FIRES OF CHANGE

The Art of Fire Science

2015 – 2016 | Coconino Center for the Arts | University of Arizona Museum of Art

This is a preview of the Fires of Change catalog.
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FIRES OF CHANGE
The Art of Fire Science

Flagstaff Arts Council
Southwest Fire Science Consortium
Landscape Conservation Initiative

Curated by Shawn Skabelund

Coconino Center for the Arts
September 5 – October 31, 2015

University of Arizona Museum of Art
November 19, 2015 – April 3, 2016

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The exhibition travels to the University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, Arizona, November 19, 2015 – April 3, 2016.

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Photo: Tom Alexander

"These forests were

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

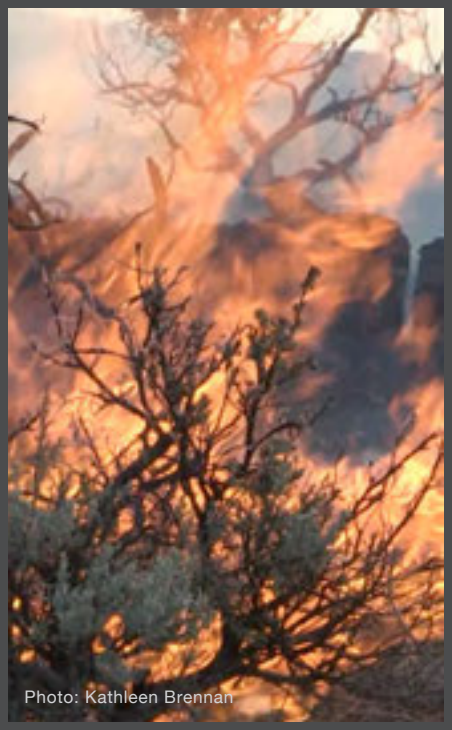


Photo: Kathleen Brennan

born of fire."
– James K. Agee, 1993

Photo: Kathleen Brennan

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

The Language of Trees

Before the mysteries
a forest contains
had been explained

it was claimed by those
who lived close enough to know
that trees talk

and all it takes to hear them
is that you listen,
you,

who come from far away
and trust only
a language you already understand.

– David Chorlton

FOREWORD

Fires of Change presents a fascinating cross-section of contemporary art and the history of fire ecology in the western United States. Eleven artists, mostly from the southwestern United States, were tasked with exploring the intersections of wildfire, forest ecology, climate change, and fire management practices of the past century and a half. The result is a stunning collection of work that forms a cohesive whole and challenges the viewer to re-think what they know about fire.

The idea behind *Fires of Change* was inspired by a similar project in Alaska, culminating in the exhibition, *In a Time of Change: the Art of Fire* in 2012. The team of scientists at the Southwest Fire Science Consortium and the Landscape Conservation Initiative approached the Flagstaff Arts Council with the concept and the three entered into a partnership.

The science team came into the project with a clear message to convey to the community. They had a target: the prevalent cultural misconceptions about wildfire in the western United States create real obstacles to implementing effective forest management practices based on science. In the eyes of our communities, the media, and often politicians making decisions that impact fire management, wildfire was "bad." Our team of scientists wanted to turn this conversation on its head.

How best would they convey that message? How could they start a sea of change in public opinion? If they turned to a marketing campaign, advertisers and marketers would be fighting the uphill battle of counteracting their own very effective messages of the past. And politicians are more invested in their own political survival than in trying to educate their constituents about new understandings in fire science.

A good artist has the vision, the flexibility, and the fearlessness to tackle an issue, turn it upside down, and show it to her neighbors. In the simple stroke of a brush, or in this case, the twist of a needle or turn of a camera, an artist can inspire a new way of thinking about any subject. In fact, artists have been doing this for centuries. By taking something common and presenting it in a different way, the artist can shape ideas and change minds. And changing minds, in this particular case, would be a challenge.

For nearly 150 years and up until just recently, management has emphasized wildfire suppression or exclusion in the West. Fire was seen as dangerous and unwanted, a disastrous force that must be stopped. The Smokey Bear campaign, "only you can prevent wildfires," put the onus on the individual to stamp out wildfire. This effort to encourage personal responsibility is still valuable today, but the underlying message may have had a different impact. In the media, wildfire coverage tends to be sensationalized, with a focus on disaster: the number of structures lost, the acreage consumed, the lives lost. Fire was presented as the enemy that had to be conquered.

The science behind *Fires of Change* tells us something different. Fire is an essential component of a healthy forest. The forests of the western United States need fire just as much as they need water, albeit in a different capacity and at a different frequency.

Yet today, disaster reporting and the overriding forest management policies of the 20th century remain prevalent in our culture. Climate change gets a lot of the blame, and deservedly so, as increasing temperatures and drought conditions have significant impact. But what gets lost in the mix is that the increasing size and severity of wildfires in the past two decades results greatly from our own fire management practices. Forests are thick with underbrush and fuels that are ready to burn because we suppress almost every fire we see. We've attempted an impossible task: to eliminate fire from the forest. In the final analysis, we did this to ourselves.

Our mission with *Fires of Change* was to acknowledge this past and communicate a new standard for the future. Thus, we were not interested in simply hiring artists to create new work about fire. Instead, we identified the right artists and then provided them with accurate scientific data on fire ecology and a clear picture of the necessity of fire for a healthy forest. Then, we would ask them to create new work, incorporating what they have learned with the perspectives they brought with them to the project.

In September 2014, we hosted our Fire Science Bootcamp for this very purpose. Eleven artists, selected through a national call for artists by a jury and by curator

Shawn Skabelund, were brought to Flagstaff. They spent five days learning from top-notch scientists, land managers, and fire fighters about fire ecology and the forests of Northern Arizona. Three days were spent at the North Rim of the Grand Canyon, and two in Flagstaff. The group traveled to burn sites old and new, including the very recent burn scar of the Slide Fire (2014) near Sedona, Arizona, to see how fire impacted the land. The artists were given a semester's worth of intensive study in five short days.

During that week, friendships were forged, connections were made and the artists came away with a new understanding of what fire meant for the forest. The bonds developed between the artists during Bootcamp gave them the chance to communicate their efforts and compare notes with one another as they began making new art for the exhibition. Many of the participating artists are now collaborating on other projects together outside of *Fires of Change*, a positive by-product of this educational effort.

These eleven artists had a year to go back to their studios and tackle the issue of fire, incorporating what they had learned during Bootcamp with their own experiences and understanding. With the encouragement of curator Shawn Skabelund, a former firefighter, the artists stretched their art in new directions. Bryan David Griffith stepped out of his identity as a renowned fine art photographer and into the role of installation and sculptural artist, bringing the forest – charred and chaotic, fresh and sculpted – into the art gallery. Artists Saskia Jordá and Steven Yazzie engaged their communities to participate in the development of their art, reflecting how fire has impacted so many lives. Helen Padilla wove the themes of firefighter safety and danger, the random nature of luck and fate, and pop art all in one single, astonishing work of art. And Kathleen Brennan gave us a view of the life cycle of a forest, through fire and back to new life once again. From fire, the forest is born anew.

Katharina Roth's *Nineteen*, an installation of 19 porcelain firefighter helmets representing the Granite Mountain Hotshots who tragically lost their lives in the Yarnell Fire (2013), presented a stunning memorial. However, if there's one message to *Nineteen*, and that of *Fires of Change*, it's that we don't need to put firefighters in harm's way to save the forest, or save a few structures. We now know that the forest needs the fire; it is part of its natural life cycle. Lost structures can be rebuilt. Lost lives cannot.

This publication, itself crafted from the forest, stands as a visual record of *Fires of Change* and its exquisite art. Through it, we wish to honor the firefighters on the frontlines of forest fires everywhere, and record the work of the eleven artists who crafted a ferocious and moving message for the future.

– John Tannous
Executive Director
Flagstaff Arts Council

"Even though fire is itself an inexorable force of nature, we need not view its worst effects as inevitable."
– Stephen F. Arno and Steven Allison-Bunnell, 2002

CURATOR'S STATEMENT

I grew up in the small logging town of McCall, Idaho. Its economy, built within the watersheds of the Payette National Forest, centered on logging, tourism and work for the U.S. Forest Service. McCall also remains the site for the second largest smokejumper training base in the country. My childhood heroes were smokejumpers. I dreamed of becoming one someday. As a child, The True Story of Smokey the Bear was read and reread. I believed that only I could prevent forest fires. Forest fires destroyed forests. Fires needed to be suppressed in order for forests to be productive in the commodities they provide. As a college student, I spent a summer at Utah State University's Forestry Summer Camp and then went on to become a hotshot on the Uinta National Forest travelling the Intermountain Region fighting fires.

In 1988, I found myself surrounded by the Midwestern cornfields in graduate school at the University of Iowa. The news headlines that summer were of the huge wildfires that eventually devoured a third of the forests in Yellowstone National Park. After three months and over a million acres burned, early autumn snowfalls finally put the fires out. My father, a hydrologist and a range management specialist for the U.S. Forest Service, was asked to come out of retirement to help organize the re-vegetation of specific sensitive areas within the park. I visited with my dad about his experience working in Yellowstone. He summarized it by saying that the fires were the best thing that could have happened to those lodgepole pine forests — after years of fire suppression, once mismanaged wounded forests now had the opportunity to be healthy and whole.

It was in graduate school that I began to see the error of my childhood thinking. In art school no less. While in Iowa, I participated in prairie burns and learned to appreciate the value of fire's beneficial role to ecology. By removing fire from the landscape, the landscapes we were trying to protect were being damaged. I saw the tragic consequences of decades of past fire suppression and exclusion on these landscapes and on others as well. Stamping out the flames from forest biota was akin to ridding other environments of wolves, raptors, coyotes and prairie dogs.

It was with this thinking that I was thrilled to be asked to curate *Fires of Change*. For this project, I selected artists whom I believed could bring a curiosity, an aesthetic, and more importantly, an imagination, about fire and its value to the landscapes we live in. Just as with my own work, I am excited to share the work these artists have specifically done for this exhibit with the public. I believe these artists have created art that will fuel the fires of change for the next generations to come. I want to personally thank each of them for participating in this project. I also want to thank Cari Kimball and Collin Haffey, the original creative minds behind this project, for pushing it forward from that one conversation we had over two years ago in order to make it happen.

– Shawn Skabelund

"It's not a matter of if fire will occur but when it will occur."
– Anonymous

FIRE SCIENTISTS' STATEMENT

Wildfire can both rejuvenate and devastate a landscape; it can be both an ally and an enemy in the development of resilient forests in the Southwest. Wildfire is a natural process that has shaped many ecosystems in this region for centuries. Dry conifer forests of the Southwest burned frequently with low-severity and mild effects. In a warming climate with unnaturally dense stands of young trees from past management practices, high-severity fires can create treeless patches so large that forests are not likely to return, even given many decades or centuries. On the other hand, maintaining a regime of frequent low-severity surface fires can help create forests that have a better chance of surviving droughts and our changing climate. Our forested lands require fire as an active natural management tool. It requires a coordinated effort among scientists, communities, managers and the boots on the ground to insure the proper, safe, and active use of fire.

It was at the nexus of science, management, and community that the *Fires of Change* science-art project was formed. The Landscape Conservation Initiative, the Southwest Fire Science Consortium, and the Flagstaff Arts Council partnered with funding from the Joint Fire Science Program and the National Endowment of the Arts to bring artists, managers, and scientists together for experiential and collaborative learning. These artists met with fire managers and fire ecologists who presented an entire semester's worth of an undergraduate fire ecology course while camping together on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon and touring the recent Slide Fire. We hoped they would be inspired by the natural beauty of the North Rim and through conversations with scientists and managers create specific and thoughtful work that shares a compelling story of the complexity of fire with a broader audience.

– Collin Haffey, Andi Thode,
Barb Satink Wolfson, Cari Kimball

Ponderosa

This forest has roots
ten thousand years deep
and branches of lightning.
Rain fell as needles here,
drying on the ground
where summers grew longer
and fire
found a home to return to.

Curator

Shawn Skabelund, Flagstaff, Arizona

Artists

Left to right in photo:

Saskia Jordá, Phoenix, Arizona

Julie Comnick, Prescott, Arizona

Craig Goodworth, Newburg, Oregon

Bryan David Griffith, Flagstaff, Arizona

David Chorlton, Phoenix, Arizona

Helen Padilla, Flagstaff, Arizona

Jennifer Gunlock, Los Angeles, California

Kathleen Brennan, Taos, New Mexico

Shawn Skabelund, Flagstaff, Arizona (Curator)

Katharina Roth, Sedona, Arizona

Bonnie Peterson, Houghton, Michigan

Steven Yazzie, Phoenix, Arizona

"Fire put out is a fire put off."
– Stephen J. Pyne, 2014

BRYAN DAVID GRIFFITH – BROKEN EQUILIBRIUM

Artist's Statement

I believe the root cause of our problems with wildfire is a fundamental set of cultural perceptions – perceptions that must be challenged before we can enact successful policies, no matter how clear the scientific data.

In Western culture we traditionally view dualities – light and darkness, life and death, forest and fire – as opposing forces with horns locked in an epic struggle of good vs. evil. We fight nobly to preserve life and subdue death by taming nature to prevent unpredictable disasters like wildfire.

My work explores the idea that these forces aren't opposed, but rather part of the same continuous cycle. One can't exist without the other. Death is necessary to sustain life. Fire isn't a natural disaster; it's nature changing and evolving, seeking equilibrium. To exclude fire from a forest that has evolved with it for eons is akin to removing the bugs, grubs, and fungi that we find unpalatable but are necessary to recycle dead material. Yet keeping fire out of the forest is precisely what we've done for over 100 years. By trying to exclude death, we have inadvertently severed the cycle of life.

Now wildfire is coming back with a vengeance, like a river breaching a dam. Some of these fires are indeed life-annihilating disasters, but they aren't really natural disasters. They're the product of a long legacy of human interventions – a legacy that, ironically, now requires further intervention to undo.

I investigate these concepts through a series of fractured circular forms – metaphors for the cycle of life and death being broken into a duality – using the primal materials of wood and fire itself. I juxtapose soft organic lines and natural edges with geometrical forms that convey our desire to control capricious natural processes – often with unintended consequences.

The largest piece, *Broken Equilibrium*, portrays the current, unstable cycle of overgrowth and increasingly larger fires. I constructed it with hundreds of trees from the Observatory Mesa thinning project and burned trees salvaged from the Slide and Schultz fires. I invite viewers to enter the sculpture and contemplate our relationship with wildfire. Are we really stewards of the land, outside invaders, or part of nature itself, evolved alongside fire as surely as the trees?

Photo: Bryan David Griffith

Photo: Tom Alexander

Bryan David Griffith
Reconstruction (top), 2015
Burned ponderosa pine
38x37x10 inches

Bryan David Griffith
Broken Equilibrium (bottom), 2015
Salvaged trees from wildfires and thinning projects
13.5x13x7.5 feet

Photo: Tom Alexander

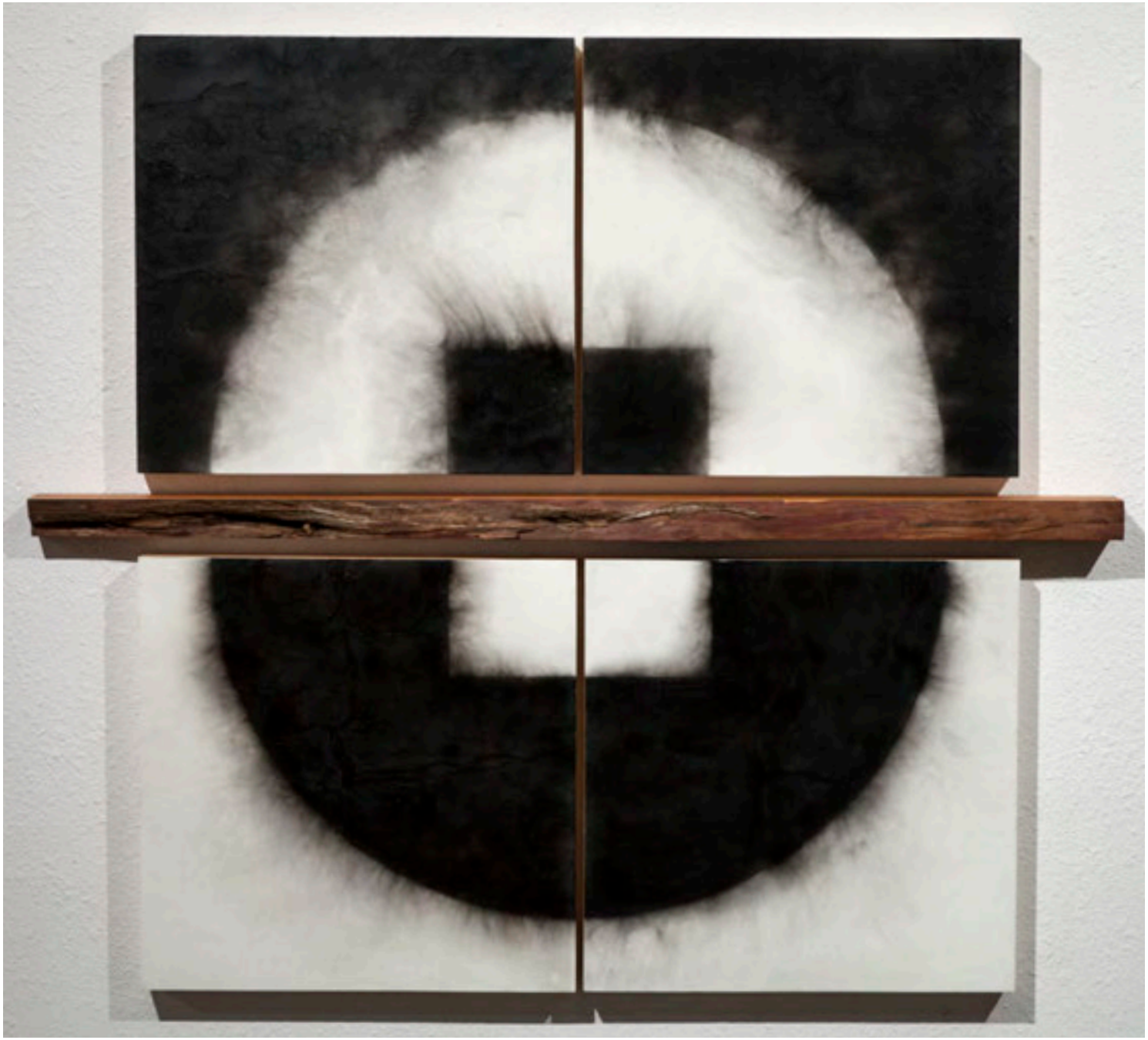
Bryan David Griffith
Broken Equilibrium and Reconstruction, 2015
Salvaged trees from wildfires and thinning projects
13.5x13x7.5 feet

"I challenge the American people to recognize how fire and smoke… can and must continue to play an essential, natural role in the life cycle of the wild lands we live in and love."

– Bruce Babbitt, 1997

BRYAN DAVID GRIFFITH – SEVERANCE

Photo: Tom Alexander



BRYAN DAVID GRIFFITH – BOX & BURN

Photo: Tom Alexander

Bryan David Griffith
Severance, 2015 (left)
Smoke from open flame accumulated in encaustic beeswax, wood
60x54x5 inches

Bryan David Griffith
Box & Burn, 2015 (right)
Burned ponderosa pine
38x37x10 inches

A Field Guide to Fire: *Lightning*

The Navajo believes that if he comes
within the influence of the flames
he will absorb some of the essence
of lightning, which will therefore be
attracted to him and sooner or later
will kill him.

Coconino Sun, Aug. 11, 1900

When darkness turns electric
and the sky descends
to where the ponderosas stand,
fire writes its name on air
with lightning five times hotter
than the sun.
One strike
sizzles; one strike bites
into bark; one strike sparks
a blaze; one strike holds back
and follows a man all his life,
waiting to have him know
the fate of trees.

SASKIA JORDA – 100% CONTAINED

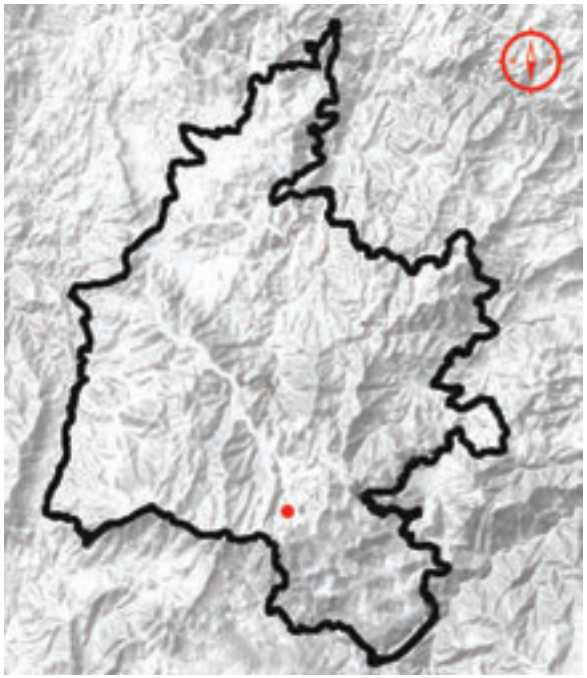
Artist's Statement

During the summer of 2012, a small dwelling that my husband was building by hand burned down in the Gladiator fire in Crown King, AZ. Witnessing the aftermath of the fire and walking through the charred landscape was an eye-opening experience, one that remains etched vividly in my memory. I was particularly moved by the silence and stoic presence of the burnt trees. Since then I have been looking for ways to process this experience through my art, to conquer my fear of fire, and to search for opportunities to learn about the impact I personally have on my surrounding environment.

The *Fires of Change* exhibition presented the perfect opportunity for me to revisit my connection to fire, and to continue the dialog through a new project entitled *100% Contained*. My objective was to make a poetic gesture using black yarn the length of the perimeter of the Gladiator fire when fully contained: 200,059 feet (37.89 miles). Over the past several months, a community of over 50 participants from all over the country contributed to the project, crocheting and knitting skeins of black yarn into an organic line to reach my goal.

The yarn's appearance on the platform fills the confines of the footprint of the fire within a 1:5000 scaled map, loosely referencing the topography of the mountainous landscape through which the fire burned. In some places, the yarn's terrain is highly manipulated and controlled; in others it flows organically, representing the struggle between man and nature. More specifically, this is the struggle between managing the often-erratic growth of the fire versus allowing it to take its natural course. Amidst this dichotomy is pinned a red dot of yarn: the location of our small dwelling lost to the fire.

With this installation I explore several themes: the change wrought upon the landscape by fire, the slow re-growth of Southwestern forests, and the many hands involved in fighting a fire of large magnitude. Through social practice and connecting communities, the piece intends to bring forth the beauty of a community effort linked by a common goal: raising awareness about the impact of fire on the land we inhabit – not only the destructive power of fire, but also its regenerating force.



Gladiator Fire Perimeter. Crown King, Arizona
Perimeter: 37.89 miles

Saskia Jordá
100% Contained, 2015 (aerial view)
Wool and acrylic yarn on wood platform,
10x10 feet

SASKIA JORDÁ – 100% CONTAINED

Special thanks to the following participants for contributing to the 100% Contained project:

Up to 1/4 Mile

Jacki Lynn	Crown King, AZ
Ana Hernandez	Philadelphia, PA
Clara Thiem	Cave Creek, AZ
Kim Steffgen	Rimrock, AZ
Kris Manzanares	Phoenix, AZ
Dylan Manzanares-Schnick	Phoenix, AZ
Mina Amini	Scottsdale, AZ
Kathleen Stuart	Phoenix, AZ
Emily Lawhead	Flagstaff, AZ
Erika E. Hess	Flagstaff, AZ
Caroline Hamblen	Spring Green, WI
Chiara Rose Skabelund	Flagstaff, AZ
Sara Jenkins	Phoenix, AZ
Milly Joslin	North Concord, VT
Hristi Wilbur	Glendale, AZ
Lisa Jacobs	Phoenix, AZ
Heather Muise	Greenville, NC
Terry Kerr	Ridgeway, WI
Robin Lynne Haller	Olmsted Twp., OH
Elaine Rowles	Peoria, AZ

1/4 Mile to 1/2 Mile

Claudette Moreno	Miami, FL
Rebecca Cross	Oberlin, OH
Amy Manning	Phoenix, AZ
Lisa Takata	Phoenix, AZ
Loretta Tedeschi-Cuoco	Mesa, Arizona
Alexandra Carpino	Flagstaff, AZ
Judi M. Chadburn	North Concord, VT
Mary McDonagh	Scottsdale, AZ
Sandy Horsman	Scottsdale, AZ
Arianna Urban	Eugene, OR
Alejandro Steffani	Clarks Summit, PA
Madalena Maestri	Spring Green, WI
Joan Mahoney	Sellersville, PA
Stacy Booth-Buck	Prescott Valley, AZ
Isabel Valdes	Houston, TX
Jasmine Barber-Winter	Flagstaff, AZ

Installation Team:

Luis and Veronica Jordá, Victor Sidy, and Shawn Skabelund.

1/2 Mile to 1 Mile

Val Hilburgh	Sun City West, AZ
Victor Sidy	Phoenix, AZ
Arlene Hovey	N. Concord, VT
Corinne Bell	Phoenix, AZ

1 Mile to 2 Miles

Jenny Zelaya	Scottsdale, AZ
Karrie Hovey	Mill Valley, CA
Monique Sidy	Sedona, AZ
Irene Valdes	Houston, TX
Pauline Schultz	Phoenix, AZ
Cristina Murphy	Rotterdam, NL

Over 2 Miles

Samantha Atkinson	Spring Green, WI
Charlotte Fischer	Phoenix, AZ
Wilhelmina Hassell	Scottsdale, AZ
Agustina Corominas	Houston, TX
Saskia Jordá	Phoenix, AZ

Photo: Bryan David Griffith

Saskia Jordá
100% Contained, 2015
Wool and acrylic yarn on wood platform,
10x10 feet

Photos: Shawn Skabelund

"We show that large wildfire activity increased suddenly and markedly in the mid-1980s, with higher large-wildfire frequency, longer wildfire durations, and longer wildfire seasons."

– A.L. Westerling *et al*., 2006

KATHLEEN BRENNAN – THE MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Artist's Statement

As a lifelong photographer and multi-disciplinary artist, I have been repeatedly drawn to the harsh beauty of the elemental transformations that occur in our everyday lives. I've photographed birth, death, illness, changing skies and, most recently, the effects of drought on the landscapes and peoples of northeastern New Mexico.

Like many Westerners, I have witnessed the increasing threat of forest fires, lived for weeks in the smoke of distant burns, and wandered among their charred remains, but never fully appreciated the necessity and life-giving potential of fire until the Fires of Change Bootcamp in 2014. We were fed an enormous amount of valuable information, which sparked many discussions with friends for weeks afterwards.

I found myself wanting to get up close and personal with this mysterious being we call fire. When I returned to the Grand Canyon as Artist in Residence in February 2015, I met with Windy Bunn, the fire ecologist and one of the presenters at our workshop. I asked about seeing a prescribed burn in the area. It turned out Burn Boss Josh Miller was happy to escort me the following day to a small fire they were conducting in the Kaibab National Forest where I photographed and filmed.

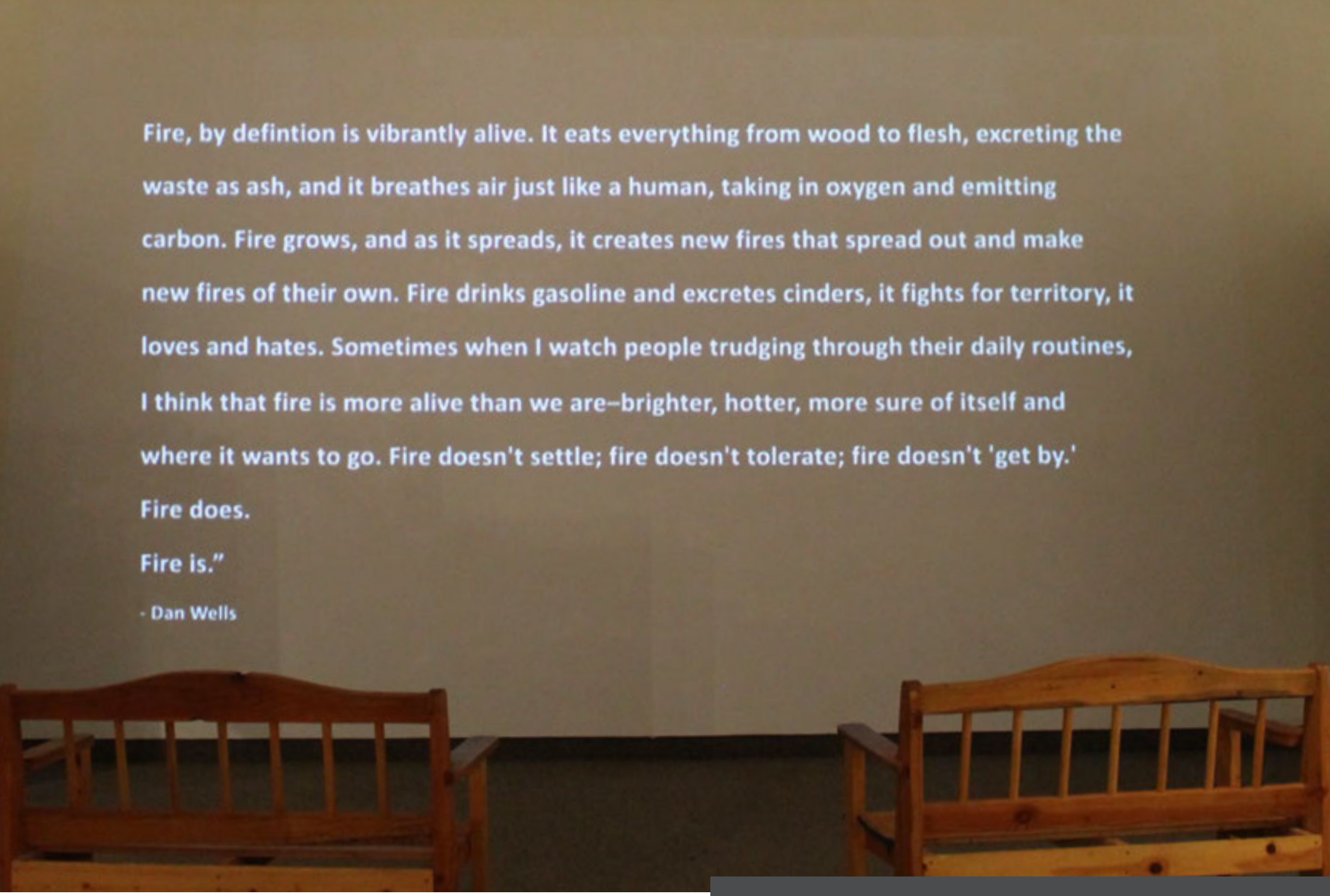
On returning to my home in northern New Mexico, I read of a burn planned in the forest to the west in the Carson National Forest. I contacted the Forest Service office in the area, and had the opportunity to capture another burn. Later, I visited the Lama Foundation, a spiritual community in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains north of Taos, which was ravaged by a human-caused fire I witnessed from afar in May of 1996. They kindly met with me, invited me to join their morning circle and let me wander about filming the growth that has occurred since the fire.

In my piece for this exhibit, I edited footage from all these places, and decided to project the video life-size on the wall to enable viewers to experience it as close to first-hand as possible. I chose not to include an explanation of what was happening but rather to offer an experience with sounds of the forest and fire accompanied by two powerful statements about fire and human nature.

The 8-minute piece *The Matter of Life and Death* speaks to the transformations we must go through in order to sustain our environment and ultimately our lives.

View the full video: https://vimeo.com/138401802

Kathleen Brennan
Stills from The Matter of Life and Death, 2015
Video, projected life-size
8 minutes



Kathleen Brennan
Still from The Matter of Life and Death, 2015
Video, projected life-size
8 minutes

"Fire belongs in the mountain Southwest, and unless the peaks flatten, the monsoon evaporates, the seasons homogenize, or the biota vanishes, those fires will continue."

– Stephen J. Pyne, 1995

JENNIFER GUNLOCK – URBAN INTERFACE

Artist's Statement

In my mixed media collages, I incorporate photographic imagery I take on my travels, primarily of buildings and trees. A subject that I repeatedly latch onto when I'm incorporating them into a piece is the tense and awkward relationship between the wild landscape and imposing infrastructure we build to shield ourselves from the wild. There is no real dividing line between the two. They coexist, just not very harmoniously.

As I was wandering through past burns on Grand Canyon's North Rim during the fire science boot camp, my attention immediately fell on the glossy, blistering bark that covered these fully barbecued ponderosa pine remains. With that image in mind, and remarking on the leafless aspens' eerie resemblance to cell phone towers, I set out to create a large scale work on paper that re-imagines the ponderosa pine forest, with artifacts of civilization embedded in it. I selected photographs I took during boot camp, of charred ponderosas, a fire truck's hoses and headlights, and the urban infrastructure referencing my home city of Los Angeles, such as a skyscraper reflected in the windows of another, and a fire escape. I photocopied these images and then cut, tore, and sliced them into unrecognizable pieces, fusing them into a forest composition.

A question repeatedly explored during the boot camp was that of human intervention into the forest. The recent increase in fire super storms is largely due to human causes, such as decades of total fire suppression, importation of non-native plant species, and accelerated global warming. So, now fire managers are tasked with patching up the damage civilization has caused. Humans created the problem, and now humans are trying to fix it, leaving the fire managers and scientists grappling with the philosophical and political questions of: how much should they impose on forest ecosystems in order to establish a healthy balance, and when should they leave it well enough alone? And, what is their (our) right or responsibility to the landscape?

Jennifer Gunlock
Urban Interface (detail), 2015
Mixed media collage and drawing
11x15 feet

"Removing fire from… ecosystems would be among the greatest upsets in the environmental system that man could impose… a fundamental reordering of the relationships between all plants and animals and their environments would occur."

– M.L. Heinselman, 1981

Jennifer Gunlock
Urban Interface, 2015
Mixed media collage and drawing
11x15 feet

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

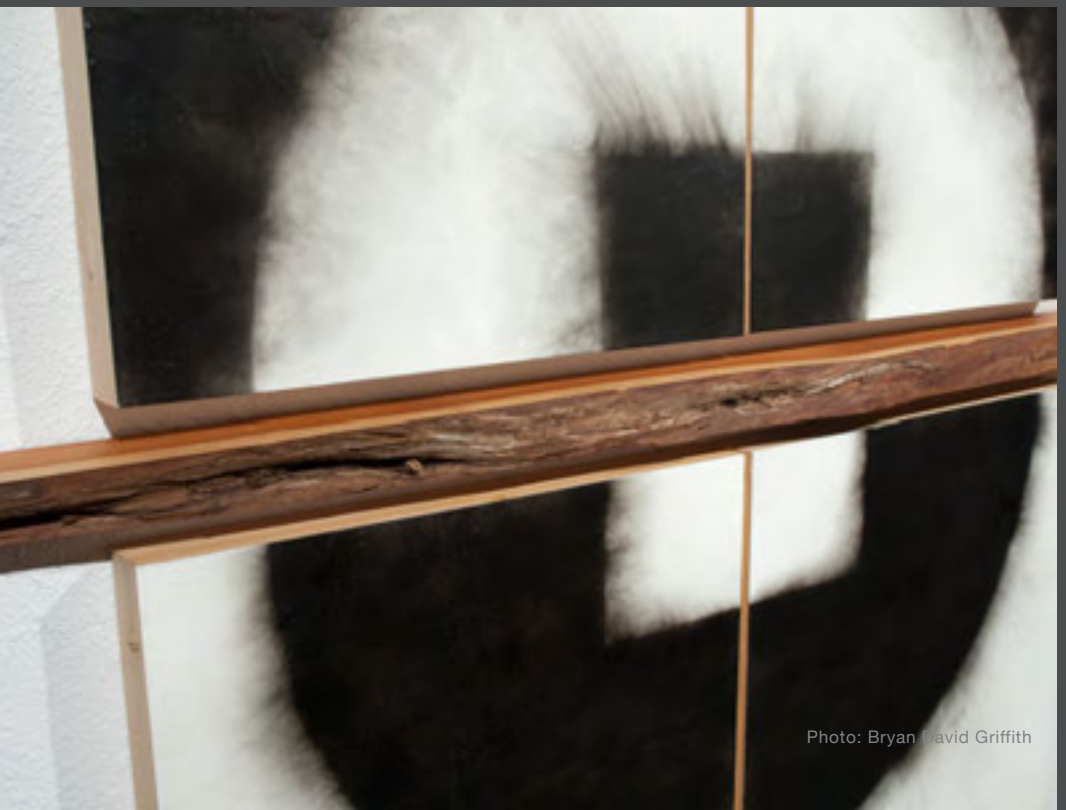


Photo: Bryan David Griffith

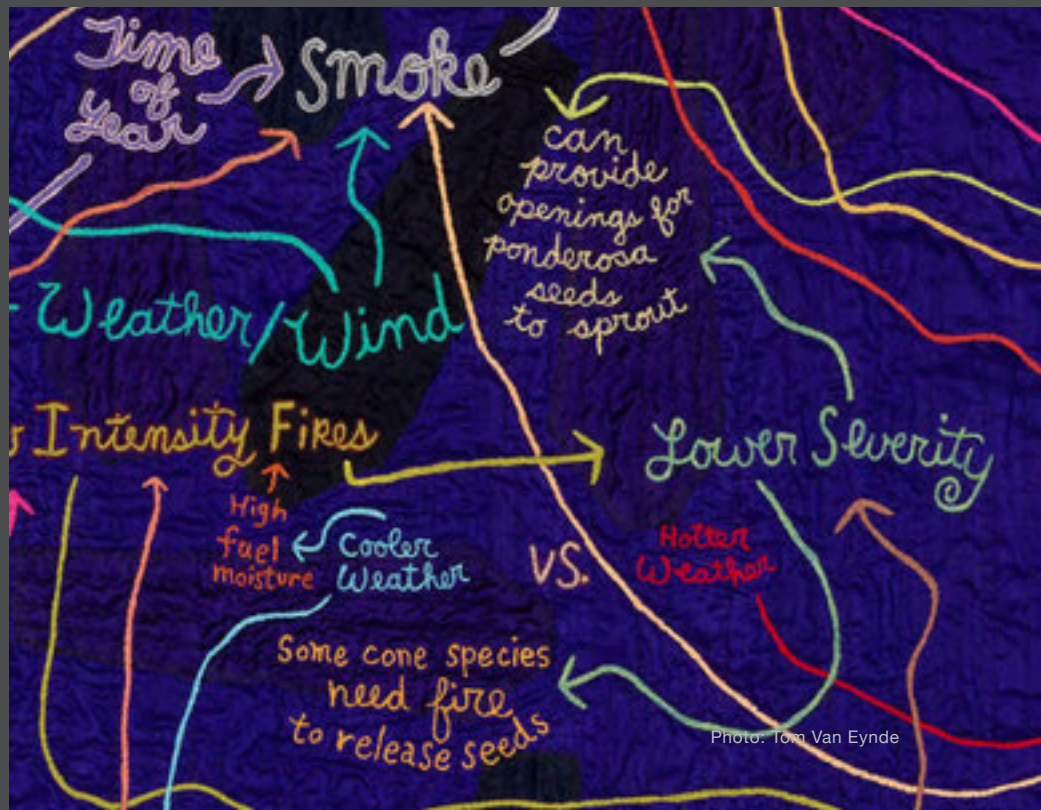


Photo: Tom Van Eynde

Photo: Bryan David Griffith

Photo: Tom Alexander

Photo: Kathleen Brennan

Photo: Bryan David Griffith

STEVEN YAZZIE – FOREST OF WORDS

Artist's Statement

Forest of Words is work that brings local people together to meet and talk in a semi-structured environment in hopes of gaining meaningful insights and perspectives about wildfires in the West. The project was initiated by inviting a cross-section of community members from the Flagstaff area to meet for a focus group discussion here in the gallery. Conducting research in this way was part of a process of outreach and social engagement, exploring the space of universal value systems, in hopes of collecting data, and sharing data in a meaningful way. The social scientific method and techniques embedded in the focus group activity can be considered the conceptual framework and guide for community participation, as well as a subtext to the installation. *Forest of Words* is a community dialogue and a process of engagement seeking a greater understanding of the Flagstaff community, and in the process is re-contextualizing and rationalizing aesthetics of place-identity.

My installation represents a structure of social connectivity and is designed as a practical and minimal sculpture open for public discourse and engagement. It contains the chairs and the blackboard that were used in the focus group meeting. The display and arrangement share a formal gesture of process and a symbolic representation of a defined space for communal exchange. The installation contains the audio recording of each participant in 6 MP3 players that are designated to six chairs once occupied by those participants.

Now as a temporary installation, *Forest of Words* invites you the reader, viewer, and participant to enter into the space and take a seat and listen to the conversations that once took place here.

Listen to *Forest of Words*:
http://flagartscouncil.org/2015/11/fires-of-change-gallery/

Participants:

Randy Scott, Kate Collette, Tim Darby, John Serkland, Nora Timmerman, and Frederica Hall

From the recorded discussion:

"The way humans live on the land now has created dense forests, thick with underbrush that is easily burned. In every fire I can think of in this region, we've exacerbated it by the way we live, trying to squelch any kind of fire that would clear the undergrowth. Even if a fire wasn't human caused, in a way, we definitely have a percentage of fault."

"The whole sky was that peculiar orange. And everybody was gone. When we drove out, it was like after the apocalypse, and nobody was around. There's just that strange color to the sky."

"Whether it's human caused or nature caused, the sense of helplessness is just so huge. What can we possibly do besides escape?"

"It seems pretty clear that the causes for climate change have a significant human component to them. It would take fairly concerted action to do something about it. The political arranging that's necessary to generate that action is so difficult. We need to find a way to do [something] and get beyond the forest of words that make action very difficult."

Steven J. Yazzie
Forest of Words, 2015
7 chairs, chalkboard, chalk, colored lighting, audio recording: 1 hour 20 minutes
Dimensions variable

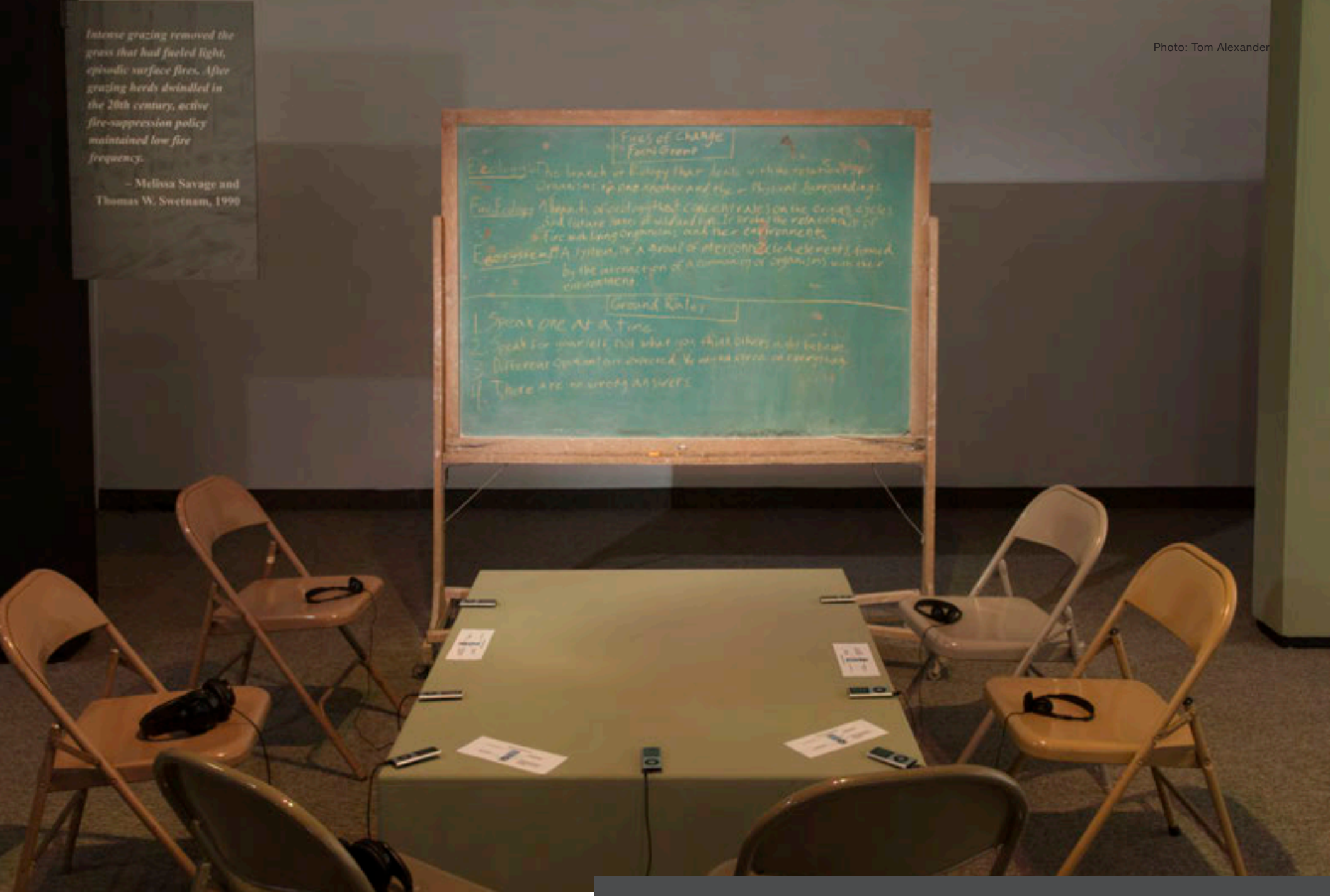


Photo: Tom Alexander

Steven J. Yazzie
Forest of Words, 2015
7 chairs, chalkboard, chalk, colored lighting, audio recording: 1 hour 20 minutes
Dimensions variable

"[Climate models] foreshadow twenty-first-century changes in forest structures and compositions, with transition of forests in the southwestern United States… towards distributions unfamiliar to modern civilization"

– A. Park Williams *et. al*, 2013

JULIE COMNICK – ASHES TO ASHES

Artist's Statement

Ashes to Ashes is a series of drawings depicting recent Arizona wildfires, rendered with charcoal samples I personally collected from each fire site. Each drawing is displayed with its corresponding charcoal sample. The collection represents fourteen significant wildfires from 1990 to the present, with archived photographs used as references.

While regular wildfire cycles are essential for the health of the ecosystem, they are frequently accompanied by negative public perception of wilderness devastation and human disaster. The increased size and severity of recent fires – due to suppression strategies that began over a century ago, and the continual drought and warming trends resulting from climate change – have taken toll on the environment and humans alike.

The use of charcoal, as an art medium, dates back to the earliest Paleolithic cave paintings. That it still prevails today (in a refined and compressed form) attests to charcoal's variety of applications and archival nature. Working with the unrefined, burnt remnants of Ponderosa Pine or Manzanita found at each wildfire site presented creative challenges such as achieving tonal range and detail on a small scale, and meeting contemporary expectations with an archaic medium.

The objective of these drawings is to reverse the public perception trajectory as viewers gain a renewed appreciation for the necessity of wildfire toward sustaining the longevity of our shared landscape.

Julie Comnick
Ashes to Ashes, 2015
14 charcoal drawings and charcoal samples from fire sites
10x12 inches each

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

Photo: Tom Alexander

Julie Comnick
Ashes to Ashes, 2015
14 charcoal drawings and charcoal samples from fire sites
10x12 inches each

Woolsey Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Lightning
Date: 2011
Location: North Rim Grand Canyon, Point Imperial, AZ
Size: 424 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine / Dead and Down Logs from 2000 Outlet Fire
Management: Managed

Yarnell Hill Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Lightning
Date: 2013
Location: Yarnell, AZ
Size: 8,500 Acres
Vegetation: Chaparral / Pinyon-Juniper Woodlands
Management: Suppressed
Structures Lost: 129
Deaths: 19

JULIE COMNICK – ASHES TO ASHES

Aspen Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Human
Date: 2003
Location: Mount Lemmon, Santa Catalina Mountains near Tucson, AZ
Size: 84,750 Acres
Vegetation: Aspen / Pine-Oak / Conifer
Management: Suppressed
Structures Lost: 325

Dove Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Human
Date: 2013
Location: Granite Mountain Wilderness near Prescott, AZ
Size: 6,732 Acres
Vegetation: Chaparral
Management: Suppressed

Outlet Fire
Incident Type: Prescribed Fire - Converted to Wildfire
Cause: Management Ignited
Date: 2000
Location: North Rim Grand Canyon, Point Imperial, AZ
Size: 12,440 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine / Mixed Conifer
Management: Suppressed

Aspen Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Lightning
Date: 2009
Location: North Rim Grand Canyon, AZ
Size: 4,270 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine
Management: Managed

Dude Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Lightning
Date: 1990
Location: Mogollon Rim, AZ
Size: 20,000 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine / Pine-Oak Woodland
Management: Suppressed
Structures Lost: 40
Deaths: 4

Range Fire
Incident Type: Prescribed Fire
Cause: Management Ignited
Date: 2012
Location: North Rim Grand Canyon, AZ
Size: 2,316 Acres
Vegetation: Mixed Conifer
Management: Prescribed Fire

Rodeo-Chediski Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Human
Date: 2002
Location: Coconino / Gila / Navajo Counties, AZ
Size: 469,638 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine / Pine-Oak / Juniper-Pinyon
Management: Suppressed
Structures Lost: 426

Schultz Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Human
Date: 2010
Location: Schultz Peak, San Francisco Mountain near Flagstaff, AZ
Size: 15,075 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine / Mixed Conifer
Management: Suppressed

Wallow Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Human
Date: 2011
Location: Apache National Forest near Alpine, AZ
Size: 538,049 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine / Gambel Oak / Engelmann
Management: Suppressed
Structures Lost: 72

Roosevelt Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Lightning
Date: 2007
Location: North Rim Grand Canyon, AZ
Size: 9,240 Acres
Vegetation: Ponderosa Pine
Management: Managed

Slide Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Human
Date: 2014
Location: Oak Creek Canyon, North of Sedona, AZ
Size: 21,227 Acres
Vegetation: Juniper-Pinyon / Ponderosa Pine / Douglas Fir
Management: Suppressed

Warm Fire
Incident Type: Wildfire
Cause: Lightning
Date: 2006
Location: Kaibab Plateau, AZ
Size: 55,000 Acres
Vegetation: Mixed Conifer / Ponderosa Pine / Pinyon-Juniper Woodlands
Management: Managed, Suppressed

BONNIE PETERSON – ON THE NATURE OF FIRE

Artist's Statement

This work explores the language of wildfires and their environmental connections. I wanted to understand and unravel some of the complex interactions among the factors and ecological consequences of recent western wildfires. While researching definitions and variable manipulations, I started drawing arrows between fire science variables, constructing a flow chart, a relational map. This diagram was the basis for my embroidery on silk, *On the Nature of Fire.*

Two 7.5 minute USGS topographic maps of the Grand Canyon were the foundation for a variety of source materials, such as scientific graphs, photos, stitching and text, which examine fire science and the human experience. I am interested in the wild land firefighter's job description, fire ecology data, climate research, and the 1800s journals of John Wesley Powell and Clarence Dutton.

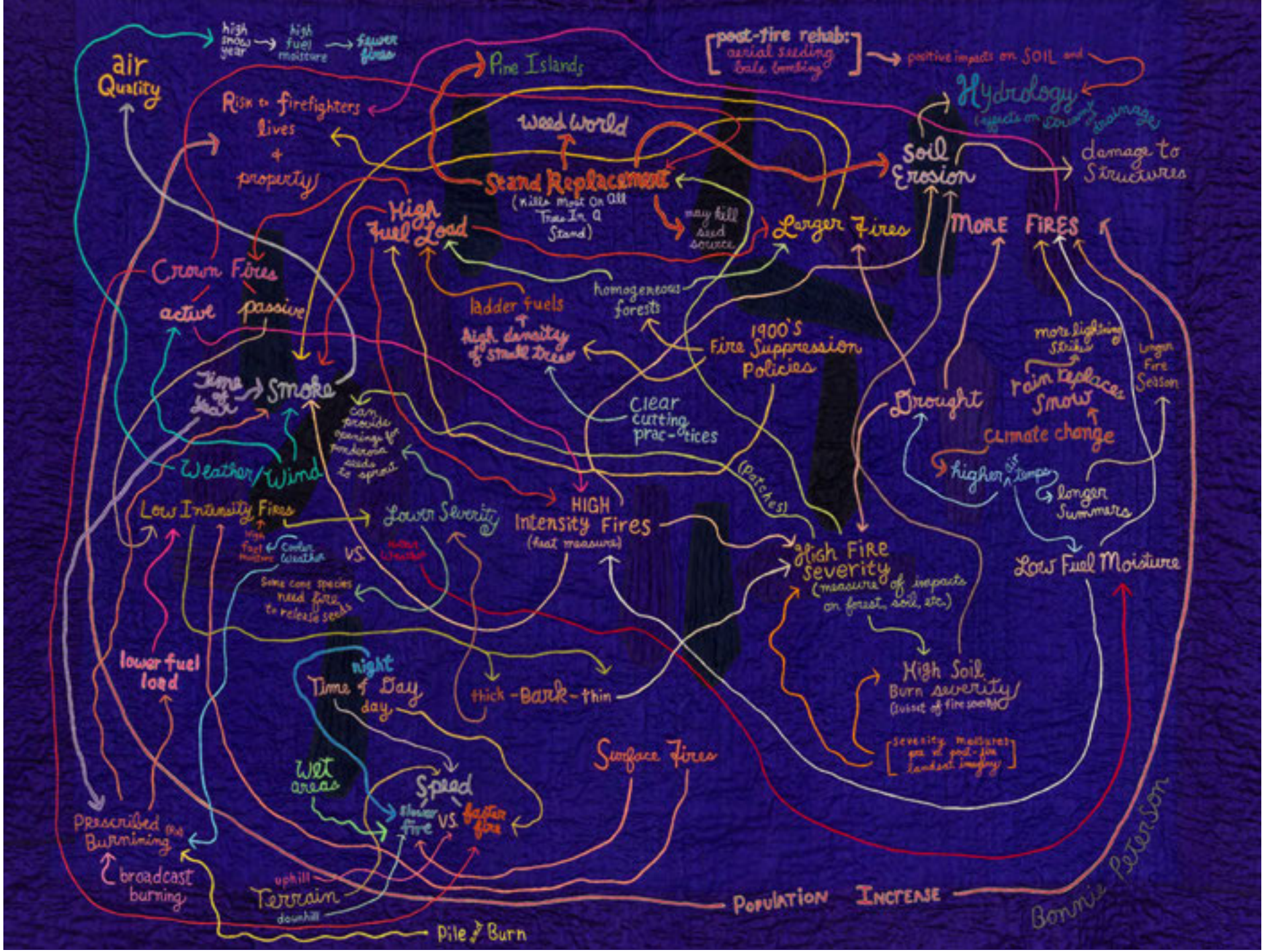
Being in wild places, in wilderness, informs my work as well. The long multi-day backpacking trips I take become significant. They inform me in how to integrate historical context and contemporary society into my artistic process. While traditional embroidery and primitive quilt samplers become points of departure, they also provide my compositions a novel opportunity to consider current events and ethical questions.

Photos: Tom Van Eynde

Bonnie Peterson
On the Nature of Fire (detail), 2015
Embroidery on silk, velvet
65x85 inches

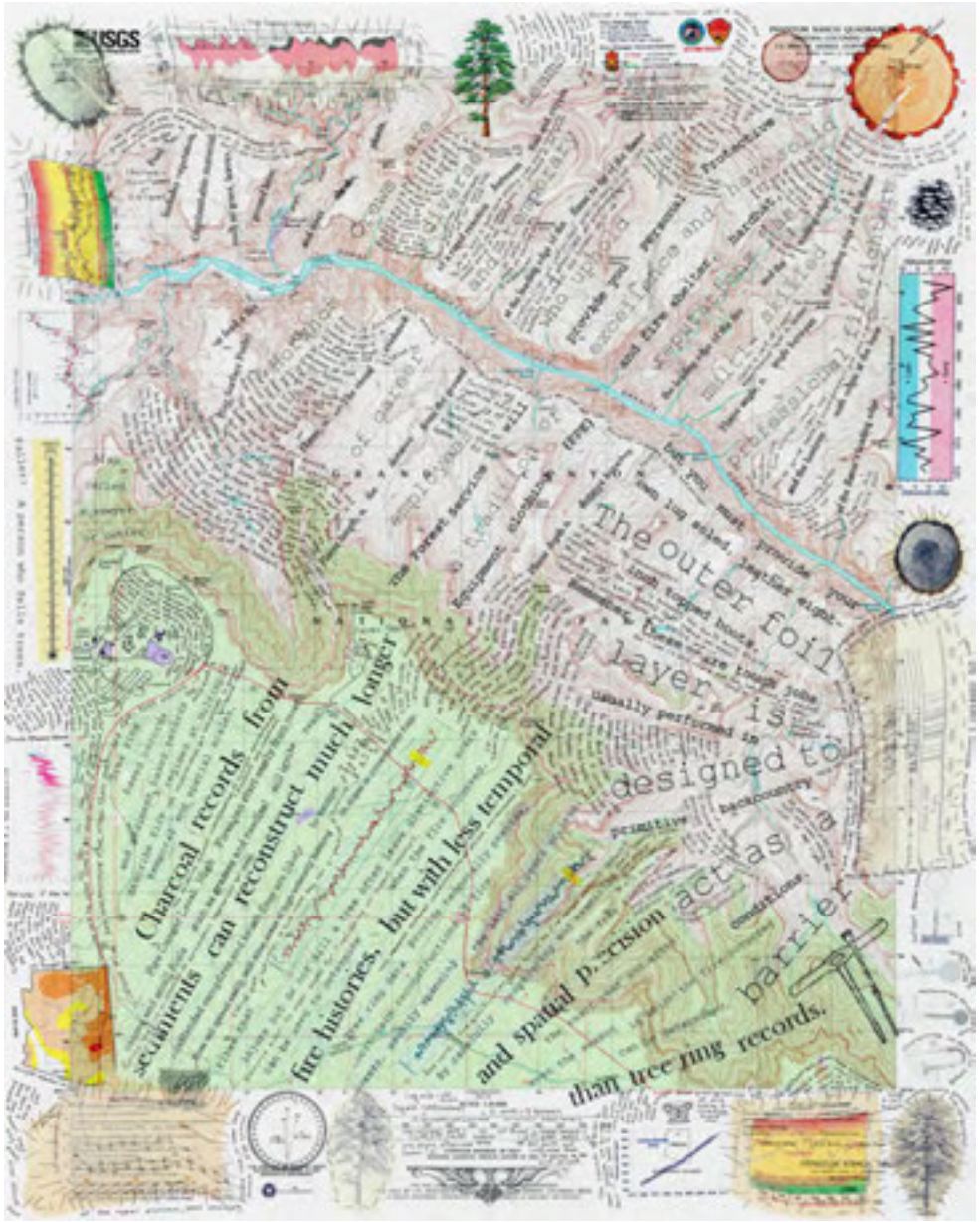
"Is fire management on a collision course with disaster? Perhaps, because wildfires continue to become more intense and destructive of resources, and expenses in fire control are increasing at an astronomical rate."

– Harold H. Biswell, 1989



Bonnie Peterson
On the Nature of Fire, 2015
Embroidery on silk, velvet
65x85 inches

BONNIE PETERSON – TWO QUADRANGLES



Bonnie Peterson
Phantom Ranch Quadrangle, 2015
Mixed media
27x22 inches

Bonnie Peterson
Bright Angel Quadrangle, 2015
Mixed media
27x22 inches

A Field Guide to Fire: *Control*

> *. . . the choice is not between two landscapes,*
> *one with and one without a human influence;*
> *it is between two ways of living, two ways of*
> *belonging to an ecosystem.*
>
> William Cronon, 1983

The slow smoke rising
signals where a fire crawls
along the forest bed,
crackling as it burns
the recent history away
of how the seasons brought
more heat than rain
and left the layered kindling
for the next storm
to ignite. It follows every rise
or ditch, flowing low
and holding to its purpose
though it strains sometimes
to stay within its means
the way a wolf might do
when scenting prey
in two directions.

CRAIG GOODWORTH – FIRE RENDERINGS

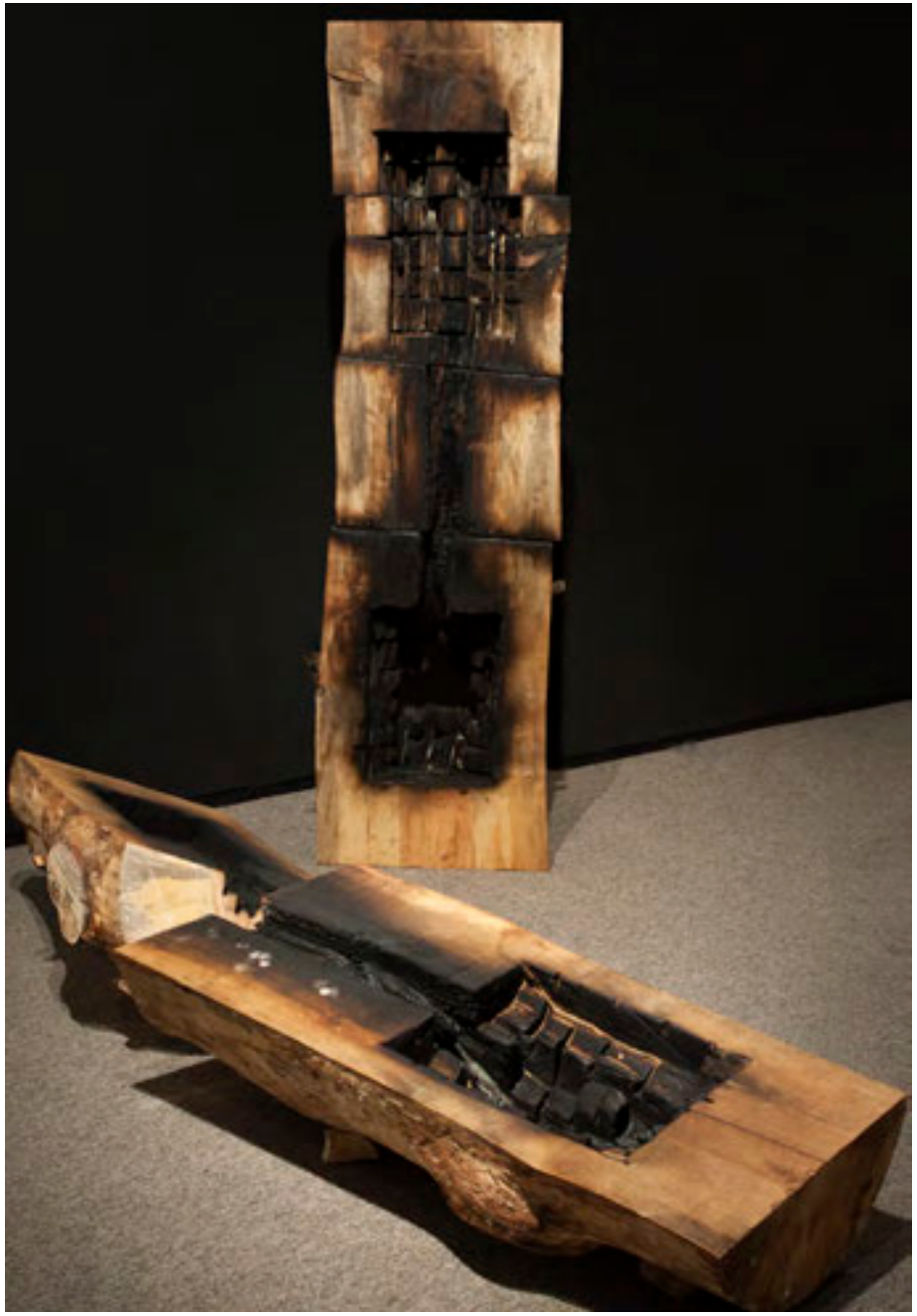
Artist's Statement

Working directly with logs and fire, I've sought to collaborate with fire in altering raw material - rendering form, volume, and texture. These studies allow me to know in and through my body something of fire's destructive capacity, but also its creative potential.

The trough or sarcophagus form echoes and extends a series of contemporaneous artworks (*9 Korytos*) I made this past spring while on a Fulbright in Slovakia's Carpathian Mountains. Through this work, I investigated forests ravaged by unprecedented wind.

The two halved ponderosa logs and slab were collected from a burn site in Northeastern Arizona. The slab is filled with cinders collected from Red Mountain and pot ash collected from heating my present home in Oregon. Currently due to an unrelenting drought, the Northwest is being ravaged by fire. Hundreds of homes are being destroyed by wildfires.

Regarding process, both *9 Korytos* and *Fire Renderings* begin with empirical data then shift the question to art's role in helping us feel physically connected to land. As thinking needs to be grounded in some kind of feeling, these artworks ask what role aesthetics has in feeling the crises that arise in the natural world.



Craig Goodworth
Fire Renderings Study 1, 2015
Burned ponderosa pine
each section 24x12x81 inches

Photos: Bryan David Griffith

Craig Goodworth
Fire Renderings Study 2, 2015
Ponderosa pine, ash, cinders
120x35x5 inches

"Wilderness, like fire, is both a natural and a cultural phenomenon. The contradictions, paradoxes, and anomalies of the one are those of the other."

– Stephen J. Pyne, 1982

HELEN PADILLA – BANG MIRROR

Artist's Statement

"Perception is subjective."
– Sol Lewitt, artist

Bang Mirror, rather than reflecting, is projecting a harsh yet fragile message. When opening and unfolding a blanket fire shelter, so neatly packaged for carrying in a firefighter's pack, it appears very thin and flimsy. I feel that only a willingness to perceive it as a shelter could protect its occupant. I consider a firefighter's decision to open this package – a decision their life depends on, a decision that determines their fate. Through repetition of the familiar childhood fortune teller, I contemplate my perceptions of that time and place. Those moments are not frozen in time, but rather steadily marching onward, leaving both wonderful and horrible moments behind forever.

Helen Padilla
Bang Mirror (above: detail, right page: full view), 2015
Aluminized fabric from fire shelters, cardboard, pins
96x96x8 inches

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

Photo: Tom Alexander

HELEN PADILLA – RED FLAG

Artist's Statement

"Sculpture is more than an object; it's an activity."
– Charles Ray, artist

Red Flag speaks of my desire to collaborate with the community's concern for the place I live in. Through the act of collecting red fabric from local Goodwill thrift stores, cutting it up, and mixing it all together, I reform our community's cloth into a symbol of our unity and our unprecedented effects on the land we live in. I can't change those effects, but I can change my expectations for the future to align with what's necessary for the survival of the forest. Wildfires of ever-increasing intensity call for new perceptions of life in the Southwest.

Helen Padilla
Red Flag, 2015 (above: aerial view, right page: detail)
Recycled cloth, ponderosa pine, gold leaf
108x96x6 inches

Photo: Tom Alexander

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

"Complete prevention of forest fires in the ponderosa-pine region of the Pacific Slope has certain undesirable ecological effects"

– Harold Weaver, 1943

KATHARINA ROTH – NINETEEN

Artist's Statement

When he shall die,
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.
– William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

I chose porcelain to create these helmets as a tribute to the 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots who gave their lives in the deadliest wild fire in Arizona. They died doing what they loved most. According to Superintendent Eric Marsh, who perished with them, fighting fires was the most fulfilling thing that any of them had ever done.

Porcelain symbolizes the fragility and preciousness of life and how it can be shattered in an instant. The helmets were fired in a wood kiln where the unglazed porcelain absorbed the marks and paths of the flames, and the wood ash was transformed into glazes. Some of the helmets were warped and damaged in the kiln because fire is such a powerful force. Fire contains both, life and death, and as scary as it may appear, its transformational power is essential for life.

Katharina Roth
Nineteen, 2015 (right: full view, right page: details)
Wood-fired porcelain helmets
11x9x6 inches each

Photo: Tom Alexander

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

Photo: Shawn Skabelund

"Fire officers will have to manage their lands with the fires they get, not the ones they would like."

– Stephen J. Pyne, 1996

KATHARINA ROTH & CRAIG GOODWORTH – TREE CORE STUDY 1

Artists' Statement

During the fire science workshop on the North Rim, we decided to collaborate on a secondary project in a way that might hold together concept and craft. We were both struck by the fragility and memory of a tree core. It is the essence of a tree, a documentation of its history, from its beginning one to two hundred years ago, enabling scientists to see the evidence of a particular tree, sharing with us its story of dry and wet years, possibly pests and illnesses, and when it was touched by fire.

In making a tree core out of clay, we are documenting the various rings of growth, giving it an archival quality, like a book in a library of time, setting it in stone. Wood firing implies we are casting it in fire, exposing it to the elements. Instead of showing a burnt tree trunk we are taking its essence and burning it.

Photos: Tom Alexander

Katharina Roth and Craig Goodworth
Tree Core Study 1, 2015 (above: full view, right page: detail)
Porcelain and stoneware
32x72 inches

"Models suggest that the future will have substantial increases in wildfire occurrence… Restoration of patterns of burning and fuels/forest structure that reasonably emulate historical conditions is consistent with reducing the susceptibility of these ecosystems to catastrophic loss."

– Peter Z. Fulé, 2008

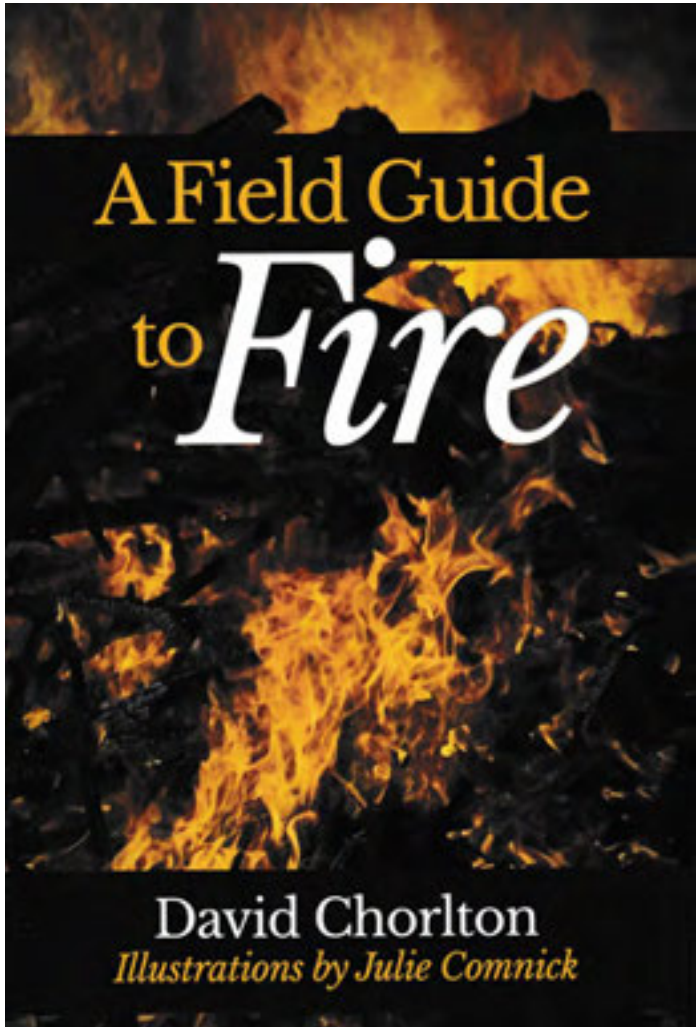
DAVID CHORLTON – A FIELD GUIDE TO FIRE

Artist's Statement

Only a couple of days after returning from the week in Northern Arizona, my first idea for writing came to me while I was out walking and thinking about anything but fire. It was to create a "Field Guide" which would, by its title, suggest that fire is a life form of a kind we identify the way we do birds and other wildlife.

Considering types of fire, I turned to sources including old Arizona newspapers such as the *Coconino Sun* with their reports from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Once we depart from contemporary news language and priorities, we're on the way to a broader range of ideas. After taking in the scientific material, I considered their reference to the Navajo to be a fascinating addition (see page 18), and a stimulus to get my writing under way.

Thinking back to our workshop days, especially the visits to locations where the forest is beginning its post-fire existence, I began a sequence called *Sunlight and Ashes: Forest after Fire*. In a society where advertising is expert in trivialization, serious issues are easily displaced to make room for frivolous ones. If we think in terms of the ancient oracles, or even people who have lived for generations without industry or technology, we may discover a way to accept fire and use it to advantage.



David Chorlton
A Field Guide to Fire, 2015
Book of Poetry

"A wildland fire may be concurrently managed for one or more objectives and objectives can change as the fire spreads across the landscape."

– Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Management Policy, 2009

Sunlight and Ashes:
Forest after Fire (V)

It hasn't been long since
the pines were here,
dark green
and home to Goshawks; it hasn't taken
as long for the land to change

as it takes a child to grow
to the age of curiosity, when
he asks what kind of tree that is,
and the parent
says
    It's aspen; it grows
from a fire.

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