



MAINE AUDUBON

# HABITAT

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## ART ON A MISSION

Our Colorful Partnership  
with Maine College of Art

Eliza Donoghue Is  
Calling You to Action

Remembering Those  
We Lost in 2017



MECA student Alara Murphy '20 hangs artwork in the Gilsland Farm Gallery.



# ART<sup>WITH</sup> MAINE AUDUBON

## If You Want Creative Solutions, Start with Creative Partnerships

By Elizabeth A. Jabar

*How does art facilitate advocacy?*

*How might the citizen activist and the citizen artist work together to help us all be more effective in achieving our goals for the planet?*

*Can the experience and symbolic gestures brought about by art transform the world?*

These questions are at the core of the Public Engagement program at Maine College of Art, and they guide our partnership work in the community. From the beginning of MECA's partnership with Maine Audubon, it was clear that our two organizations hold shared values, including inspiring and empowering leaders, activists, and messengers focused on addressing pressing issues. The "citizen activist" and the "citizen, artist, designer" are critical to successful advocacy and education.

Contemporary artists are working in the studio, the classroom, and the community. Within these contexts, artists are building platforms for public engagement, dialogue, and social change. Essential to this work is building long-term relationships and connecting our art practice to the larger concerns of the world. By extending the campus into the community, we facilitate opportunities for students to co-create socially engaged art projects with new communities. In this framework, students begin to see how the practice of artists

and designers is expansive and dynamic, and how the way we work and where we work is evolving.

This fall, students in Professor Michel Droge's Public Engagement courses *Nature Lab* and *Field Guide to a New World* collaborated with Maine Audubon to research local conservation and environmental issues. They studied the role of the artist as cultural mirror, maker, and activist. Students produced prints and books that use the tradition of combining fine art and scientific research. The handmade field guides pay homage to the legacy of John James Audubon, Henry David Thoreau, Winslow Homer, and others in their use of illustration, field documentation, and writing to capture and reflect nature. The block prints echo the style and technique of Russian and Chinese propaganda posters while delivering calls to action on behalf of environmental issues.

For the students in these classes, this space of discovery and questioning was nurtured through active field study and research in the landscape. "Students learn to engage with the land to understand things on a visceral level," says Droge. "They experience the environment directly and feel it. It's not an abstract concept. They see how their work can aid the institutions we work with and enhance the work they do. As a result, they see the issues and the solutions and their impact. That's an

## The Roots of the Maine Audubon/MECA partnership

Two years ago, Maine Audubon Education Director Eric Topper was invited by Portland Pollinator Partnership founder and MECA staffer Annie Seikonia to hear MECA students present mock grant proposals about pollinator conservation. It was a unique and intriguing focus for an art class, and made clear that MECA wasn't just producing artists, but forging local leaders, activists, and messengers.

Next, Eric connected with MECA instructor Michel Droge. Michel thought Maine Audubon could be a rich source of inspiration for students to create woodblock prints in the tradition of Chinese propaganda art — bold images and colors, few or no words, and designed to evoke action. Eric collaborated with Michel, working with that class (and with another this fall, in which students produced handmade field guides) to teach them about Maine Audubon's mission and work and to help them select themes that align with our conservation priorities.

The art produced by Michel's students was displayed in Maine Audubon's Gilsland Farm Gallery this fall.

amazing form of activism. Once they feel that, they never lose it.”

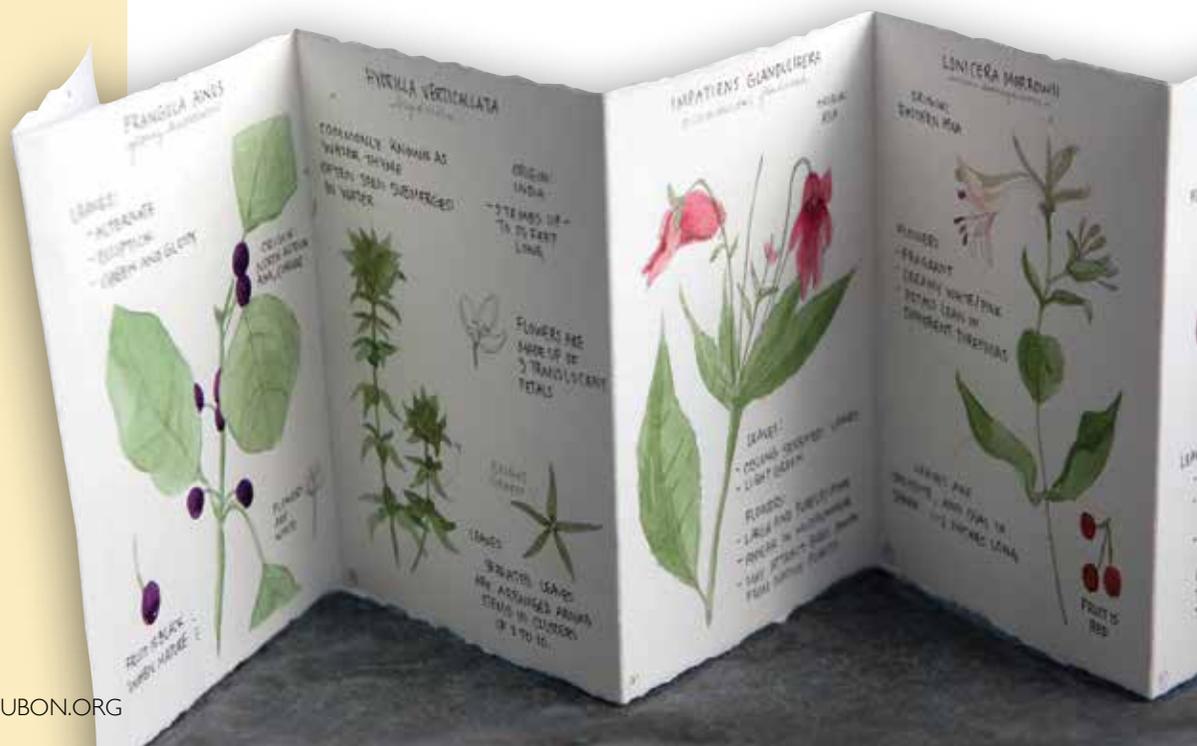
Ours is a timely partnership. When I consider the scale of human need and global uncertainty right now, I ask, “What is the role of the artist and the value of creativity in the ever-changing landscape marked by profound human need, environmental crisis, and rapid social-political change?” I believe the answer is in the question — that it is through creative action that it is possible to solve the world's most pressing needs. To accomplish this work, we need artists everywhere.

MECA student Matanah Betko '20 suggests that “it is important for the artist to present an idea for moving forward. It's not hard to make people feel bad, but is very difficult to make people move.” Adding artists into the equation opens up unseen possibilities, because artists bring creative processes and new models of thinking into problem-solving. These new models shift percep-

tion through active participation, social experience, and experimentation. By working collaboratively, student artists and community partners forge the authentic relationships that are necessary for making real, lasting social change.

Within this framework, we can see the power of collective action and awaken our creativity to solve real-world problems. This “co-creation model” amplifies the social aspect of socially engaged art by making work with, by, and for others. It guides all our work in the Public Engagement Program. Working collaboratively to address complex issues requires us to take our time, be reflective, and be deliberate. These conditions support the mutual goals of facilitating social action while also creating space for the questioning and mystery inherent in both artmaking and nature.

Maine College of Art and Maine Audubon have a shared view of Maine as a place of natural beauty, and a source of inspiration and inquiry. Our com-



**STRONG PARTNERSHIPS ARE SIMILAR TO A THRIVING ECOLOGY. THEY REQUIRE ATTENTION AND CARE.**

mon task of expressing the value of the local, as well as a serious commitment to repairing the world we share, brings the heart of our partnership into

sharp focus: we can realize the long-term goals of conservation and stewardship of all aspects of our community through strong partnerships.

Strong partnerships are similar to a thriving ecology. They require attention and care of the interrelationships within an environment, and an ability to see the totality of relations, guided by reciprocity and inclusivity. As caretakers of our environment and community, we must bring this way of seeing and being into all aspects of our lives. As MECA student Renee Michaud '20 explains, "I can step back and see the whole picture and recognize that I play a part. This feeling is similar to when I am making a painting and all the little pieces of paint

combine to evoke a form. We are all contributing to the palette, and together we create a better composition."

Collective action with our networks and communities is necessary to take on complex challenges and develop strategies for purposeful innovation and social change. There is a great need for artists and citizens who are willing to create spaces of risk where we can reach across boundaries and build bridges to imagine our collective future. My classroom is where I begin.

*Elizabeth A. Jabar serves as Chair of the Printmaking Program at MECA, where she is also Associate Dean and Director of Public Engagement. She is a feminist printmaker who explores a range of personal-political issues in her work, including cultural identity, representation, equity, and maternal ethics.*

