

Biennale artist is feeling Blue about the environment

Konstantin Dimopoulos paints a stand of Squamish trees to highlight climate change

By Cathryn Atkinson

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BRIGHT IDEA The Blue Trees project has taken place around the world, including in New Westminster, where these trees were painted last week.

Konstantin Dimopoulos wants your attention.

The Egypt-born, Melbourne-based conceptual artist has come to Squamish as part of the Vancouver Biennale and is taking something we all take for granted — our lush vegetation — and changing it into something unforgettable.

A creator of environmental and social justice installations, his 12-year-old project *The Blue Trees* takes a stand of living trees and paints their trunks temporarily cobalt blue.

He has recreated this striking image around the world, including London, Houston, Albuquerque and nine other locations.

Earlier this month, Dimopoulos added trees in Pier Park in New Westminster to the project, and has selected a location in Squamish. The location had not been announced as of *Pique's* press time, but painting will take place in the next week.

The colours eventually wash off after about three months, he says.

Dimopoulos believes Squamish is a good fit for the project.

"This incredible beauty that you have here. Part of what I am trying to express is how quickly that can change. Rainforests have disappeared like that!" he says, snapping his fingers.

Connecting with the Australian office of Friends of the Earth years ago, he was shown photos of rampant deforestation in South-East Asia. It was a career-defining moment.

"I'm not anti-forestry, I'm anti-ecocide. I'm for sustainable forests and managed forest, people in Canada make their livings from it," he says.

"It's important to other foresters, not just me, to say that ecocide is not good enough. I don't want to push anyone away, I'm trying to bring the forestry community into the discussion."

He thought of the famous Greenpeace protest of painting the white coats of seal pups bright colours in order to protect them from hunters, and decided to do this to trees. The pigments used do not harm trees, he says.

"Colour in nature is also used to say 'danger.' Some animals are red or blue in order to stop others eating them. So I thought about the trees, about them saying, 'Don't touch me!'" he says.

After Squamish, he will paint trees in Singapore, Stuttgart and Florida. *The Blue Trees* has become the largest project of his 30-year career.

"With art, you never know where it goes when you create it. This idea started with me wondering how we could raise the issue of deforestation, not in a forest, but in an urban community," Dimopoulos says.

"Urban communities people want cheap things, cheap meat or lumber. And people are supplying it by cutting down forests. The urban community often doesn't see the problem."

He also educated himself on the importance of trees to the creation of oxygen, and has used this in his work.

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