



## ARTIST PROFILE

An interview with Mixed Greens artist Joseph Smolinski in New Haven, Connecticut

**MG:** How are you influenced by nature?

**JS:** Growing up in Minnesota has been a big influence. The changing seasons there are very dramatic, which forces you to be aware of the natural environment. My first introduction to art was from my grandfather, a self-taught landscape painter. He had a special connection with the landscape of northern Minnesota and built a Swiss-style chalet cabin on a beautiful lake there. I would often watch my grandfather make sketches of birds and trees for his paintings, which were very intricate in detail.

**MG:** Is the intricate quality of your work a result of your technique, or is it evidence of a larger concept?

**JS:** In graduate school I moved away from two-dimensional works and began to explore object-making and installation involving light, sound, video, and electronics. These works pushed me to think more conceptually and address my interest in science and technology. After graduate school I began the process of trying to unlearn everything I absorbed in those two years and drawing seemed to be a natural path for me to follow.

When I started to draw again, I felt most comfortable with a fine line on a small page. Now I just really get into the obsessive quality of the textures and details. I have found that this technique is the most honest way for me to render a drawing. It isn't a coincidence that my grandfather also taught me to look closely and give the subject the respect it deserves.

**MG:** How did you become interested in drawing cell phone towers disguised as trees?

**JS:** I was driving to New York from Connecticut when I saw this giant tree on the horizon. As I got closer I realized it was a cell phone tower disguised as a tree and immediately my imagination took off. I thought of these fake trees infiltrating the landscape like a parasite and I had a sudden realization of our impending biotech hybrid future.

**MG:** Why do natural disasters also recur in your work?

**JS:** As the ideas about a world littered with cell tower trees progressed I imagined the disasters that would ensue. Trees falling on cars, being struck by lightning, becoming victim to a hurricane or flood seemed like important events in this new world. These disaster images also started to suggest a struggle between nature and technology and brought about questions of progress. Many technological advancements have sprung from disastrous events.

**MG:** MASS MoCA will be exhibiting your outdoor sculpture, video, and drawing from the "Tree Turbine" project (May 2008). What is the concept behind this project?

**JS:** I've been interested in alternative energy for a while. I once constructed an installation of 500 potato batteries that powered flashing LED lights. While working with the tree images I started to think about what else the tree could become and reflected on that potato installation. Then I read an article in *The New York Times* about wind power and its opponents, who felt that these efficient sources of electricity marred the landscape. These were the same groups that had their cell phone towers disguised as trees so I figured that the best solution was to use the aesthetics of the cell tower tree for a wind turbine.

**MG:** Does your work have an environmental message?

**JS:** The "Tree Turbine" project definitely enters the environmental debate. We are in desperate need of alternative energies and while the "Tree Turbine" may not be the solution, hopefully it will pose new questions about our relationship to the environment.

**MG:** What can you reveal about your upcoming show (Fall 2008) at Mixed Greens?

**JS:** Here are some hints: hurricane, fire, tornado, drought, deforestation, causalities of war, apocalyptic technological Garden of Eden, and spinning trees for spent oil.

**MG:** What type of tree do you personify?

**JS:** I think I would be a birch tree with papery white bark and dark branches, invisible in the snow and bold against the dark forest. I am allergic to birch pollen though, so it may cause an inner struggle.