

Vermont Arts Council

Transcript

Vermont Made, Episode 13

“Yestermorrow’s Elements of Shelter with Thea Alvin and Meg Reinhold”

This document is available in large print upon request.

(00:00): [A loon calls over a soft, bright guitar riff, songbirds twittering in the background.]

Desmond Peeples (00:05):

You're listening to “Vermont Made,” the show where Vermont creatives tell me, Desmond Peeples, all about something they've made. In this episode, I speak with Thea Alvin and Meg Reinhold, two of the artists behind a new exhibit in the Vermont Arts Council Sculpture Garden called "Elements of Shelter," which will be on view for the next two years, through May 2025. Come see it at 136 State Street in Montpelier, Vermont.

(00:34):

The exhibit consists of five timber-framed gateways of painted wood and stained-glass, which represent the elements of shelter — earth, wood, metal, water, and fire — as well as a unique bench and a hanging sculpture of wood and metal. Thea Alvin and Meg Reinhold conceived of the exhibit, then constructed and installed it with the help of a team of fellow instructors and staff from Yestermorrow Design/Build School, a leading center for sustainable design and building education located in Waitsfield, Vermont. The exhibit's towering, colorful structures invite viewers not only to wander a beautifully transformed space on State Street, but to acknowledge the looming pressures of our current climate and housing crises. I had the pleasure of speaking with Thea and Meg about the exhibit's development,

their backgrounds as artists, and the unique power of learning and being at Yestermorrow Design/Build School.

(01:34):

[A short loon call plays, accompanied by songbirds.]

Thea Alvin (01:35):

My name is Thea Alvin. I have a sculpture park and studio in Morrisville, Vermont. I'm super excited to have taken on stained glass in the last three or four years, [learning] how to make glass and to create shapes and designs and participate in this installation here in Montpelier.

Meg Reinhold (02:05):

My name is Meg Reinhold. I'm a muralist. I have a business called Trillium Handcrafts and I live in Granville, Vermont. I am a muralist and a textile artist. I did the painting portion of this installation and some of the design work, along with Thea, and also lent a hand with chiseling out some of the joints in the timber frames and things like that when it was time to put the structure up.

Desmond Peeples (02:28):

Great. Thank you. You're both here and the exhibit is here, thanks to Yestermorrow Design/Build School, let's say. I know what that school means to me just from my limited knowledge of it, but I would love to hear from the both of you, one, the school's mission and what it means to you in particular, and how you became involved with Yestermorrow.

Thea Alvin (02:57):

Quite a few years ago, a friend of mine signed me up for a straw bale building program there, and that was my introduction to Yestermorrow. The friend lived in Granville, which by chance is where Meg's studio is located. I took the straw bale class and I fell in love with the motto of the school, which is "think with your hands." That, for me, is the best teacher.

Somebody else's hands who know what they're doing, I think, [are] a really profound teacher and goes much farther from my learning style to watch somebody who is a master at crafts or with what they're doing, watch how their hands move. It goes miles beyond what the written word or photographs of it can do in terms of me being able to learn. I became a teacher there at the school about 15 years ago, and I teach a program called The Art of Stone, and I teach a masonry oven class. I've been, for 10 years (but not continuous because of the pandemic), teaching a restoration program in the Alps in Italy.

(04:05):

We're restoring a 15th-century village up there. The way that we're doing that is... All of the programs that Yestermorrow offers really are hand skills. So, an instructor will instruct and we learn by doing instead of just, for the most part, sitting in a studio. That's also doing, but to learn by building and by exploring the material and the place, maybe... to experiment and to feel comfortable with the experimentation process and not needing it to be one particular right way. I really enjoy that, that if you get an idea, you can follow the idea. That freedom of expression through building and through construction, I think it's really, really empowering. So, I've learned to empower people, my students, and to be empowered by them and to be able to inspire people and to become inspired by the school and to feel very confident that if I don't know an answer to some structural question that I'm

pondering that there [is] a wealth of knowledge, including an actual library there, to teach me how to solve whatever it is that the question is.

Desmond Peeples (05:30):

You said you started with a straw bale class.

Thea Alvin (05:33):

Yes.

Desmond Peeples (05:34):

Can you explain what that is?

Thea Alvin (05:35):

Sure. Straw is a building material. A straw bale is a giant block, like a construction block, and you can stick them together with oak stakes and then you could put plaster on the outside of them and you have a super insulated structure. In the state of Vermont, you can have really, really thick walls. In fact, some of the instructors now have a company (I believe they're based in Winooski) called New Frameworks. And they're building panels so that they have... They're super insulated straw panels that are finished on both sides, and you can just build a house with these panels. You don't even have to actually get the straw on a truck anymore, you can just put the panels together. Straw is a profound insulator. It's a renewable resource, it's natural, and it doesn't offgas. For all those things, you can have an extremely healthy house and a sustainable system for building.

(06:43):

It was really inspiring. From that, I helped a fellow student build their straw bale house on a stone foundation that I built with them. And then I took home a puppy from that build and had developed so many friendships from that first interaction and the dog. That was many, many years ago now but I still have all the friends and all of those connections. The strength of that, of people on the same mission trying to do something that's so whole and so wholesome and regenerative, it feels... At the end of the day, you see a construction that you've made. You can see massive progress. The programs at Yestermorrow are five days long, some of them. Some of them three months, some of them six months. There'd be structures you can live in. I think that's just a very powerful tool when you give a person the skills to build a home from straw. You can't find something more magical than that, I think, except maybe stone. [Desmond laughs.]

Meg Reinhold (07:54):

A little biased, huh? [She laughs.]

Thea Alvin (07:57):

Just slightly biased, yeah.

Desmond Peeples (07:59):

Meg, so what does Yestermorrow mean to you and how did you become involved?

Meg Reinhold (08:04):

Well, I grew up in New Hampshire and I grew up in a building family. My dad had a really high-end log home construction business. My mom helped him run it. I went to art school in Portland, Maine — Maine College of Art. I graduated and wasn't sure what I wanted to do next. So, I ended up

through-hiking the Long Trail, just as [an] in-between thing, and discovered all these wonderful towns in Vermont. Through the course of that, you'd drop into town and get groceries once a week, and I ended up in the Mad River Valley and just really loved the area. People were really kind to me, so I ended up moving there. I got a job at Yestermorrow, not completely understanding what the school was. I got a cooking job and I didn't really know what design-build was. But I had seen Yestermorrow's structures all around Waitsfield.

(09:04):

They had a great bandstand on the town green. They had a really funky little bus stop. The aesthetic, the style of the buildings was similar, or it was familiar to me. And I had poked around Prickly Mountain area where they had these really just wacky, incredible feats of architecture that were like nothing I had ever seen before. So, I was really curious about the school, and I learned what it was through taking classes there, through great interaction with the instructors. I cooked there for about 10 years, took a lot of courses. When things were slow in the kitchen, I would paint the school. I ended up painting murals in all of the dorm rooms and some of the common areas. And I painted signage. I enjoyed cooking, but it wasn't my passion. So, if I could squeeze a little bit of art time in, I would do that any way I could.

(10:03):

I think as far as what I value in the mission of the school is the focus on sustainability and using a combination of really traditional techniques and really cutting-edge technologies to marry the best of the past and the future in building. Sustainability is also just something that I... It's a thing I think about just in my regular creative life. I do murals in people's homes, but I

also do a lot of decorative painting on found objects. I will source a lot of beautiful old antique doors that people are taking out of their houses as they're renovating, and they put them out for free on the side of the road and I pick them up and I refinish them, and I paint these big botanical motifs on them. I'm really into mending. I mend my own clothes. I mend clothes for friends. I really like to repurpose things. So, I felt really aligned with that mission of the school, of just keeping your footprint very small and being resourceful.

(11:11):

I'm a homeowner. I have a fixer-upper house that needs a lot of mending. And Yestermorrow classes have come and done work on my house and Thea's house. We've been the beneficiaries of a lot of skilled people coming and doing... I've had a natural plaster job done in my living room that I got to join in and help on. I've had custom cabinets built where I got to be a student and a client in the class. I've found a lot of ways to just appreciate everything that Yestermorrow has to offer to myself and the community, and it was really wonderful to work there for as long as I did.

(11:54):

I was there for almost a decade. When I first started, not fully knowing what the school was, I never would've thought I was going to be there for a decade. But the community was wonderful, and the only reason I left was just because I had been doing so much art on the side, and it was starting to take up more and more space in my life, and I felt really empowered to leave there and start my own business, so I did that last summer. When they reached out to me to collaborate on this project, it was really exciting to... I didn't hesitate for a second. Yes, absolutely. I want to come back and work with these people. My relationship with Thea started about maybe

seven, eight years ago. I was a student in one of her Art of Stone classes. So, it was really fun to go from being a student and having her mentoring me to doing this project where we get to just collaborate as artists.

Desmond Peeples (12:53):

That is a beautiful trajectory, I think. You mentioned the school that you went to. Could you say that again?

Meg Reinhold (12:59):

Yeah. I went to the Maine College of Art in Portland, Maine. I got a BFA in painting.

Desmond Peeples (13:09):

What was that like?

Meg Reinhold (13:09):

It was interesting. I went right out of high school, and you go through almost an art school bootcamp at the very beginning where it's a lot of rigorous design courses. It was a great school. Portland was a really fun city. I don't know how much it's changed since I was there, but at the time, the Porteous building was this big, old department store building that had been converted into studio spaces. So, it was a really neat historical building to work in, and I loved it, but I got a little burned out after three years. So, I ended up leaving at the end of my junior year. I took five years off and then I went back to finish up. I felt like I really found my voice over the course of those five years. At the time that I left, I was lost in terms of what I wanted to say.

(14:10):

My dad was in the military, he was in the National Guard, and he had just been deployed to Iraq. So, it was just a really difficult time for me to be away from family, and it was a good time for me to leave. When I came back, I had a lot of clarity around what I wanted to make. I had more skills. I was much more serious going back as a 25-year-old in terms of [that] I was in that studio all day, every day. I was making as much as I could possibly make.

(14:39):

I did it a non-traditional way and I'm glad with how things lined up. But then when I graduated, I wasn't able to find a job in the arts right away. I actually had a great lead at first. Jenny Holzer was doing some work out of Barre and she's doing these granite benches that were being engraved with text. I got a lead on that job. I almost got in on it, but instead, I ended up coming to Yestermorrow which was very arts adjacent, and I got to work with so many wonderful creative people and build my comfort with power tools. I feel like I can build anything now. I'm building cabinet doors. I'm renovating my house. It was a good fit, too.

Desmond Peeples (15:34):

Let's see. You also mentioned the business that you've started. I don't think you mentioned the name. Do you want to do that?

Meg Reinhold (15:41):

Sure, yeah. The business name is Trillium Handcrafts. It's primarily a mural business. I've worked for businesses. I've worked for individuals. Painted everything from place structures to shutters on people's houses, a lot of front doors. If you're driving around Vermont and you see very symmetrical,

botanical folk motifs on someone's front door, that may be a door that I painted. That's my favorite style to paint in. I really like nature-based things, plants, landscapes.

Desmond Peeples (16:24):

Well, the style is really recognizable. I feel like at this point, if I saw something, I'd think, that's Meg.

Meg Reinhold (16:29):

Oh, good.

Desmond Peeples (16:34):

I love that. You described Yestermorrow as arts adjacent. And I really loved that because I knew that, having no experience with the school. I just drove by and I was like, "These people are doing something very creative." But it's all power tools and saws and pushing the natural world together. Of course, you [Thea] are an accomplished artist as much as you are a builder. I would love to hear [about] your experience with Yestermorrow as an arts-adjacent environment.

Thea Alvin (17:07):

Sure. When you think with your hands and you are empowered to use tools and materials to create things, those things don't have to be straight lines. There doesn't have to be a right answer. I think that that's a really very cool opportunity to explore what the materials can do. When I'm working in Italy, we are restoring a village in the Alps but it's considered a laboratory where we're experimenting. I don't think that many construction sites would consider themselves an experimental laboratory here. We're really very

focused on getting things done and time is money. When we're exploring what tools and materials can do, time isn't money. Time is clever, time is "yes," time is "okay, let's try." When you frame the project as "let's see what happens," it's a completely different entity than "you have a 40-hour work week. I'm doing four tens this week. [Background laughter.] I'm just going to jam it all out. We're pulling twelves." [More laughter.] What those words are, it doesn't mean you're enjoying your creative life, even if you're a builder.

(18:46):

Arts-adjacent construction and building beautiful lines and building with natural materials and building with sustainability and sustainable practices and thinking about inclusivity and sharing knowledge with people of all different backgrounds and giving opportunities to people who are otherwise perhaps not... wouldn't even consider building because of the social pressure. It's really an important and nurturing environment to teach people who have skills that need to be drawn out that aren't necessarily apparent. You might walk onto campus and see people of all different colors and all the genders and no genders and be really inspired to come with whoever and whatever it is that you are and bring your person to this place and learn without judgment and with support. The only judgment would be safety. Don't put your hand [laughing] under the nail gun or whatever.

(19:50):

The way that Yestermorrow works is they'll have a client... There's a whole list. If you want to become a client, you can sign up. "I want to become a client." And then your need is the next thing. For example, I have an upcoming class. The class is full, and we have a client, but typically I would be pitching for a client and asking, "Does anybody want to be a client of a

pizza oven class?" And most everybody's like, "Yes, me." The client that we have asked, "What would it be like if you built an oven that was a trout?" So, I got to draw a trout and imagine what a trout oven would look like and how the mouth of the fish could be the opening, where the pizza comes out, and how the tail would swoop around and provide a protective area to make a pizza in. And just think about how cool that would be.

Meg Reinhold (20:48):

That's so cool. I want to see that [laughing].

Desmond Peeples (20:50):

Yeah, I want to see that.

Thea Alvin (20:52):

I really want to build that. But what the client ended up... They're going to have just a regular oven and it will be beautiful. The client's mom is a mosaic artist and they've made these mosaic trout that they're going to smooch on the outside of the regular oven after us. Okay, fine. [Background laughter.] That's fine. It'll be very arty and very beautiful, but I still want to build a trout. It might be slightly trouty, just don't tell her. [More laughter.] It [has] a little tale right in the end and some eyes. The school has a record, there are memorable items like the bus stop that Meg mentioned. There's a certain flavor. The Prickly Mountain houses are very particular. The school was founded by architects who were exploring what would happen if they didn't cut the board off. If you left the board long, could you do something with the end of it? What would it look like if you stuck it up like this?

(21:50):

The concept of exploring "what would happen if..." is the fundamental of the school. That's that little niche that I open up and experiment with. What would happen if we did such and such? That's where the magic begins within each class, because you might need a trout oven, or you might need a roof system over something, or a garden shed, or cabinets, or you might be interested in sustainable forestry, or beekeeping, or building bee boxes for your beekeeping, or permaculture design so that you can keep the bees in the boxes in your garden with no till system. All of those aspects are also part of what the school teaches, not just how to build a house. They also teach you how to build passive solar houses. How to have really smart houses that use maybe a cord of wood a year instead of burning fossil fuels. They teach all sorts of things.

(22:54):

The way that you get there is by experimenting with what would happen with the materials, and you get to play with those along the way. Each class is composed of between five to 13 or 14 people. And each one of those people has their own ideas, their own educational background and their own ways of approaching [things] and their own learning differences, maybe. While you're learning from your instructor or instructors, depending on how many are in the group, you're also sharing and you're learning about who is with you in the class. You're able to pick up architectural and design ideas and philosophies and talk about religion and politics in a setting where it's non-confrontational and you're learning how to interact on a very different level with people from really, really wide backgrounds.

(23:51):

I think it's the way to heal everything, actually, because when people are learning together... You're learning, so you're a little bit vulnerable and

you're putting yourself out there all together. Even if you're an expert in your field, you're learning this new thing and you're learning together with other people who are learning. From that perspective, you're able to really see the equality across the differences.

Desmond Peeples (24:20):

A word that keeps coming to my mind that you said earlier is “regenerative.” I absolutely love... That's the essence of what's going on there. We talked a little bit about Meg's background as an artist, how she developed. I would love to hear a bit of the same from you.

Thea Alvin (24:36):

Oh, sure. I don't have an art school background to rely on, and I always wished I had gone to art school. I also am really grateful that I never did because I feel like I'm an outsider. I feel, because I don't study art... and I deliberately now don't study art because I love the idea of inventing a system or making a thing completely on my own, even if it exists in a parallel, real universe — not parallel universe but it's out there. For example, one time I was building a chimney at my house. I'm a trained mason. I have apprenticed to masons for years and years, so building chimneys and fireplaces and things is fairly normal. But I was building this chimney at my house and instead of laying the bricks brick-style (across, horizontal, one over two, two over one, like that), I stood the bricks up and I made them go around instead of across.

(25:41):

And I was like, "oh, I'm so smart. This is so clever. I'm just, I'm a genius." While I was having the "I'm a genius" thought, I had the also very powerful thought of “this has been done before. You're not the only one. You're not

the first one. Stop with the ego." I really enjoyed that reflection on my own self in that moment, so I settled myself back down. A couple of years after that, I was in Mexico teaching and I saw a beautiful chimney with standing up bricks in the round, and I was like, "Yay, it does exist." And I was so excited that I did invent it for me, I did, because I had never seen that chimney, but that person also invented that chimney. But we erupted in the same media at different places in the world. I love that that can happen. I love that art is like that. It's this spontaneous combustion of creative cleverness.

(26:40):

That is the profound beauty of art for me. It doesn't have to be this thing that one person owns for their own self. It's this thing that's out there for everybody to tap into and to share and to invent and develop and play with. All this media is out there. [Pauses.] I've come from a background where my father was wealthy and my mother was poor. I grew up with my mom for 10 years on Cape Cod. And then I lived with my dad for the following eight years on Martha's Vineyard, so I have this very posh background. But then I ran away when I was 18 and I was living in a camp in Wolcott with a husband and subsequently three little children. And then shortly after that, I was living in a camp in Wolcott with three little children and no husband.

(27:29):

I had to find a way to support us. We had no electricity and no running water. Subsistence was a way of life. I went... In Stowe, there was a climb-in dumpster, and you could climb in there and they had clothes and shoes. We called it "the box" but we also called it "the mall." [Background laughter.] I shopped in the mall in Stowe for years. What I would do there was glean clothing. I would take apart all of the old cashmere coats and fur

coats and flannels and plaids, and I would take all the zippers off of the jeans and the corduroys. I would refashion all of that material that was now raw material into teddy bears. I dressed the teddy bears as loggers, as old ladies, and as couples, and they were really cute. I could make a teddy bear a day and I could sell it to the people who threw away the clothes in Stowe. I was able to earn \$45 a day making teddy bears from my home. That was enough to buy dented canned food at the store with food stamps to support the kids.

(28:54):

I also made their clothes from all those scraps of things. From that time period, I developed a resiliency and hope and trying to see the beauty through the poverty and to make beautiful things from thrown-out stuff and to not have shame, but to have pride in being able to be creative and clever. \$45 a day income isn't a lot, but it was enough. And to have enough and to be okay with enough. Later, when the kids were a little bit older, I started to work in construction, and I was stripping a roof in Stowe. I was peeling shingles off it with a roof shovel. It's a special toothy metal thing that you pry the shingles up with. And there's a big dumpster and a tarp down below. And the person's house had a skylight in it.

(29:53):

I looked through the skylight onto a rocking chair in their little foyer, and there was one of my teddy bears on this lady's rocking chair. I was so excited. I jumped down and I was covered in asphalt debris and a tool belt and sweaty and gross, and I went to her front door. I was so proud of myself, and I knocked on the door and I told her that I made her teddy bear. And she was like, "Okay, lady." [Laughter.] "Go away, please." I went home and I got my photo album and I brought it back to her the next day,

and I showed her her teddy bear and all the other ones because I had pictures of them. I realize that this is a tangent, but to be resilient is a lifestyle. It's not just a fashionable word, but it's one where you really are resilient.

(30:46):

It's a way of being. It's an outlook. It's not just a thing that you do sometimes when you have a hard time. I felt, in the stained-glass work that we've done, the first piece I did in the series with Meg was called "Fire." I've had a fire and I've been chased by fire. And fire is a very destructive force. It can also be the force that keeps us warm and alive. In Vermont, fire is a very real part of staying alive in the winter, keeping warm. We use it every day to cook our food and to eat, to sustain our bodies. We think about the resiliency of this earth as it's undergoing scorching heat and desertification and what it would take for the earth to be resilient and to have enough and to always come back and to always keep trying and to always stay within that presence of mind, of being able to do it and to not just despair and to not quit.

(31:56):

What if the earth quit? What if it stopped being resilient? We'd be in really deep trouble. I try and live that, where resiliency isn't just a matter of fact or a struggle, but resiliency is about making it beautiful and making it pleasant and valuable and worthy. While you can be poor or wealthy, you can have dirt under your fingernails, but to make it lovely while it's all the other things as well. I think for me, that's my religion, that's my way of life, is to be always in hope and to be always working towards creative entities and to keep moving forward in creation and to make things that also inspire

other people who are in the dark to have hope and to see that you can struggle and you can be poor, and you can also make it and you can make it beautiful.

Desmond Peeples (33:05):

This is a wonderful segue into the works of art and the sculpture garden. I would love to talk about the development of this exhibit, "Elements of Shelter," from concept to installation. You two are, you would say, the core artists behind the concept, and you worked with a wonderful team of Yestermorrow folks. Walk me through.

Thea Alvin (33:36):

I think being a stained-glass artist and working with Meg, who is a muralist painter, we wanted to find a way to merge the two media so that we could collaborate. We wanted to collaborate, we wanted to find a way to make these things fit together. Meg's brilliant idea of having five elements... I was thinking three or five, the number being odd was the important part, but what was the content of those things? We tossed around a lot of ideas. But she came up with the original drawings that... I recall a cairn of stones stacked up.

Meg Reinhold (34:17):

That was especially for you. [She laughs.]

Thea Alvin (34:21):

It's the first one. I was like, "Not starting with that one." [Laughter.] We relied heavily on Nick Pattis and Britton Rogers at Yestermorrow campus to

tell us the size that our imagination said that these structures needed to be. I knew that a glass panel, 30 inches square, would read well if it was overhead. And I knew that I wanted to have overhead artwork. I thought it might be triangular in shape so that the glass would be in the middle and that Meg would have two triangles on either side and a big triangle on top. We worked with those very vague shapes and presented the idea to the Yestermorrow folks. Britton said, "Nick will figure this out." Nick came back the next day with measurements and designs and [an] AutoCAD-type drawing for us. Megan and I took those, the dimensions, and she came over to my studio and laid out these huge pieces of paper, and we cut them out. She cut them out [laughs] — I was playing with glass.

(35:41):

We did the drawings together with pencils and pens on those huge, at scale pieces of paper. We worked out one or two that first day. And then I started to work on the glass part and she took the paper home and started to work on the paint part. From there, the collaboration has been really strong with her really teaching me a lot about color. I taught her the rules of how the lines of stained glass are pretty demanding. They don't do what paint can do. The lines of glass have to start and end on another line. They can't just go out and come back. Glass is a thing that has to connect through to the next line.

(36:34):

You'll see a lot of traditional-type joinery in the glasswork. The essence of stained glasswork, Meg had to learn, in this instant. It was such a compressed thing. Her gifts allow her to translate glass into paint so that it looks quite seamless.

Desmond Peeples (36:53):

It does.

Thea Alvin (36:54):

The lines of the paint are completely, I think, different from what paint would normally require because she's pulling through the vision of the stained glass and interpreting that in paint, which is really profound.

Meg Reinhold (37:10):

Yeah. No, it was a really lovely collaboration, and it was fun learning the rules of stained glass from Thea. It makes me want to learn how to actually make stained glass. But I was trying, in the painting of it, to just... Again, paint can't do what glass can do. Glass is beautiful in the way that it catches the light. Some of the pieces she chose have these gorgeous streaks of color shot through. I was trying to just bring a lot of energy into the way these things were painted and a lot of movement and a lot of direction because these elements that we're depicting are forces. They're forces of nature and they're sort of iconic. Also, it was a struggle. We did a lot of design work back and forth like "how do you depict earth?" How do you depict metal in a way that's instantly recognizable but also unique and beautiful?

(38:11):

In each of the designs, we tried to include some form of life. The fire was the first one that we made. Thea did that design all on her own. She started the glass, she sent me a photo of it, and it had feathers in it. She talked about global warming and her design process. We thought about the phoenix and

all these things. And it's like, all right, so we have feathers in one, we have fossils in earth, we have dolphins in water, and just ways to think about the interconnectedness of all life within these elements.

(38:52):

I'm really happy we settled on the overall shape that we did for each of these, where it's the iconic house shape. And it makes me think a little bit of a dormer in a house. Really early in the design process, we had talked about maybe creating things that provided shelter, like little corners where people could rest, or little things that had actual roofs. And I actually think that what we settled on was really perfect in that it doesn't provide shelter. One of the things that this piece talks about is the lack of shelter and the inaccessibility of it, and how out of reach that is for a lot of people right now. So, I think it all came together really well.

Desmond Peoples (39:47):

I'd love to talk more about how this exhibit invites people to talk [and] to think about the housing and climate crisis. But first, I want to zero in on the elements that are featured. I'm going to go in the order that they're presented from the State Street entrance: earth, wood, metal, water, and fire. Why these elements?

Meg Reinhold (40:17):

When we had talked about having an odd number of whatever this was going to be, there's so many things that come in fours. I was thinking about the four seasons or the four elements, and then I realized that in Chinese medicine there are five. I don't know very much about Chinese medicine, so

I can't talk about it like I'm extremely knowledgeable, but I've learned a little bit about it. And one of the things that I understand is how important it is for all of those elements to be in balance with one another, and that it can be a concept that relates to the human body, or it can be a concept that relates to something much larger, like the health of the planet. Yeah, that was really the jumping-off point for us.

(41:05):

Also, there's no hierarchy within those elements. They're sort of arranged in a pentagram shape and they're all interconnected and all inform each other, and some of the elements will feed another. Some of the elements will keep another one in check. So, it was interesting. I've just scratched the surface of it and I'd love to learn more about that. But it felt like a really good fit for a lot of the things that we were trying to communicate here. And also, just that they are structural elements. They're building elements that we have our hands on all the time as builders.

Desmond Peeples (41:44):

How about Johno Landsman's two pieces? Do you want to say anything about those? The bench and the wooden sculpture hanging from the tree, how [do] those fit into the concept?

Meg Reinhold (41:57):

He created those pieces separately. The hanging piece, aesthetically, visually, I think actually fits really beautifully with everything else. And I can't speak to what his concept was, but the seating that he created, that beautiful bench was definitely meant to have a conversation with the gates just in terms of the shapes of it and the way it was put together.

Desmond Peeples (42:21):

Yeah, I definitely see that conversation happening. Also, you're walking through the gates, and they don't necessarily provide you a shelter of any kind, but you can come and rest on this bench. You can also lie down on it and just collapse. [Laughter.]

Thea Alvin (42:35):

It's so nice. [Laughter.]

Desmond Peeples (42:37):

It's really wonderful. Let's turn to the topics that this exhibit is grappling with, the housing crisis and the climate crisis. How were you hoping to invite viewers into those subjects with this work?

Thea Alvin (42:58):

I'd like to encourage people to be curious about discovering what each one of the elements is. And then reflect on why they are together in this group and why they are together in this shape. With that, each one of the pieces has inclusions in it. So, the metal one has bees and honeycomb overtaking nuts and bolts, or the nuts and bolts are overtaking the bees and the honeycomb. Within the Chinese medicine philosophy, each one of these elements ascends or descends. And each one is supplanted by or surpasses another. So, it's interesting that all in balance, it all holds itself together. Right now, our systems are very out of balance. A great takeaway for people would be to see how they're inspired by this work to reflect on their own lifestyle to see if they are in balance or if they're not.

(44:01):

In speaking with a beekeeper, recently, he was saying how his bees are being stolen from the places where the bees are working. He drives to put them in orchards and patches and things. He's a professional beekeeper. And other people come along with semi-trucks and steal his bees because bees are so rare now and they're a valuable entity, they're a valuable quantity. Humans would survive four years, Einstein said, if there were no bees. As we carry on with our culture of buying easy-to-get foods that have systemic pesticides within them, we're happy because we have cheap food, a lot of it, and we're killing [ourselves] while we're merrily going about our way. I want to provoke people to awareness through the beauty, to think [is] it sustainable? Are we able to sustain our lifestyle here?

(45:09):

Do you have practices within your life that you could change that would help us not burn up or have baseball-size hail or really scary floods? There [are] floods in Pakistan right now that are just incredible. Do we think of our own microcosm here in Vermont, or do we think globally of how poor countries, people who live on the fringe of famine or water situations that are incredibly dangerous? We only think of our little lifestyle here. How globally can we think? To have something that forces us to look up, it takes us out of our pedantic viewpoint.

(45:57):

Another big word I know is "myopic," [background chuckle] not really long or big, but it's [an] interesting word where we tend to be focused only on one area, like blinders that a horse has. I'd like us to look up and to see, to take our head out of our own business and to see the bigger picture. If you stand back, you can see all five of these gates together. And to take a big wide look at our lifestyle and our culture and see if there are things that we

can change and how can we positively affect the culture of people around us? What is it that we can do to support climate crisis? How can we support the housing crisis? What are the actual things that we can do to provide sustainable change? How can we provide housing in a meaningful way for people who don't have homes?

Meg Reinhold (46:49):

Something that just struck me, just occurred to me in this moment, is just that act of looking up and the holiness of it. You usually see stained glass in a church. That's mostly the only place I've seen it. You don't usually see it exposed to the elements in the way that it is here either. It is a holy feeling to walk through them in a way. The first time I walked under them it felt very big and very profound. It's just something I appreciate about that — that was a nice surprise.

Desmond Peeples (47:25):

I see many people doing the exact same thing. People craning their necks as they walk back and forth through these gateways, and I can only imagine what's going through their minds. I am curious, what sort of reactions have you been receiving from your community about the exhibit, [from] the people who've come to see it, and also folks in Yestermorrow who maybe weren't necessarily involved in the conception or construction but know that this is happening? What sort of reactions have you gotten?

Thea Alvin (47:57):

I think people have been very excited about it and they're very moved, which I think is great. I don't know if I had any expectations of actual changes, that somebody [would] miraculously find a way to house all the

people that need houses. But we've had people tag us on social media with different photographs of themselves doing yoga postures and having lunch. I get lots of messages from friends about having seen them and I tell everybody [to] come and see the gates down here. They're very big, so it's something obvious. It's something to see. It makes art more accessible, I think, to have people come and be able to see them and come and walk through them. I'd love for that to be a way for people to step off into a creative culture. They might now see something that they didn't know that they could do and start doing something, anything. Just keep off the couch and out of your phone and do something. Even walking through them is a positive activity.

Meg Reinhold (49:17):

And how could you not want to walk through them? It's so fun to watch people just get pulled through. I've had great reactions or great responses from people so far, too, where they've seen it and they didn't realize that it was a Yestermorrow project yet, or that I was a part of it. They're like, "Oh my gosh, you guys did that? It's amazing!" Public art is wonderful and I've always appreciated it as a spectator, but I've never created it before. And it's a really great feeling to just create an experience that everybody gets to have. It's free, it's accessible, and it's a conversation starter.

Thea Alvin (50:01):

I like the ability that Meg and I have, just the experience of sitting outside on the picnic table and watching people experience it because they don't know that we made it so we're anonymous. We're sitting there, we're watching them, and they just think we're friends having a conversation, which we are, and just seeing people experience it and enjoy it. I've come down for the farmer's market and seen all sorts of people walking back and

forth and walking their dogs, dogs peeing on it, all the things. And kids climbing and playing and yelling and just watching it feel like it's been there forever already. It feels really nice and people are really enjoying that part. The discovery of secret things, I think, is really lovely. To previously have parked in the parking lot and then suddenly there's a thing to see, that's really fun.

Meg Reinhold (50:53):

I'm looking forward to seeing it in the winter, too...

Desmond Peeples (50:56):

Oh, me too.

Meg Reinhold (50:56):

...to see how much those colors show up.

Desmond Peeples (51:02):

Yeah. We're nearing the end of our time. Is there anything that we haven't touched on that you'd love to speak about?

Thea Alvin (51:12):

I would love to say that we are open for commissions. [Laughter.] I would love to install large artworks, exploring what glass and paint can do together in lots of shapes and sizes, way outside of this particular installation. I'm really inspired by so many stained-glass artists, but to build little structures that are composed of glass and paint, I think would be an amazing opportunity. I know that [Meg] and I, we are not tired of each other yet, and we're ready to collaborate on many more things and to really push our own limits and think with our hands of what some other possibilities can be. If

that means engaging in new teaching opportunities and finding new ways to create new works together, I think that that would be an amazing opportunity.

Meg Reinhold (52:05):

Yeah. Oh, I would absolutely love that. It was just so fun to just continually fire each other up throughout this process and just trade ideas back and forth. I loved collaborating with Thea and would love to do it again — any excuse I can find.

(52:23):

[A loon calls, birds chirping in the background.]

Desmond Peeples (52:25):

That's our show folks. To learn more about Yestermorrow Design/Build School and the Elements of Shelter exhibit at the Vermont Arts Council Sculpture Garden, check out the show notes at vermontartscouncil.org/podcast. Vermont Made is a production of the Vermont Arts Council, the primary provider of funding, advocacy, and info for the arts here in Vermont, which is and has always been Abenaki and Mohican land. This episode is sponsored by the Vermont Department of Tourism and Marketing. Visit vermontvacation.com to find countless ways to enjoy our state. And if you're a new resident here, visit thinkvermont.com for regional resource guides and job information. Thank you for listening.

(53:14):

[Songbirds twitter as a guitar strums a soft but upbeat tune.]