

GOOD AND BAD FIRES:
MAKING ART IN A
BURNING WORLD

by

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of

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in

Art

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DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to my mother and father, my Bubby and Grandpa, my brothers and sister, and my loyal dog, Mila.

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ABSTRACT

The absence of indigenous cultural fire with growing climate change, on top of a century of fire suppression has ultimately led to the issues of wildfire we face today. It is a complex issue that plagues society with a responsibility to act on it, while being a part of a system that makes it difficult to accomplish anything. It is not a matter of “if” a fire will come, but when. The weight of this is placed on Federal Land Employees who work overtime to make almost no dent in the efforts to restore, while also trying to contain the fires that threatens livelihoods. Because of hotter and drier climates and the reintroduction of controlled burning, fire has been brought back into the landscape. The creative process offers me a way of illuminating the complicated narrative of forest history combined with the reality of landscape. Constructing pieces through various processes of painting, burning, drawing, and textile offers different entry points into the wildfire conversation. My research paper aims to expand on both acknowledging and redefining American’s relationship with wildfire.

CHAPTER ONE

THE SPARK THAT LIT THE FLAME

Fire as a Tool

My artistic practice has always focused on environment. The land has had a profound effect on me. The natural phenomenon of wildfire in my graduate thesis. My goal was to expand the ways I approached this theme after making traditional oil paintings for my undergraduate thesis. I was introduced to artist Richard Serra's *List of Verbs* (figure 1). This list contains different actions to apply to artwork. The one that stood out to me the most was "to fire". With this list in mind, I began to create works with different materials related to fires and firefighting. I experimented with fire extinguisher powder, charcoal, fire shelters, and burning. Charcoal and burning felt appropriate for the direction my work was headed in.

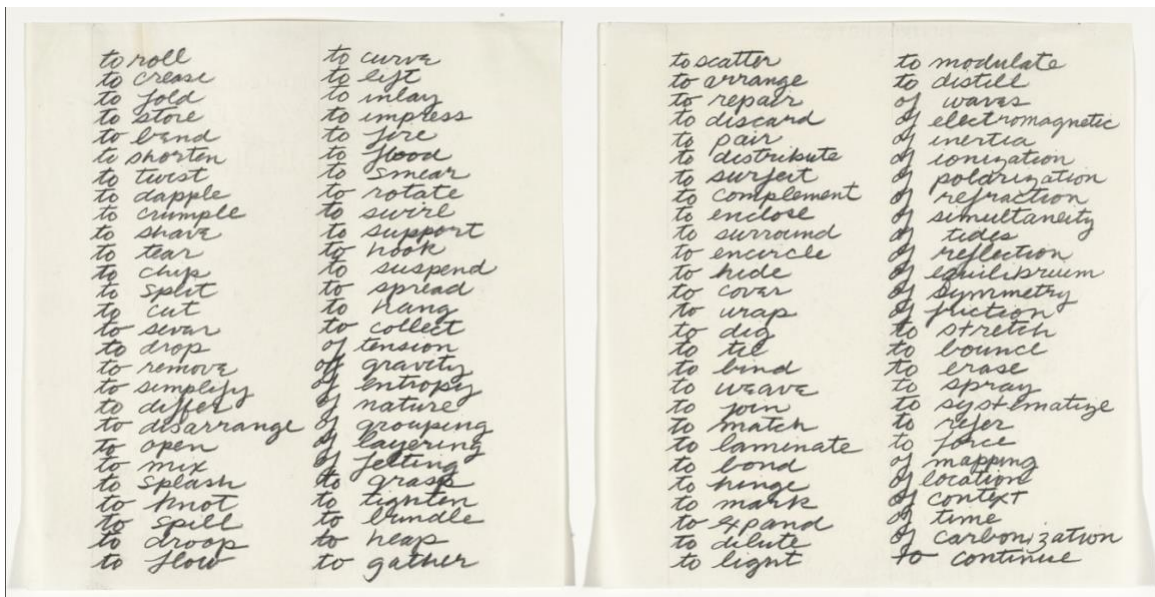


Figure 1 – Richard Serra's List of Verbs, 1967

Throughout my graduate research at Montana State University, fire has become an integral tool to my studio practice. The Japanese tradition of burning wood to black, known as *Shou Sugi Ban*, introduced fire into my work. This metaphor is rich, as the burning provides protection against fire, water, insects, and UV exposure. Commonly used to seal wood siding for home construction, this process has a high aesthetic value. It first appeared in the piece, *Fireproof I* (figure 2). I made a cradle board with fir plywood that I torched out back at the Melvin Studios. I used a kiln burner attached to the studio's gas line; it was an exciting process. The plywood veneer peeled off and areas darkened to shades of black and brown. *Fireproof I* was the origin of using fire in my work, as opposed to purely depicting it.



Figure 2 – Fireproof by Russell Brausch, 2023

Burning my work has taken away a lot of control. It mirrors the future of forest conservation. The necessity to inflict fire on the landscape is vital. However, fires are controlled to prevent them from destroying man-made structures or watersheds. This idea added to the tension of how much of the surface should be burnt. I ask myself if I have authority over the outcome of my piece. I wondered if this process would overpower my own drawing or become the essence of the entire piece.

In a group of studies, instead of a kiln burner, I used a propane torch. This became an additive tool to alter the first layer of the wood surface. I examined different levels of burning through several one-foot by one-foot pieces. These studies helped establish my own relationship with fire. As the burning process starts, I am under the impression that I control the outcome. That is partially true. Where I place the combustible end of the torch determines where it will burn, however the speed at which it burns can alter the surface quicker than I have time to react. I employ fire as a mark making tool that has a mind of its own. The flame adds darkness to certain areas, while I preserve others. Once finished burning, whatever is left unburnt becomes the area for charcoal drawing. Hours into the drawing, I can stumble upon an area burnt slightly too much where the oils brought to the surface refuse my charcoal.

There is an illusion that we have control over nature, yet fires continue to show us that we are helpless. Firefighters set backfires to create fire lines. Fire lines aid in control, but swift changes in winds can make these useless. Fires create their own winds and distortions in weather. These serve as conceptual reminders for my process. I only have so much control and at some point, I am at the mercy of the flame. Fire both serves and hinders my process. This contradiction

represents my own internal struggle with fire, seeing it destroy animal habitats and citizen's homes, while also being beautiful.

On the Coast of Maine

Scarborough, a small town on the southern coast of Maine, is where I spent my formative years. My family traded suburbia for rural, coastal living. The house I grew up in was built on land surrounded by trees. This forest connected to the marsh; the marsh turned into the estuary which became the Atlantic Ocean. Fir trees towered above the house in every direction. This place became my playground. Dead timber was carved out by my father to make a trail that went to the marsh and looped back around to the house. This loop would become the site of many bike races, crashes, laughs, and tears. The forest gave childlike imagination a place to thrive. It is where I would escape into other universes — the trees transformed into creatures, haphazard forts, climbs, falls, and resembled other fictitious planets. They would also be the cause of roof damage and dangers of falling trees. Undoubtedly, this landscape forged my identity and connection to the land.

Living in Maine allowed my family to recreate within the diverse landscape of the Northern Atlantic coastline. Days not consumed by roaming the forest were instead spent at Pine Point Beach. From March until November, my brothers and I spent early mornings hunting for sand dollars, seashells, and crabs washed up from high tide. Once fall was greeted with its first snow, the sandals were swapped for ski boots. Snow packed slopes lined with pines, dictating where to ski. I was always gravitating toward trees. They had a magnetic pull on me.

These experiences with nature taught me how important it is to get outside. All the months of the year were spent at the beach, the docks, the mountains, the forest. Watching tides

go in and out with the moon phases, seeing how a lobster caught off the coast of the beaches could be tossed from the boat to our bag, to the stovetop and chewed down with butter. My childhood gave me the sense of what connects us to places we travel and live. The environments informed me and taught me how to observe.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LAND

Landscape Painting

The physical landscape shaped my identity and simultaneously, the genre of landscape painting influenced my artistic practice. Like a family heirloom, it has been passed down to me from my grandpa. He has been a photographer for most of his life. After moving out to Maine, his fascination for capturing the landscape grew, seeking out ideal lighting, rocky coastline and thrashing waves. He showed me his passion for horizon lines, placement, composition, and selection.

I vividly remember sitting at the top of Cadillac Mountain in Acadian National Park with a sketchbook, pencils, and watercolors my grandpa provided us with. He taught us to observe and capture our view with pencil and paper. As a child, the thought of other tourists watching us was embarrassing. Once I began to draw, the other tourists watching faded away and my focused attention brought peace and quiet. Throughout my life, I have always carried a sketchbook on my hikes and backpacking trips. The act of drawing connects me to the land, and I get to take a piece of it home with me. One of these sketchbooks, with every page filled, is available for viewers to look through in the exhibition.

My grandpa's photos would inspire drawings and paintings. The gift of his old DSLR camera offered me a chance to take high quality images of places I could revisit in my studio. It is important to me that I recognize themes in his work that have influenced my own, while also

bringing my own experience to it. Most of the environments he captures are confined to road access, while I travel on and off trails to find mine.

The dialogue between our work has connected us together through art and landscape. Especially with my family's move to Fort Collins, Colorado. The stark contrast from the east coast introduced my grandpa and I to a diverse range of places unfamiliar to us. At the time of the Cameron Peak Fire, I was studying in Omaha, Nebraska, while my grandpa witnessed the smokestack rise above the Devil's Backbone trail in Loveland, Colorado. It burned August through December. His photographs of the sunsets popped up on my phone almost every day. The sun reflecting through the smoke would indicate how bad the fire was. As the fire grew, the sunsets became redder and duller. Even the sunsets in Omaha introduced a red hue to its palette. The thoughts that something so horrible could bring such beauty kept me awake at night. This paradox seeped into my work by illustrating these sunsets. It began to draw me to other imagery that had this same feeling of uncertainty, such as the burnt landscapes I visited in Colorado.

As a child, I painted and drew all the time. I was obsessed with filling coloring books front to back. In elementary school art classes, Winslow Homer became a household name. I made replicas of the boat drifting out to sea made in kindergarten art classes. His Maine home and studio is only three miles from my house. Homer's studio on Prout's Neck became the site of some of his most iconic paintings of American landscape. Homer's painting *Maine Coast* focuses on the treacherous waves (*figure 3*). He does not shy away from depicting the intensity and fear that comes with facing ocean cliffs. As a kid, I absorbed these qualities into my own landscape painting. The sublime feeling of these waves influenced the trajectory of my work.



Figure 3 – Maine Coast by Winslow Homer, 1896

I am attracted to these similar qualities in the burned landscapes I visit. The rich exteriors of charred stumps entice me. The burnt trees inversely make the environment much brighter. Absence of branches with dense pine needles eliminates most of the shade trees typically provide. Melted needles and torn branches reveal the parched soil. There is nothing left on the trees to shade. Moisture has been sucked out of the ground. The leftover carbon reflects the bright sun.

I chose to draw these trees because they represent the aftermath of intense flames. These are not the landscapes artists typically choose to paint. Burnt trees turn into lines, some still standing up straight and others on the ground. These trees intersect with horizon lines, streams,

and rivers that make up this landscape. Rendering the remains of a burnt tree blends the line between representation and abstraction. The shapes made do not resemble living trees. Every single burnt tree is different from one another. Some challenge gravity by the contrast of the thin bases holding up an entire trunk.

One artist from the Canadian collective known as The Group of Seven¹, Frank Johnston struck me with his painting, *Fire Swept Algoma* made in 1920 (*figure 4*). This landscape painting of a burned area exemplifies the reductive qualities a burned forest has. The complex arrangements of branches and logs lie on the ground. The pillars of trees that remain are intersecting the mountains behind them. The mountains are painted with tally mark-like paint strokes, showing more trees in the distance, and representative of time. This painting convinced me to continue oil painting, through its effectiveness of capturing landscape with paint on canvas. Johnston's paint strokes inspired me to curate my exhibition around that feeling of passing time. Instead of using horizontally oriented canvases, I approached my exhibit with the idea of displaying vertical panoramic canvases. The format acts like "slivers" of time. Smoke rises, trees tower above, and trails lead toward mountain summits. This upward motion is important to the subjects depicted, making the viewer nod their heads along with the motion of a brushstroke.

Fire on the Mountain

The summer after our move to Colorado was my first encounter with wildfire. That night, as the sun set, darkness illuminated the fire off on the Grey Rock Ridge in the Poudre Canyon.

¹ The Group of Seven, "The Group of Seven – Canadian Landscape Painters From 1920 to 1933."

Questions filled my mind — How did this start? Was anyone stopping it from growing? Did we need to do something about it? Seeing trees destroyed in this way felt surreal. As a child, it felt terrifying. Fire is bad right?



Figure 4 – Fire Swept Algoma by Frank Johnston, 1920

In the fall of 2020, the Cameron Peak fire ignited. It had grown to immense proportions, becoming Colorado's largest wildfire in recorded history. The burn scar totaled 208,193 acres. It burnt for three and a half months before it reached 100% containment. ¹At the time I was entering my junior year of college in Omaha, Nebraska. I was 500 miles away from home, while the fire kept burning. The same questions resurfaced within me. I applied for a research grant the following summer and began answering them.

The grant resulted in more questions than answers, however I began to understand the complexity of the forest's own relationship to fire. I went into the project thinking that fire was an enemy. I wanted to know how to stop fires. It was contradicting to my own perspective on fire that I would find out how integral it is to the natural environment.

The grant allowed me to spend the summer of 2021 in the mountains of Northern Colorado. I traveled west through the Poudre Canyon Road intending to visit several areas affected by the burn. After driving through the small town of Rustic, I was hit with this intense shock to see the Poudre River completely burnt to a crisp on one side. The other side was seemingly fine. It was clear the river provided a natural fire line dividing the canyon. The road was filled with homemade signs posted to fences, thanking firefighters for saving their homes. I had never been immersed in this kind of environment before.

After winding through the canyon for a couple of hours, I turned onto County Road 103. This took me to Cameron Peak where the fire originated. Black spires over arid ground. Half-burnt timber sat in piles, one after another. I wanted to get off the main road and after passing multiple campgrounds with signs stating "CLOSED. HAZARD. BURNED AREA," I entered

¹ Maiolo-Heath, "Coalition for the Poudre River Watershed-Cameron Peak Fire: Facts and Impacts."

some dispersed camping that did not seem as explicit to my trespassing. I hopped out of my truck and began taking photos of the environment. This place felt hot. Without a canopy, there was no escaping the sun. The dry ground offered no moisture to combat the heat. The only sense of life or movement came from the river flowing through the shimmering black bark of trees that had fallen onto the water. A sadness enveloped me. Other places I love could succumb to the same fate.

Patches of green grass and yellow wildflowers poked through parts of the burn site. I was shocked to see plants thriving only six months after the fire was contained. These thriving organisms showed me that fire is not entirely destructive. The different chemical compounds like phosphorus, potassium, and nitrogen stored in trees are released back into the soil when burnt down. Natural and man-made fires restore nutrients to the soil¹. When forests are deprived of fire, it can starve environments. Humans cause this through putting fires out prematurely or they can facilitate healthy forests through controlled burns and cultural fire.

Erika Osborne is a contemporary oil painter based in Colorado was also affected by the Cameron Peak Wildfire. Her work focuses on the restorative aspects of fire. Her body of work titled, *Woodland Naturopathy*, focuses on painting burnt branches and stumps surrounded by thriving grasses and wildflowers². This is best shown in her painting, *Generational Wisdom* (figure 5). She paints fallen branches and stumps surrounded by thriving grasses and wildflowers. The paintings emphasize the growth with vibrant palettes. The contrast between the colorful florals against the deep blues and blacks of a burnt log stood out to me. These are beautiful representations of fire and evoke a sense of hope. After making sublime paintings of

¹ “THE EFFECT OF FIRE ON SOIL PROPERTIES.” USDA

² “Woodland Naturopathy – Erika Osborne.”

fire, I did not want to eliminate the sense of awe and grandeur that existed in my work by focusing too much on the fauna and flora. Fire feels overwhelming and intense to me. This is a key aspect of my work.

The burn site of the 2012 Millie fire is nestled in the Gallatin National Forest. The Storm Castle Creek flows through the burn scar down to the Gallatin River. While hiking in this area, I encountered more blackened trees. One tree stood out to me because of the scales of the bark



Figure 5 – Generational Wisdom by Erika Osborne, 2023

reflecting the sun. The incredible surface of that tree contrasted with the vibrant green forage growth. Etched in my mind, this felt like a visual representation of the paradoxical nature of fire. The luscious forage shows that fire is restorative. The burnt tree represents the destruction, however the beauty in it instills optimism in me. *The Monolith* is a charcoal drawing of this tree on a burnt wood panel (*figure 6*). This eight-foot-tall drawing towers above the viewer like a monolith. The tree becomes a monument, to show the importance of fire. By using charcoal, I aim to capture the cyclical nature of the forest. The product of burning creates charcoal. I utilize that medium to capture the beauty of the burnt tree. The wood panel is burnt to show materiality, then charcoal is added to create the image of the tree. Some growth under the tree demonstrates what Osborne's work does well, while still having the sublime nature of fire be the center.



Figure 6 – The Monolith by Russell Brausch, 2025

CHAPTER THREE

ONLY YOU

The Exhibition

My MFA thesis exhibit, *Only You* shows a variety of different approaches to modern firefighting. My work shows the intense nature of fire through the human intervention within wild land firefighting. In *F.E.A.R.* which is firefighting slang for “F*** Everything and Run”,¹ captures a montage effect of different viewpoints of firefighting (*figure 7*). Depicting the rough timber, scooper planes, and firefighters in front of a smokestack demonstrates the overwhelming qualities of what firefighting looks like. These different strategies of controlling fires happen simultaneously, and this painting offers that viewpoint that can only be found working the fire line.

In August of 2024, the Alexander Mountain Fire west of Loveland, Colorado ignited while I was back home in Fort Collins. Watching the smokestack grow throughout the week lured me in. On an evening, I drove as close as I could get to the fire. About a mile away, I sat in the trunk of my car sketching the fire. I watched as DC-10 air tankers drop retardant over the ridge, alternating with helicopters drenching spots with water, flying back to the reservoir to refill and repeating for hours on end. While sketching this fire, I was confronted with my own vulnerability and responsibility to this issue. I was helpless to the effects of this wildfire, while also having no ability to aid in creating fire lines. I could not do anything helpful, but I could draw. This gave me purpose, knowing one of the duties of an artist is to document what they see.

¹ Leschak, *Ghosts of the Fireground: Echoes of the Great Peshtigo Fire and the Calling of a Wildland Firefighter*.



Figure 7 – F.E.A.R. by Russell Brausch, 2024

Moving a pencil across paper is nothing close to firefighting, but it is what I do. I would be ready to help tell the firefighter's stories. That is a major part of the story, not just depicting the land, but also those who approach death while protecting others.

My friend, Dakota Randall, who has been working for the Forest Service for years was assigned to that fire. He was out on the mountain as I sat and sketched it. I realized the importance of these men and women who choose to make a career out of wildfire. They spend hours digging fire lines, chopping down trees, and staying up all night to protect structures. All hope was put into firefighters managing the fire as it crept closer to my Grandparents home in Loveland. It became an important part of my work to represent these individuals. They commit their careers to brutal work during fire season. It used to only last six months of the year but now fire season is all year round. Dakota's contract with the forest service maxes out before summer even ends, working all his permitted overtime hours. To establish a workforce that is more consistent throughout the year, the Forest Service has contracts that keep them employed during off months of the fire season. ¹They replace fighting fires with controlled burns and fuel reduction. While this is effective, it eliminates the off season which draws in certain kinds of personalities that want to do this work. On top of that, Federal Worker layoffs have caused panic considering foreseeable fire seasons that continue to get worse. All months of the year, firefighters are effectively reducing the impact of wildfire for everyone else living in high-risk areas. Without them, the WUI² would be doomed.

All the firefighters depicted in my show are carrying a chainsaw over their shoulder. It represents the heavy burden they carry with them to protect our homes and restore the forests.

¹ "Permanent Firefighter Pay Update: Part 2 | US Forest Service."

² Wildland Urban Interface

Dakota is depicted in the charcoal drawing on burnt wood panel titled, *Never You* (figure 8). Through the charcoal and burnt wood panel, his likeness emerges. The white Conté used to achieve full ranges of value creates a ghost like figure. This alludes to the figures of the past, haunting the forest with their bad management tactics that have become their legacy.



Figure 8 – *Never You* by Russell Brausch, 2025

I struggle with the aching to help make effective change while feeling helpless simultaneously. Not knowing what to do, I make artwork that identifies this feeling. It is best represented in the mixed media works; *Learn from Mistakes* and *The Problem is the Fixing* (figure 9). These two pieces are created from used Nomex firefighting uniforms donated from the Northern Colorado Fire Prevention Officer, Jane Gordon¹. With these uniforms, I cut them apart and sewed them to represent abstract landscapes. The yellow shirts allude the hazy smoke, while the green represents the forests and grasslands. After sewing these together, I find images that represent old and modern symbols from the Forest Service. I use silkscreen processes to print these symbols onto the fabric. After drawing, and burning these pieces, I stretch them over wood panels. The odd shaped fabric wraps around the rectangle, where some parts pull tighter. The pulling of the fabric adds tension. It mirrors the internal tension of vulnerability and responsibility to an issue we have no control over.



Figure 9 – *The Problem is the Fixing* (Left) and *Learn From Mistakes* (Right) by Russell Brausch, 2025

¹ “Young Gulch Trail.”

These pieces are inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's screen prints and mostly his 1955 piece, *Bed* (figure 10). His modernist approach to using everyday objects resonated with me. "Combines" is a term¹ that Rauschenberg coined to help define the works where he attached found objects to canvas-like structure. He doesn't let the bed just be a bed, he adds to it in ways that continues to abstract it and transform it into an art object. In a similar fashion, these Nomex uniforms are stretched like canvas, printed on, painted, drawn, and finally burned. They differentiate from their utility but still function to provide a sense of history within the individuals who wore the uniforms.



Figure 10 – *Bed* by Robert Rauschenberg, 1955

¹ "Combines (1954–64) | Robert Rauschenberg Foundation."

Even though the narrative on fire suppression has shifted, there is still a necessity to protect homes and properties. This perpetuates fire suppression by seeing fire as the source of devastation, not renewal. The stretched fabric reflects the tightness in my chest. The anxiety that we will not learn from our mistakes. But at the same time wondering how true forest restoration can be effective when the industry has been made to fight them. I wonder if both things can coexist as effective ways to restore forests while also protecting livelihoods.

In the exhibition, it was important to make the work feel accessible to the public. The lands I depict are public lands, designated to be preserved and used by the public. I chose to make large, eight feet tall panels to represent the height trees have. Evenly spaced apart, and various approaches to each one can describe a healthy forest, where diverse trees grow, with plenty of room for light to reach the forage underneath. Placing them on the ground and leaning them against the wall makes them more approachable, as if the viewer can walk right into the landscape.

In reference to National Parks visitor centers, a Smokey Bear Kiosk waits for viewers to commemorate their trip into the room of smokey and burnt landscapes with a sticker or pamphlet. They are reminded by Smokey Bear's presence to be responsible with fires, while also questioning his hat labeled, "DOOMED" (*figure 11*). This hints at the humorous nature of an anthropomorphized bear telling you what to do, while acknowledging the reality of the current era.



Figure 11 – Exhibition View, Smokey Bear in Only You MFA Exhibition by Russell Brausch, 2025.

The flow of the main gallery takes the viewer from a smokestack off in the distance, to getting a closer view at fires and then a panel completely burnt. One wall examines firefighting methods and Forest Service slogans. Vinyl decals placed underneath two paintings create false shadows. The decal under *Elkhorn* states, “IT’S A GRAND OLD FOREST, TOO”, to play on the idea to preserve old growth forest. This painting depicts the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation elk habitat restoration site in the Elkhorn mountains outside of Radersburg,

Montana. The decal under *Red Feather* says, “YOU CAN STOP THIS SHAMEFUL WASTE” (*figure 12*). This slogan is representative of the underlying intentions of fire suppression, to protect the natural resources found in timber production. It is an ironic reality that timber burning down becomes useless for its production value because of enacted policies. These policies did not acknowledge forest health and prioritized economic gain. The logging industry’s effect on forest management policies are to blame for the immense loss of that resource today¹. The iconography referenced within the text and work can be made at different levels of engagement, which allows for different audiences to resonate and feel moved through certain pieces. The pieces demonstrate the strength of propaganda through these phrases and how shadows persist far past original intentions.



Figure 12 – Red Feather (Left) and Elkhorn (Right) by Russell Brausch, 2025

¹ Egan, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America*.

Fire Suppression

Forest management and climate change has led to hotter and drier summers, increasing the chances for kindling to ignite and grow into a massive wildfire¹. This threatens ecosystems for wildlife and the civilization that surrounds them. The mishandling of these lands is described as fire suppression. This concept has overshadowed perspectives on forest health. The lack of burning means there is now more fuel from brush and younger trees. These fuels create hotter fires that make old growth trees susceptible to fire. The decrease in old growth forests means that forests composed of younger trees are more vulnerable to disaster.

In the American Western landscape, this can be traced back to land acquired through Manifest Destiny. Major land acquisitions like the Louisiana Purchase, Texas Annexation, Mexican American War, and the Gadsden Purchase allowed settlers to move west of the Mississippi River and claim land through the Homestead Act. Ownership of this land became contingent upon occupation and utility. Many saw this as an opportunity to grow their new estates on land previously designated as forest. Fires would intentionally be started to burn down forests and transfer its utility into potential building and land possession. Uncontrolled, these fires could grow to thousands of acres.²

The logging industry practices of clear cutting, where the entirety of a logging claim is turned to stumps, used to require the spreading of seeds post-logging. The unnatural growth of these seeds has created super thick forests. Thick forests make for tight spaces in between tree canopies, starving forage from nutrients. The competition for sunlight and water has plagued

¹ Anguiano and Gee, *Fire in Paradise: An American Tragedy*.

² Egan, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America*.

these forests from growing tall and large. They do not make for thriving habitat or secure vested interest for future logging. The Great Fire of 1910 functioned as a wakeup call for the Federal Government. The decimation of timber resources panicked the government. This loss influenced the Forest Service's shift their focus to full fire suppression¹.

During this period of westward expansion, landscape art functioned to encourage Manifest Destiny. Paintings like Casper David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* shows the sublime nature of the west (*figure 13*). The figure overlooking the cliff with fog rising from below shows the American ideal of seeking beauty in nature while also acknowledging the unknown that awaits him. My depiction of the land is similar with figures headed to and from smokey mountains. In my piece, *Tyler*, I paint the figure of a former wild land firefighter, Tyler Berry (*figure 14*). His back is turned with a Pulaski axe and shovel slung over his shoulder. This mirrors Friedrich's painting. The figures are both turned away from the viewer, facing uncertainty in the environment in front of them. The nod to Friedrich's work adds an ironic tone to the work. A theme that keeps resurfacing in my work is the contradiction that those who were outspoken for protecting land assets are also to blame for its problems today.

¹ Property and Environment Research Center, "Good Fire, Bad Fire: Inside the Race to Restore America's Forests | PERC."



Figure 13 – Wanderer above the Sea of Fog by Casper David Friedrich, 1818

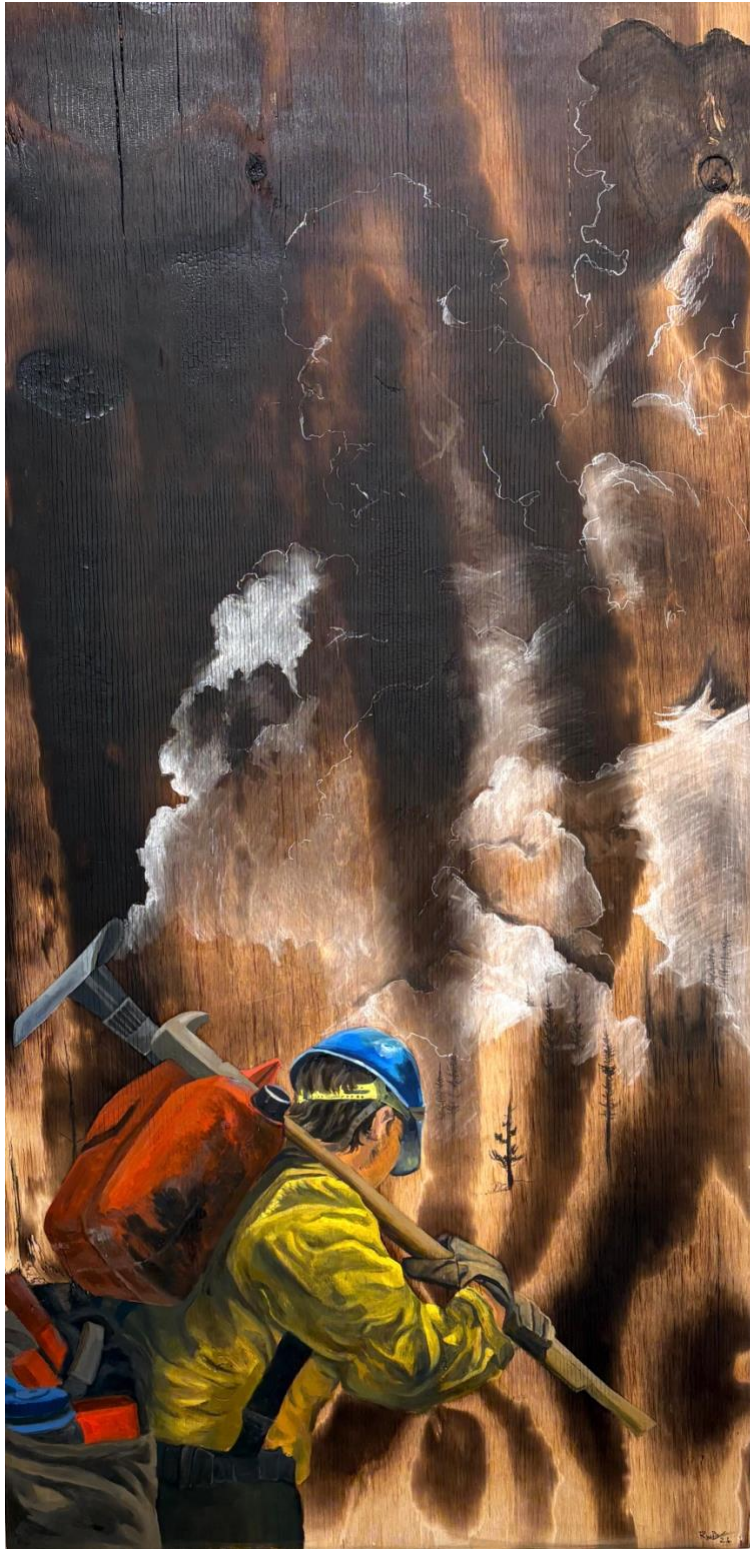


Figure 14 – Tyler by Russell Brausch

Indigenous Practices

Contemporary discussions of forest management have largely focused on looking to indigenous populations for wisdom. For hundreds of years, Native people fire on the landscape. By lighting small fires in the forest, they could target undesirable fuels¹. These fires were tame which would burn the younger trees and brush. The thick bark of older growth trees would protect themselves against controlled burns. Once burned, the nutrients could return to the soil and continue to foster spacious canopies and abundant forage for animals to thrive in. This practice kept forests from being overcrowded and created better environments for hunting wild game. Lodgepole Pines require fire to spread their seeds. Pinecones will inflate with the intense heat and release seeds into the ground.

The “wild” landscape that settlers encountered was formed by the indigenous populations. Beautiful forests thought to have been untouched by humans, had been cultivated through years of care and knowledge of land management². Westward expansion brought disease and wars that ravaged native populations. The expertise of controlled burns was lost or confined to reservations. The practices that exist today are known as cultural burning.

Viewing photos of Yosemite National Park in 1872³ compared to today shows the stark difference between a forest cultivated by indigenous tribes and the same forest devoid of them. The Yosemite Valley was primarily inhabited by the Ahwahneechee (Southern Sierra Miwok) tribe that had a vibrant culture of fire practices.⁴

¹ Stewart, *Forgotten Fires: Native Americans and the Transient Wilderness*.

² Anderson, *Tending the Wild: Native American Knowledge and the Management of California's Natural Resources*.

³ “How The Indigenous Practice of ‘Good Fire’ Can Help Our Forests Thrive.”

⁴ Veltman, “A Northern California Tribe Works to Protect Traditions in a Warming World.”

The exhibition does not contain explicit depictions of indigenous practices. The concept of cultural fire has lingered in the background but does not make an appearance because most public has not seen prescribed fire in centuries. These thoughts appear through in *Fireproof II* (figure 15). This piece is burnt to black, absorbing light that feels like a void and simultaneously reflects light in particular spots. I intend this piece to be a bookend on the main gallery, asking viewers to reflect on the use of fire in our environment. It is an abstract representation of a burnt forest, where trees overlap each other and create a stark, black landscape. Will we right the wrongs of our predecessors and look to wiser communities for guidance?



Figure 15 – Fireproof II by Russell Brausch, 2023

America's Best Idea

Researching the history of forest fires, National Parks and Forest Service iconography Parks have emerged in my work. These land designations function as the American ideal of wildlife and nature. The idea of preserving nature gives this false impression that the landscape

will never change. Nature grows much slower than the human existence. Alterations are subtle. It is not until a natural disaster occurs that quickly demonstrates that this is untrue.

American industrialization questioned the utility of land taken from indigenous tribes. Theodore Roosevelt was elected president during this time and is responsible for the creation of the U.S. National Parks System. He realized the importance of nature for the nation's wellbeing. During his presidency from 1901 – 1909, Roosevelt designated 230 million acres of land for conservation.¹ This appointment led to the creation of the United States National Forest Service. One of their original purposes was to oversee and govern these lands.

The “Teddy Bear”, a stuffed bear, was named after Theodore's hunting trip in Mississippi where he refused to shoot a captive bear. These loveable kids toy garnered warm feelings for bears, despite their violent nature. Smokey Bear originated from a severely burnt bear rescued from a fire. He is one of the icons that continues to appear throughout my work. He was the anthropomorphized bear spokesperson for wildfire propaganda. This was an effective strategy to convince citizens that fires that threatened their home, was in fact, bad. What started from a real bear, evolved into a cartoon brown bear with man-like features, sporting denim jeans, a shovel, and yellow forest ranger hat. The first illustration was drawn by Albert Staehle in 1944. His image, placed with slogans like “Only You Can Prevent Forest Fires” placed responsibility on the individual. While destructive fires are predominantly started by humans, this simultaneously perpetuated fear for all kinds of fire. Cutouts painted with Smokey Bear line entrances to many National Forests across the west. He became a national symbol for being a good steward and informing the public of the level of fire danger present on a given day. Even

¹ Egan, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America*.

though preventing human caused fires is wise, the definitions of prevention and suppression became synonymous.

I utilize Smokey Bear to point out the effects of his fire suppression narrative. A cute, beloved, hyper-masculine teddy bear resonates with Americans. Smokey Bear is ubiquitous in National Parks or National Forest areas. He is a familiar face to my audience. Not many know the extent of the effects he had on the current state of forests. This lack of nuance for the viewer can raise questions about the actions of the bear in my drawing. In *Torchy Bear*, Smokey Bear is holding a military grade flamethrower and torching a mule deer buck with a gas mask over its head and holstering an oxygen tank (*figure 16*) This image touches on the beloved symbol, while showing his intention on burning the deer. The humorous tone lightens the doom and gloom of the reality of the forest health. I intend for this tension between humor and reality to raise questions about the reason why I would depict Smokey Bear in this way. Recontextualizing this icon offers viewers a chance to acknowledge the strength of propaganda in this country and deconstruct it for today.



Figure 16 – Torchy Bear by Russell Brausch, 2023

The title of the exhibition, “Only You” plays on the Smokey Bear campaign, “Only You can Prevent Wildfires” encouraging citizens to be responsible with their campfires, smokes, and matches. This narrative has left a legacy that places responsibility on the individual rather than a community. Similarly to when I am sketching the fire, others might feel like they have no way to contribute to aid in this issue. It is overwhelming that 80 million of the 193 million acres of National Forest land need restoration. This does not include privately owned land, BLM, and state lands. How could the individual even begin to understand what it looks like to participate in reducing those 80 million acres by a fraction of a percent. The Forest Service can only effectively restore two million acres a year.¹ There is not enough workforce, equipment, and funding to keep up with the wildfire seasons and restoration.

National Forest iconography, like fire towers, also make appearances in my work. These towers functioned to spot and end the spread of small fires before they could erupt. It was another tactic that aided in fire suppression. Most fire towers have been decommissioned for their primary use. I use this symbol to reference the old ways of the forest service. In *Come Stay with Us*, Garnet Mountain Fire Lookout is drawn atop an eight-foot-tall wood panel (*figure 17*). This charcoal drawing on torched wood is representative of the idealism of the National Forest Service. Fire towers capture that moment in time when it felt like technology had reached a point where nature could be controlled. The towers that are still standing mostly function as a place to camp overnight, like a rustic hotel. This relic’s function has changed from surveillance to recreation. I question why viewing this tower from below feels like looking up at the institution

¹ Property and Environment Research Center, “Good Fire, Bad Fire: Inside the Race to Restore America’s Forests | PERC.”

in both reverence and disappointment. The government entities like the Forest Service, BLM, and Department of Natural Resources are supposed protect the natural features of the United States yet aided in its destruction.

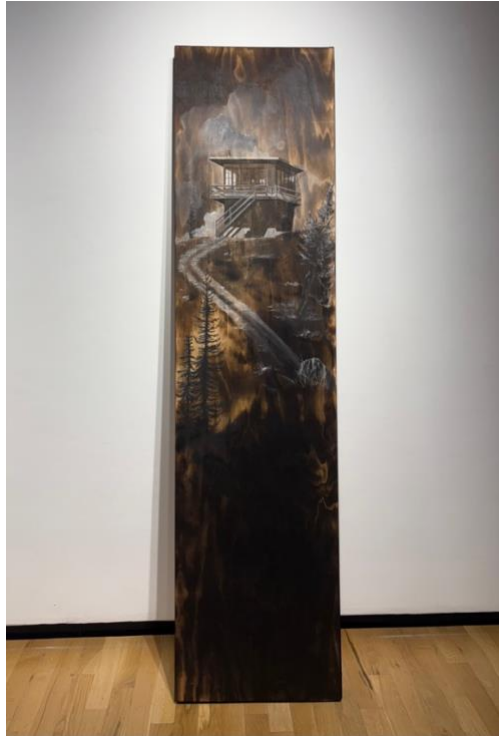


Figure 17 – Come Stay with Us by Russell Brausch, 2025

Similarly, I reference founders of the National Forest Service, like Gifford Pinchot, Ed Pulaski, and Elers Koch. Koch grew up in Bozeman, Montana and was one of the first forest rangers to supervise the Rocky Mountains in Idaho and Montana. His views were captured in his book, “Forty Years a Forester”. After fighting the Big Burn of 1910, he had skepticism of the Forest Service’s fixation on suppressing fire.¹ Koch has become a local symbol for how the town

¹ Koch, *Forty Years a Forester*.

views fire. It is ominous to imagine what Koch worried about a hundred years ago, and to put ourselves in his shoes if nothing continues to change in the state of our current world.

This hypothetical inspired me to create *Koch's Legacy* as one of the focal points of my exhibition. This painting injects Elers Koch into Bozeman during the summer of 2020 (*figure 18*). He sits atop his horse on Springhill looking at the viewer, in front of the iconic Bridger Mountain range as it burns, smoke rising far beyond the limits of the canvas. This painting's large scale enhances the heavy-handed imagery being presented. It hits close to home for many Bozeman residents who witnessed the Bridger Mountains burn. The issue of fire seems insurmountable. The complicated nature of solving these problems is like the smokestack, never ending.



Figure 18 – Koch's Legacy by Russell Brausch, 2025

CHAPTER FOUR

CONSERVATION

Mapping

The day I left my family's lodge in Crested Butte, Colorado, a fire ignited four miles west of our residence. For twelve days I checked fire surveillance updates for containment levels. I cross referenced those maps with my own topographic layered map on my OnX Hunt phone application. I identified two steep ridges that the fire would have to travel up and over to reach our home. That gave me little comfort knowing that there was no rain in the forecast, and it was the hottest part of the summer. My anxiety withered after seeing that containment reached over 40%.

Topography is a kind of language I have been learning for the past six years. By identifying hills, mountain ranges, and water features by their elevation, I can estimate their relative location based on those topographical lines. The way information is communicated through contour lines of topography is like my drawing process. I am translating these physical landscapes into a two-dimensional space. At the same time, using this idea of visual language to communicate with my viewer. This exemplifies the reasons for using realism techniques in my artwork. My goal is for all audiences to be able to understand what is represented on my canvas and panels. The use of the wood materials and burning adds nuance for audiences who understand material and its conceptual nature.

Hunting

Bowhunting Antelope in the prairie introduced me to getting on my hands and stomach, crawling over prickly cactus and sagebrush. Stalking these animals is incredibly challenging, and their keen vision makes it nearly impossible to shoot a lethal arrow. During these early season hunts, I would find myself in thick haze from distant wildfires. The red sun would illuminate my hunts at first light. Watching the antelope move throughout the day with the changing winds altering the haziness etched into my brain. This bridged the disconnection that fire affects more than just humans.

Hunting elk and deer has brought me high into the mountains. Understanding the animal's habitat is vital to successful hunts. Through this I have gained sensibility over what makes a good habitat for this game. Dense, overgrown forests are thick and make it challenging for animals to move through them. The tight canopy prevents sunlight from reaching the ground, eliminating forage, a major source of food for these animals¹. Finding elk coincides with finding a healthy forest. Trees spaced far apart, wide canopies, abundant forage all make up prime elk territory. When fire is removed from habitats, elk populations suffer, as well as the rest of the ecosystem. Spending days in these places cultivated a sense of gratefulness and empathy for these animals. Bugling back and forth with a bull elk transformed me. Nothing in my life has come close to the experience of communicating with rutting bulls.

After my hunts, I am compelled to recreate these experiences by painting. It is apparent that the choices made to manage forests a certain way will directly affect the habitat of many game species. Hunting Rocky Mountain Elk in the public land units around the Gallatin Valley

¹ "Elk - Yellowstone National Park (U.S. National Park Service)."

has brought me close encounters with the species. During the rutting season, the male elk make these loud and intense screaming noises called bugles. Diaphragms that I insert into my mouth and a bugle has allowed me to communicate with them. With a convincing bugle, the elk will respond to me. I have talked back and forth with these elk for hours, hoping they will want to come within shooting range of my compound bow. Painting a rutting bull in, *Bugle for Help*, captures this feeling (*figure 19*). The bull in the painting is staring the viewer down, with the emanating sound of a bugle implied. A helicopter dropping water in the trees behind him highlights the intertwined nature of wildlife and forest management.



Figure 19 – Bugle for Help by Russell Brausch, 2025

Restoration

Rocky Mountains are infested with the Mountain Pine Beetle. This type of bark beetle has eaten its way through thousands of pines. They burrow into trees, lay their eggs, and feed on the phloem layer. Through this feeding process, the nutrient and water transportation systems are disrupted. The Blue Stain Fungus from the beetle infects the tree and clogs the vascularity within¹. A slice from a dead tree can be identified as a pine beetle kill through the blue stain around the tree rings. Dense forests of similar types of trees can make it easy for the beetle to spread. Once infected, the tree dies and waits to become fuel in the next wildfire. Expansive mountainsides decimated by pine beetle allows fire to rapidly grow and devour the landscape.

One of the most effective tools for prevention is pruning or thinning. This requires arborists to determine old growth trees and ideal canopy spacing. Younger trees competing for nutrients and sunlight are selected to be cut down. By logging these shorter trees, the space between each tree increases.² With greater distance between trunks and the canopies, forests can protect itself from flames entering the space. These felled trees get piled up for controlled burns in the lower risk seasons. Brush burns quick and fast, but the trees are the source of intense latent heat. Reducing these fuels prevents fires from burning through all available timber. Much of the burned particles returns vital nutrients to the soil. When old growth trees are left intact, they can use these restored nutrients to continue to build a thriving environment. The future of forests might look like cutting down trees rather than planting them.

¹ “Mountain Pine Beetle - Colorado State Forest Service.”

² “Thinning the Forest for the Trees | US Forest Service.”

A great example of the effective use of thinning can be seen from the Cameron Peak fire in 2020. These thinning tactics were implemented at The Great Stupa Dharmakaya, located in Red Feather, Colorado. When the fire rampaged through, the grasses were burnt, but the Stupa and the forest surrounding remained intact¹. As civilization has moved deeper into woodland areas, these methods of thinning will not be an option, but a necessity for structural survival. Examples like this inform the reason forest conservation is worth making art about. The doom and gloom are explicit in my paintings. By approaching this subject head on gives me a sense of peace. It is hard to constantly be consumed with destruction and loss, but through the art making process I have found comfort in it.

¹ Bloom, "Thinning the Forest Saved Shambhala From Colorado's Largest Wildfire. It Offers Lessons for Other At-Risk Places."

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Strange Trails Ahead

I spend much of my time in public lands and seek the beauty of nature. Instead of turning away from issues like wildfire, I choose to embrace it in my paintings. I could capture the beauty of a vast mountain range but prefer to face my building anxieties and illustrate what these landscapes look like during and after a wildfire burns through it. In the act of creating these pieces and researching forest conservation, I have come to few conclusions. I still question whether the narrative of fire will ever be able to be looked at as a tool for restoration when thousands of homes are destroyed every year in fires that occur in more densely populated areas? Will the litigation of land management policies be expedited to accommodate the growing concerns, while continuing to place the public interest before the private entities? How can I look at a burnt forest with luscious growth underneath and feel hope while this issue becomes more prevalent with every year? Can cutting down trees appear environmentally sustainable while people continue to pay to plant more to offset their carbon footprint?

There is no clear answer to these questions. However, it is important to know that within the timeline of one human life exists only a small portion of a forest. Years of cultivating old growth, diverse forests did not happen as quickly as they were wiped out by fire. Patience might be the answer, and the effects of forest restoration might not even be visible in my own lifetime.

During one of my elk hunts, I came upon embers smoking beneath the ground underneath a scorched tree. It was most likely caused by a lightning strike a night or two before I stumbled

upon it. There were no flames, but the ground radiated heat through piles of ash. I recalled that fire could burn underneath snow all winter and ignite wildfires in the springtime. This demonstrates how fire can also be patient. The contrast of the smoke and black trees against the white snow will soon make its way into my art. The image of this projects peace while fire could be waiting for its opportunity to return. I'm certain it will continue to ignite future paintings and drawings in my artistic research.

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