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## Westminster artist the third Vermonter to opt to use life-ending medications

Maggie Lake's death made use of the state's "aid in dying" legislation

By Howard Weiss-Tisman

<mailto:HWEISSTISMAN@reformer.com?subject=Brattleboro Reformer:> )  
<mailto:HWEISSTISMAN@reformer.com?subject=Brattleboro Reformer:hwtisman@reformer.com> (<mailto:hwtisman@reformer.com>) @HowardReformer on Twitter

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1 COMMENT

**WESTMINSTER WEST** >> When Maggie Lake began working on her last art show, "Gone to Seed," she knew the cancer she had been battling for the last eight years was finally overtaking her body.

Lake was diagnosed with lymphoma throughout her two stem cell transplants and multiple rounds of chemotherapy, she continued living, her friends said, with all of the joy, humor, and creativity that defined her life.

And she never stopped producing art.

In the fall, Lake approached Putney photographer Christopher Irion with a proposal to collaborate on a project. For the last 25 years Lake produced her botanical artwork; gathering plants from the forests of southern Vermont, and beyond, to create one-of-a-kind prints, which typically used preserved stems, leaves and flowers from specimens she had gathered. But the vision which Lake shared with Irion would take her artwork in a new direction, using Irion's manipulated photos of Lake's collected plants to produce large, archival giclee prints.

Lake had always used plants in their growing and flowering state, but this work she said would be different. These prints, she would later explain in her Artist's Statement for her exhibit, would show plants in their final stages of decay; leaves yellowing, stems turning brown and the plants' berries squashed and releasing their seed.



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"The transformation of the plants was so dramatic, from tiny shapes of starry pale flowers and their new born leaves clasped



tightly around their stems to ungainly bug-eaten golden leaves bearing red and blue fruits, oozing their seed and juices into the soil and decaying leaf matter," she wrote. "What a metaphor for life. For my life, as I struggle with terminal cancer, birth, death and rebirth."

Lake worked with Irion through the fall, and into the winter as she grew weaker, sometimes directing Irion or her collaborators when she was unable to lift her own arms to move the plants across the paper or make adjustments to the digital images.

"Gone to Seed" opened at the Mitchell - Giddings Fine Arts gallery, on Main Street, in Brattleboro on Jan. 8.

Eight days later Lake used medicine she obtained through Vermont's Patient Choice and Control at End of Life Act to take her own life. She did not time the end of her life with the gallery show, her longtime partner Oliver Brody said. After years of battling the disease, Lake's cancer returned in late October and in mid-January Brody said Lake decided it was time. Her family did not think she would live through Thanksgiving, and by the time the show opened Lake weighed less than 95 pounds and she was having trouble breathing.

She could have died in December and not seen her work hung on the gallery walls, or the show could have been delayed until February and there was a chance she would not have lived long enough for the opening. In the end she was able to complete her work with Irion, have the prints framed, and then using all of the courage and strength she could muster, Brody said, make it into Brattleboro to see her art work displayed in a fine arts gallery for the first time.

"She knew her end was drawing near and she knew there was a gallery opening," Brody said. "She was very determined to get this done. She was really pushing herself. Having seen the gallery, and having seen pictures from the openings and recordings of people, it was a culmination of her huge effort, and she could relax after that."

When Lake first called Irion in late October, her cancer was in remission and she said she wanted to have Irion take photos of her most recent work. The next time the two spoke Lake told him her cancer was spreading aggressively, and that she would not be receiving any more treatment to fight it.

"She brought the prints to my studio right after she found out it was back and it was probably going to kill her," Irion said. "She had already entitled this work "Gone to Seed," and she knew this was going to be her last work before she died. "

The two artists worked together during the next few weeks with Irion producing prints of Lake's plants and then bringing them up to her studio in Westminster West for approval. In November, Irion went away for a about a month not knowing if Lake would still be alive when he returned to Vermont.

When he returned he would make a plan to come over to show her prints only to receive a call that Lake was having a bad day, and with each meeting the images grew sharper and closer to Lake's vision. The experience and discussion, Irion said, went well beyond the images they were working on.

"Knowing she was leaving brought a different sensibility to working together," he said. "We had a lot of conversations about death, and fewer conversations about the nuts and bolts. She had a very enlightened view about going on into the Mystery. She was wonderfully alive, but at the same time she was quite sure she wouldn't be alive. I feel really honored to be a part of it,"

At about the same time Lake was downtown with her sister Katy and they walked into Mitchell - Giddings Fine Arts where one of the co-owners, Petria Mitchell recognized her. Lake told Mitchell about the prints she was working on, and about the health challenges she was facing and Mitchell asked her if she wanted to do a show in the gallery. As the two began talking about a show Lake's health quickly deteriorated and Mitchell rushed to get the show opened in January.

"We were hoping she'd be alive and see it," Mitchell said. "This was her last body of work and this was keeping her going. This was giving her passion, and she wanted to be able to reach the deadline and see it."

Galleries typically plan their shows out months in advance but Mitchell and her partner Jim Giddings were able to find a space in the gallery for Lake's work.

Lake came down to see the prints in the gallery on the day before the show opened, but she was not well enough to make it to the opening. About a week later Lake took the combination of drugs she had been prescribed and died peacefully, surrounded by her family, early in the morning of Jan. 16. The work Lake left behind is stacked on shelves in her studio in Westminster West and Brody and Lake's children are deciding how to handle the sales following her death.

On a recent, cold winter afternoon Brody was in the studio preparing a print Lake had left for her close friend, Sally Warren. Lake picked out a large print of red poppies for Warren, a lifelong friend who knew Lake's parents. Warren is an artist herself and she said she and Lake spent many hours talking about art.

Those talks, right up until the end, were focused on the work and on the ever-growing and strengthening love and trust between two women who loved to talk about art.

"One of the things that death does is keep you present," Warren said. "You can't go on to some indefinite future. You only have this moment. That might have informed our delight, but it didn't change our focus."

When Lake was putting together the show she and Warren looked over the pieces and Warren discussed the lines and colors and presentation of each piece. The print of the red poppies was one of Warren's favorite.

"We spent a lovely morning doing what we both loved the most, which was to talk about our art," Warren said. "I feel very fortunate and touched. I had no idea what she had chosen."

"She was very proud of this work," Brody said about Lake's final images she left. "It's what she wanted and Christopher realized her vision wonderfully she couldn't have been happier."

"Gone to Seed," will show at Mitchell-Giddings Fine Arts at 183 Main St. until March 1.

Howard Weiss-Tisman can be contacted at 802-254-2311, ext. 279.

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