto light-sensitive paper and exposed to sunlight. One of the earliest forms of photograms is the cyanotype, developed in 1842 and historically used to document plant life. In fact, the very first photobook was created by Anna Atkins, who used cyanotypes to record botanical specimens. The process relies on special chemicals that react to UV light, producing prints in a rich Prussian blue. In this workshop, inspired and led by Plumb, you will create your own cyanotype using tree specimens collected from your neighborhood.

MATERIALS

- Pre-coated cyanotype paper. We will use [this paper](#) in our workshop.
- A sheet of Plexiglas or non-UV glass
- Cardboard
- Leaves, sticks, rocks feathers and other found elements and objects.
- A tub of water that is large enough for the cyanotype paper to lay flat
- Sunlight!



Anna Atkins, *Spiraea aruncus* (Tyrol), 1851–54; for reference only/not held in the MoCP collection



Colleen Plumb, *Untitled (Catalpa, no.18)*, 2025

DIRECTIONS

- Before taking out your paper, play with arranging your collected materials, considering how each shape will interact with the others. Have fun with your design!
- When ready, take out a sheet of the pre-coated paper. Quickly arrange your objects onto the sheet.
- Place the glass plate over your paper and objects. Allow the paper to sit in the sun for up to 20 minutes. If the day is cloudy, expose your image for an additional 10 to 20 minutes.
- Wash your print in a tub of water until the dark blue of the image sets and the areas that were covered appear bright white.
- Allow the paper to try dry.

To learn more about making cyanotypes with materials other than pre-coated paper, **WATCH: [Recorded Cyanotype Demonstration](#)** by MoCP Educational Assistant, Sheridyn Villareal

Questions for reflection and discussion:

- While working with the materials you collected to make prints, did you notice anything new about their texture, color, or form?
- Did anything surprise you about working in this camera-less process? How does the print compare to the actual objects?

EXTENDED RESOURCES

[Works about trees held in the MoCP permanent collection.](#)

[GUIDE: How to care for trees by the Morton Arboretum](#)

[What Can I Do about the Climate Emergency?](#)

[Not Too Late: Project led by Rebecca Solnit and Thelma Young Lutunatabua](#)

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Artist statement: A short, written description that an artist writes about their concepts, process, and/or inspiration behind their artwork. Artist statements are written for viewers, potential collaborators, or collectors a deeper understanding of the motivations behind the artist's practice.

Climate Change: Carbon dioxide, a crucial component of Earth's environment, is a naturally occurring gas that absorbs and radiates heat. Though according to the National Forest Foundation, the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has increased by 47 percent since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution which started in 1760. As a result of this increase due to human activity, "...our average annual global temperature has risen by 2 degrees, which has, in turn, driven temperature extremes, decreased snow and sea ice cover, intensifying natural disasters, and changing habitat ranges for plants and animals".

Environmental Justice: The American Public Health Association defines environmental justice as, "...the idea that all people and communities have the right to live and thrive in safe, healthy environments with equal environmental protections and meaningful involvement in these actions."

Environmental Racism: Despite public knowledge of both the detrimental effects of carcinogenic air polluting facilities and the ways in which trees clean the air and provide safer environments for residents, the city of Chicago plants more trees in wealthier, whiter neighborhoods.¹

Environmental racism is an issue that impacts many communities in various ways such as toxic air emissions by AI generators in Memphis, Louisiana's "Cancer Alley", lead in Flint Michigan's water and sewage being backed up into Illinois homes. Policies around where to place polluting and waste facilities often have long lasting and intergenerational health detriments primarily on black and brown communities.

¹ "In Extreme Heat, Trees Can Help Cool Neighborhoods. But a Tribune Investigation Found the City Has Planted More Trees in Wealthier, Whiter Areas." *Chicago Tribune*, June 15, 2022.

Organizations such as Openlands and more are committed to addressing the issue of environmental racism with the root understanding that everyone deserves clear air and to exist in a nontoxic environment. Though we as individuals are also able to help in our own homes and communities, which still impacts the greater whole. Visit [here](#) to explore more ways to take action in Chicago.

To learn more about Environmental Racism, please visit these links:

- <https://www.nrdc.org/stories/what-environmental-racism>
- <https://openlands.salsalabs.org/HazelJohnsonCumulativeImpactsOrdinance/index.html>

Photogram and Cyanotype: A camera-less photographic process where an object or transparency is placed directly onto light-sensitive paper and exposed to sunlight. One of the earliest forms of photograms is the cyanotype, developed in 1842 and historically used to document plant life. The process relies on special chemicals that react to UV light, producing prints in a rich Prussian blue.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Guide

Visual Arts Standards

VA:Re7.2 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

Media Arts Standards

MA:Re7.1 Anchor Standard 7 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Media artworks can be appreciated and interpreted through analyzing their components.

MA:Re8.1 Anchor Standard 8 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. Interpretation and appreciation require engagement with the content, form, and context of media artworks.

MA:Re9.1 Anchor Standard 9 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. Skillful evaluation and critique are critical components of experiencing, appreciating, and producing media artworks.

Social Sciences Standards

SS.9-12.IS.1 – Create actionable, student-driven (or student-informed) questions that lead to deeper social studies investigations.

SS.9-12.IS.2 – Develop culturally informed, student-driven supporting questions that contribute to inquiry and evaluate the purpose of supporting questions.

SS.9-12.IS.3 – Develop new essential and supporting questions by primary/secondary investigation, collaboration, and use of diverse sources.

SS.9-12.IS.5 – Gather and evaluate information from multiple primary and secondary sources that reflect the perspectives of multiple groups, including marginalized communities.

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