

India-Lynn Upshaw-Ruffner
Wendy-Alexina Vancol
As Tall As a Tree (2019)

As Tall As a Tree; A Coming-of-Age Tale.

Wendy-Alexina's painting of her younger brother, Joshua, evokes the sensation of walking in a grassy meadow and the calm serenity of a natural environment. Vancol is a second-year studio-arts major at Concordia, exploring her Haitian heritage in her body of work. Since representations of the Black community and culture in the art world are lacking, Vancol seeks to explore a narrative that differs from the prevailing white gaze.

Her experience with her family is centralized in her practice. In *As Tall as Tree*, she depicts the sometimes difficult and confusing relationship she has with her younger brother. The artist recalls a time when they were close, and said he often compared their heights. However, as Joshua grew throughout his teenage years, eventually towering over his sister, Vancol began to feel their relationship distancing.

Their dissimilar natures became as evident as their height. Vancol felt disheartened by this idea at first, but she soon realized that her brother was not only growing physically but also growing emotionally, exploring, and spreading his roots as an individual. *As Tall as a Tree* portrays her brother emerging as part of the tree, grasping onto its roots, held gently by his surroundings.

Surrounding the tree are three different versions of Joshua, allowing the viewer to get to know him as a young man, a lover of soccer, transforming into a thoughtful, introspective individual. Representing the space, he has to continue growing, the vast blue sky behind him leaves room for the mind to wander peacefully. Like trees, humans are sensitive to their environment and rely on it to thrive. Family bonds, chosen or otherwise, are of immense importance to an individual's development.

If a tree grows up with no sun or no water for nourishment, one cannot expect it to flourish. To Vancol, her brother is the same way, in that he not only needs his family and friends to grow, but he also needs to cultivate his individuality by learning on his own. As shown through the flower blossoms on each version of Joshua and throughout the central tree, his personality is evolving and he will always sprout new thoughts and qualities, just as a tree shedding leaves and blooming every Spring. A tree is not always in bloom; it will go through phases of stunted growth or even decay. Like growing up, interests and aspects of oneself will change, for better or for worse.

Carved into Vancol's tree are her parents' initials, marking their influence, an ode to their Haitian culture. The tree, and Joshua within it, grow as one namesake.

Change is a constant—something Vancol has grown to welcome and accept into her life through her painting practice. By portraying her brother's transformation, Vancol is closing the gap between cultures by offering us a coming-of-age story. Growing pains are a truth that can be felt across borders, languages and ethnicities, and *As Tall as a Tree* highlights the experience of growing up, in an engaging, approachable, and thoughtful way, while challenging the hegemony of whose experiences hold value in our society.