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Sabbatical Report

Sabbatical Leave: Fall Term, 2021

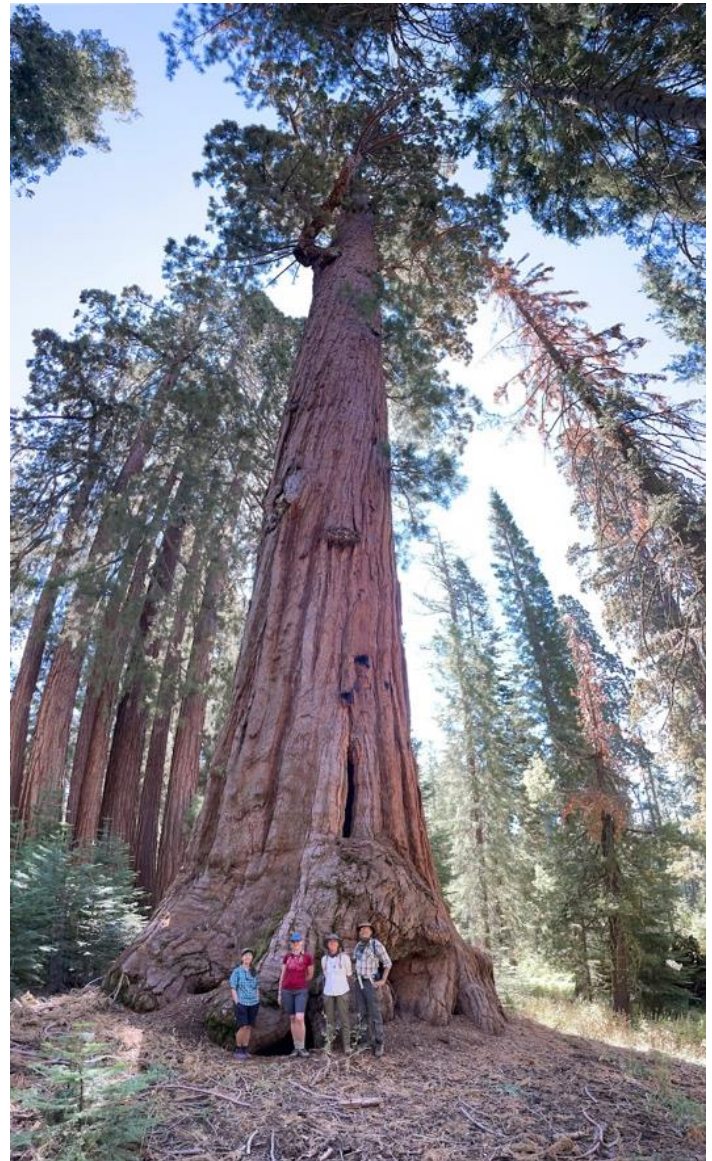
Project Title:

**Catastrophe and Regeneration
in Western Forests**

*Responding to the 2020 Wildfires through
Visual Artworks*

Artwork Title: HOPE?

Artists: Susan Lowdermilk, Andie Thrams,
Peter Thomas, and Donna Thomas



OVERVIEW

For my sabbatical leave Fall term 2021, I collaborated with three other artists; we created artwork in response to catastrophic wildfires that had personally affected us in our communities during 2020. We explored, studied, and worked together in green forests and wildfire burns in the following locations: The HJ Andrews Experimental Forest in Blue River, McKenzie River Trust lands affected by the 2020 Holiday Farm Fire in the McKenzie River watershed of Oregon, lands affected by the 2020 CZU Complex Lighting Fire in the Santa Cruz, California mountains, the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias in Yosemite National Park, and the adjacent lands affected by the 2020 Creek Fire in California. We spoke with forest scientists, park naturalists, and concerned citizens about fire and other impacts of concern in these forests. Our goal was to use the unique potential that artists possess to share our experiences and inspire action through the creation of our collaborative artwork. The result of our work is an artists' book project we titled *HOPE?*. It took us eight months from generating our initial idea to completion of the artwork.



HOPE? is a collaborative artists' book created by Donna Thomas, Peter Thomas, and Andie Thrans, and me. (Artist's books is a genre that is loosely defined as intentional artworks using the form or function of a book as inspiration.) Through fieldwork in recently burned and green forests in Oregon and California, we investigated the complex topics of tree mortality, catastrophic wildfire, and climate change. Together we created a "reliquary" in an edition of 32 copies, comprising twelve artists' books and artifacts. Our purpose with this work was to bear witness to the devastation of western forests and to grapple with the question of hope during this pivotal moment in Earth's history.

The overall size of the reliquary box that houses the twelve books is 12 x 8.5 x 6.75 inches. The dimensions of the individual books are varied. We utilized a variety of materials and processes in the work, such as handmade



and commercial paper, brass, wood, wildfire charcoal and ash, leaves, sticks, and other organic matter we gathered in the forests. Images and text were printed using woodcut, linoleum cut, pressure print, photogram, letterpress, and digital printing. We also incorporated watercolor, gouache, and ink painting into the project. We designed the project in which each book is a singular thought, question, or comment, expressing one aspect of the theme. A booklet titled, *About HOPE?*, is included in each copy of *HOPE?*, which includes detailed information and pictures about our processes, travels, and the individual artworks. Find the same document digitally with the QR code here, and at the end of this report.

During our travel time in California and Oregon, we witnessed forests impacted by prolonged drought, devastating insect infestation, longer hotter summers, and a century of fire suppression. We learned how these forces have combined to leave Western forests dense with enough highly flammable vegetation to generate the catastrophic megafires, now happening with regularity. Our project expanded from a response to wildfire to a deeper investigation of climate change and other factors contributing to megafires. Our project, *HOPE?*, addresses our profoundly human-centric approach to the natural world and the meaning of hope for all Earth's beings, including humans, during this Anthropocene epoch.

Throughout the fall of 2021 and winter of 2022, we traveled together, and created artwork together as well as individually in our home studios. We met regularly on Zoom to share information and ideas. As we created artwork, our collaboration highlighted each of our unique skills. We applied a methodology echoing the cooperative networks among plants in forest ecosystems known as the wood wide web. My individual work involves artist books that feature pop-up pages and movable structures, using traditional printmaking processes such as woodcut, thus exploring our relationship to nature. Sierra Nevada-based artist Andie Thrans typically creates paintings and artist's books in wildland forests exploring mystery, reverence, and delight, while grappling with vanishing habitats of our era. Peter and Donna Thomas live

and work in Santa Cruz, California. They work collaboratively and individually on letterpress printing, hand-lettering, illustrating texts, making paper, and hand binding fine press and artists' books. The processes we used in *HOPE?* included painting, writing, sketching, and exploring onsite in the forests; research and discussion with forest and climate scientists; collecting forest materials such as wildfire charcoal for drawing and paper making; printing with wood and linoleum blocks, handset wood and metal type, pressure print plates, and digital processes.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

HOPE? was displayed publicly for the first time at the [CODEX VIII Book Fair and Symposium: Words on the Edge](#) in April 2022, and is part of the worldwide project, [Extraction: Art on the Edge of The Abyss](#), which investigates climate change and human overconsumption of natural resources. *HOPE?* has been collected by universities and museums for their special collections where they are accessible to the public, including Bainbridge Island Museum of Art, University of California Berkeley, University of Washington, and Yale University. The project was on exhibit in the 2022 Visual Art and Media Art Faculty Show at The Roger Hall Art Gallery at Lane Community College and is included in a group exhibit of artist's books called *Westward Bound* at the Ah Haa School of the Arts in Telluride, Colorado and in the Yosemite Renaissance juried exhibition, a traveling show which includes Yosemite National Park Museum Gallery. *HOPE?* has been documented digitally as part of the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest, Long-Term Ecological Reflections and the Spring Creek Project, a 200-year living, growing record of creative works responding to the forest.

REFLECTIONS

This experience of working with and alongside independent artists, witnessing their work habits, comparing and contrasting our successes and struggles throughout our art careers gave me insight into what it is like to have a successful career primarily by creating and selling visual art. I have students each year who want to earn a living through their art. I can now offer guidance to my students about this career of artists as entrepreneurs. For example, I witnessed that my collaborators all maintained a healthy work/life balance by sticking to regular and reasonable work hours. In contrast, I have always had to fit my art studio time around my job teaching at Lane, and my artwork has been a supplemental part of my income. I have no regular schedule in making art. I work on my art projects on weekends and during summer and winter breaks, depending on the size and scope of my projects. Andie, Peter, and Donna's successes rely in part to their work habits as well as their perseverance. When we were doing studio work together, we started working in the studio after breakfast at about 9:00 am, broke for lunch, and ended the day at 4:30 or so with a walk and a beer before dinner. Work was focused on the project and not interrupted with house chores or other distractions. I was the only one up for working into the evenings, but quickly adapted to an appropriate quitting time. I also will take this lesson into my retirement when I can focus more time on my artistic creations.

We experienced the challenges that arise in a complex creative collaboration. Moving forward, I have new goals and ideas for advising students on their group projects: about applying a variety of organizational tools to their own collaborations and about avoiding common pitfalls. My collaborators and I had common goals and ideas as well as a deadline date for the project, April 2022 for the Codex

International Book Fair. As mid-career artists, we have been perfecting our craft for forty to fifty years each. I am in awe of my collaborators' art and feel very fortunate to have worked on this project with them. Our expertise lies in a variety of book and paper arts media and techniques. Working on our project, we honored each others' roles and skills and learned different creative approaches and techniques from each other. For example, I learned new techniques in plein air watercolor/gouache/ink painting from Andie Thrans and Donna Thomas. I learned the finer points of letterpress printing wood and metal type as well as hand papermaking from Peter Thomas. As a teacher I welcome being in the position of learning new skills, because it gives me empathy for my students and gives me a fresh outlook on my teaching and artwork. As an artist I am curious and interested in other artists' processes and techniques. I find reciprocal sharing with artists is exciting, educational, and often generates new ideas for my artwork.

Each book in the project represents a visual expression of our collective research and exploration. The four of us made contributions to each book, utilizing our unique artistic skills and conceptual ideas, with information gathered from our research. To varying degrees, we were involved as a group in every aspect of the project from conception to completion. We used Google Drive extensively to share and organize information and thoughts. We regularly used Zoom, email, text, and phone calls for communication and kept in touch via Zoom and email after our group travel was completed.

Our collaboration was immersive and intense. We traveled, hiked and camped together, cooked meals for and with each other, and lived and worked in each other's studios. We joked that we were a "band" and our project was our album, and the books we created were our songs. Throughout, we respected each others' ideas, skills and roles in the project. We had conflicts and disagreements, but talked through them as they arose. I learned that a four-way, interstate collaboration is highly complex and ambitious. I learned to be open to ideas and ways of working, to have patience and flexibility, and to compromise when necessary.

OUR PROCESS

Initially, we spent our time focused on research and discussion to figure out what we wanted to express and accomplish. We knew we wanted to study themes related to or in response to catastrophic wildfires, in particular the Holiday Farm Fire, the CZU Complex Fire, and the Creek Fire, and how these fires had personally affected us. Our initial idea was to create one accordion bound book that could contain our collectively generated imagery and text, but felt that one book structure could be creatively restrictive. Our discussions and research prompted more and more questions. We realized our initial idea had to encompass ideas and broader issues surrounding climate change. We arrived upon the idea of creating a collection of individual books that would be housed in a container. This allowed for more freedom of format, size, binding structure and materials, and personal creativity within the collaboration. We designed loosely defined yet clear parameters of size and theme for our project, with a theme broad enough to inspire and pull from, but not so broad as to become diluted. My experience designing our *HOPE?* project was valuable to me as an educator. As I invent or re-assess project assignments for my Lane students, I always strive to find a balance where creativity can thrive but where specific objectives in the project can also be met. I was able to discuss and reinforce my design approaches and

ideas with my collaborators as well as stretch my creative thinking to include learning different approaches to artistic research and brainstorming.

EXPLORATION

The more we know about the natural world and our connection to nature, the greater our insight into how to best live our lives in order to preserve ourselves and our planet. Art has the ability to powerfully connect and communicate ideas and concepts that can inform and activate. A goal of our project is to inform the public about the wildfire crisis in the West, to explore its connection to our changing climate, in an effort to improve how we move forward in the world to live sustainably.

While we hiked, explored, and created artwork in several 2020 California and Oregon wildfire areas, we also explored intact forests such as the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoia and Yosemite Valley, and the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest in Blue River, Oregon where we hiked the Lookout Creek Old-Growth Trail, a beautiful 450-year-old forest. Exploring green forests was a welcome contrast to having visited a burned grove like the Delta Old Growth Grove and the Delta Campground on the McKenzie River, both decimated by the Holiday Farm Fire.

We spent a week as artists-in-residence at the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest in Blue River, Oregon. The National Science Foundation designates the Andrews as a Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) site. Geology professor Fred Swanson gave us a tour of the ongoing, long-term experiments and research areas in the Andrews Forest and McKenzie River Trust property. Projects are designed to span many human generations by gathering data and insights for hundreds of years, resulting in creative responses to the long-term record of an ever-changing landscape. The mission of the program is to bring together writers, humanists, and scientists to create a living, growing record of how we understand the forest and the relation of people to the forest over time. Photographer David Bayles and Retired Biologist Sarah Greene joined us for a full day of discovery, conversation, and sharing information. We also had dinner with Patence Whittingham, Emergency Manager of Lane County, who lived near our campground. We discussed how the community coped with the aftermath of the catastrophic Holiday Farm Fire and how recovery can result in elements of both fragility and resilience in the community. The community is rebuilding but the area has permanently changed.

We tent camped in Horse Creek Lodge's meadow because the housing facilities at the HJ Andrews was closed due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We created an outdoor studio and used ultraviolet rays from the sun with leaves and other plant material to create SolarPlate images on paper for two of our book projects.

During our time at the Wawona Field Station in Yosemite National Park, we hiked daily in the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias and explored Yosemite Valley. We asked questions about the effects on the forest that we witnessed on our hikes, a long-term drought and a recent extreme Mono wind event that killed hundreds of ancient trees including Sugar Pines and Giant Sequoias that were once thought to be practically invincible. An important part of our research was to dialogue with scientists and rangers working with the forests we explored. At Wawona, we had several discussions about catastrophic wildfire, tree mortality, and climate change with Dr. Breezy Jackson, Wildlife Biologist and Director of

the Yosemite and Sequoia Field Stations, and Jeff Lahr, Yosemite Ranger and Naturalist. We also asked every scientist we met on our travels what they felt our role was as artists for our *HOPE?* project. Their answers were quite similar; we learned that artists and scientists translate data, observations, and facts differently and from different perspectives. Art communicates on emotionally and poetically and can reach the public and revealing truths on different levels. Through their work, artists can lead viewers to new insights, information, and possibly inspire action and behavioral changes. The coming together of science and art can inform and render new insights from different disciplines and perspectives. Scientists and artists share a common drive to integrate practices that support and improve the health of environmental systems to sustain life.

My research for our *HOPE?* project involved travel, observation, and reading, as well as interviewing and discussing fire and climate issues with scientists and fire professionals. Hiking the forests with them allowed me to broaden my ideas, information, and gain new insights on the type of information I could collect for my artwork through direct observation, questions, and discussion. Our project's topic is complex and timely. *HOPE?* required more extensive research than my prior art projects. Art is often a solo enterprise in which the artist looks inward; however, I learned that diving deep into a subject while also involving professionals outside my areas of expertise is a fascinating and satisfying part of the process. I hope to inspire my students to foster their critical thinking and expose them to other disciplines such as ecology, biology, forestry, and fire science to use in their art as information and inspiration.

CONCLUSION

My sabbatical project investigated topics of tree mortality, catastrophic wildfire, and climate change in Western forests. Travel and research with three artist collaborators and I resulted in an editioned artist books we created titled *HOPE?*. Through the experience I made novel discoveries and gained new knowledge to apply to my art practice and courses. *HOPE?* was a creatively inspirational, personally relevant, and intellectually stimulating project. I reached many objectives from my initial plan and learned valuable lessons and approaches on how to collaborate successfully on a complex art project. From my fellow artists, I learned new approaches to creating art, and artist's books to integrate into my working processes and teach to my students. I learned tips and techniques from my artist team in media I don't typically work, as I shared my practices and knowledge with them.

It is my intent that *HOPE?* will activate people to think about the ways we can all connect our wisdom to nature, to address climate change, and to build healthy communities and ecosystems. As an artwork, *HOPE?* imparts scientific information and data taken from our discussions with scientists, revealing insights on a poetic level that data alone cannot. Through our research, discussions and resulting artwork I was able to share the understandings that we discovered through our artistic process. I acquired more knowledge and insights about the natural world in Western forests and its connection to our changing climate. I have shared my collaborative work and experiences with students, colleagues, peers, and the public through several exhibitions and presentations thus far. *HOPE?* has already fostered dialogues on relevant climate issues.

As a result, I have become more curious about and fascinated with forest science and the future of our local and global environment. Looking ahead, I am creating a new body of artwork (prints and artists books) responding to important and timely themes such as climate change and landscape transformation in my area. I plan to return to the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest to continue this work.

“About HOPE?”

Read more about the project and see images of our travels, process and the individual artworks here:



PROJECT TIMELINE

August 29 - September 7, 2021

Wawona Field Station, Yosemite National Park, access to the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias, Yosemite Valley. Discussions with Dr Breezy Jackson, Wildlife Biologist and Director of the Yosemite and Sequoia Field Stations, and Jeff Lahr, Yosemite Ranger and Naturalist.

<https://ucnrs.org/reserves/yosemite-field-station/>

September 8 – 14, 2021

Peter and Donna Thomas’ art studio, Santa Cruz, California. Hiking and exploring in the CZU Complex wildfire area and sketching/painting in the forest. In the studio, project ideation and topical research. Design of individual artist’s books. Artists’ books production, including letterpress typesetting and printing creating imagery via woodcut pressure printing, and paper making.

September 30 - October 1, 2021

Movable Book Society Conference, Denver, Colorado, <https://movablebooksociety.org/2021-denver-conference/> The Movable Book Society, a nonprofit organization, provides a forum for artists, book sellers, book producers, collectors, curators, and others to share enthusiasm and exchange information about pop-up and movable books. Over 300 members worldwide. My artist book, titled Power Play, was included in the show called Movable Medley, a group exhibition of artist’s books connected to the conference, Art Students League of Denver, <https://abecedariangallery.com/store/product-category/exhibits/movable-medley/>

October 5-9, 2021

HJ Andrews Experimental Forest, Blue River, Oregon <https://andrewsforest.oregonstate.edu/>. Tent camped in Horse Creek Lodge's meadow. Toured research areas of the Andrews forest property and McKenzie River Trust lands on the McKenzie River watershed with Geology professor Fred Swanson, Photographer David Bayles and Biologist, Sarah Greene. Hiked explored and painted, sketched in the shuttered Delta Campground and Delta old growth forest, burned by the Holiday Farm fire. Met with Patence Whittingham, Emergency Manager of Lane County, Hiked in Lookout Creek Old-Growth Trail, a 450 year old forest in HJ Andrews. Gathered leaves and organic material to use in SolarPrint image process.

December 1-10, 2021

Peter and Donna Thomas' art studio, typesetting, letterpress printing, book binding, paper making

December 11, 2021 - April 10, 2022

Completed the project in our home studios. Communication over Zoom, Email, US mail

April 10-13, 2022

CODEX VIII Book Fair and Symposium: Words on the Edge

Extraction: Art on the Edge of The Abyss, a related worldwide project which investigates climate change and human overconsumption of natural resources. Craneway Pavilion and Berkeley City Club, Richmond and Berkeley California. Our project HOPE? was shared publicly for the first time at this exhibition