

Residency Log: Claire Giordano

Mediums: Painter & Writer

Time: April 2019

Overview

For two weeks in April 2019 I had the opportunity to engage with Andrews Forest as both an artist and writer. Each day developed a routine. I collected paint and paper, donned a raincoat, and added the heavy brick of the wilderness radio to my pack. In the headquarters building I moved the magnet next to my name to “out” and wrote in thin capital letters my research location. On most mornings, there was only one other person “out” in the continuous rain. Writing on the board was a reminder that when I ventured into the forest my research implements were paint and brush and that I was venturing outside to create experiments in paint and words.

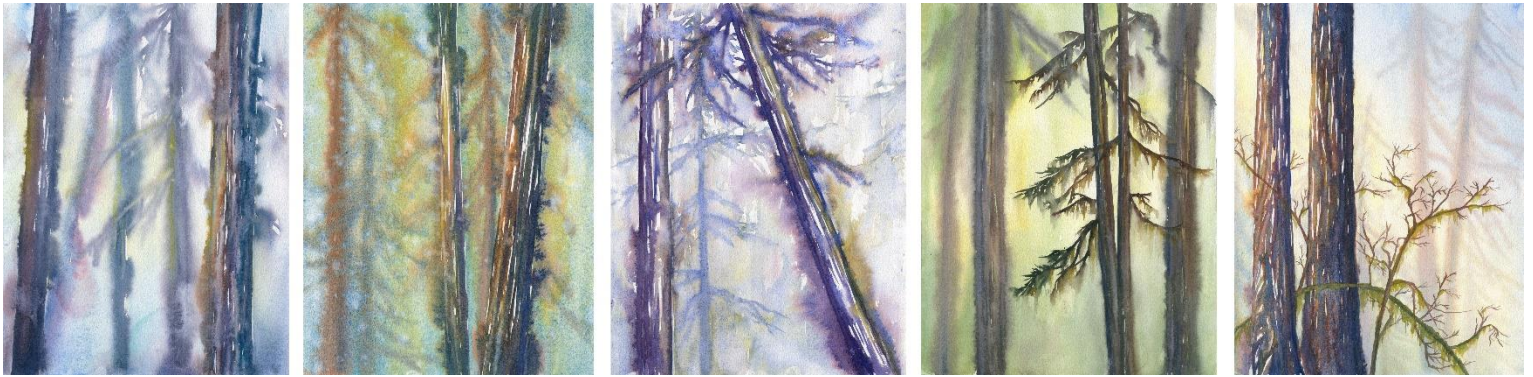
I spent most of each day outside painting and often carried sodden paintings carefully back to the greenhouse studio apartment to dry on the radiant-heat concrete floor. Once dry, every painting was taped to the wall in a growing constellation of my experience. Each evening I would sit below the paintings and write; recording thoughts, notes, and the physical and emotional experience of creating art on-site in all weather conditions.

In the following pages I share a selection of the 41 paintings (ranging in size from 5x7in to 22x16in) and over 11,000 words written over the two weeks of my residency. These visual and written observations are organized primarily by theme and location.



“The Space Between” Triptych. Each painting is 14x11 inches. These paintings show the stories and information captured in the spaces of the old growth tree canopy. The patterns in the skies were created by exposure to rain.

HEMLOCK TREE: LOWER LOOKOUT CREEK TRAIL



The five paintings created below the same Hemlock tree on five different days. Each painting is 14x11 inches.

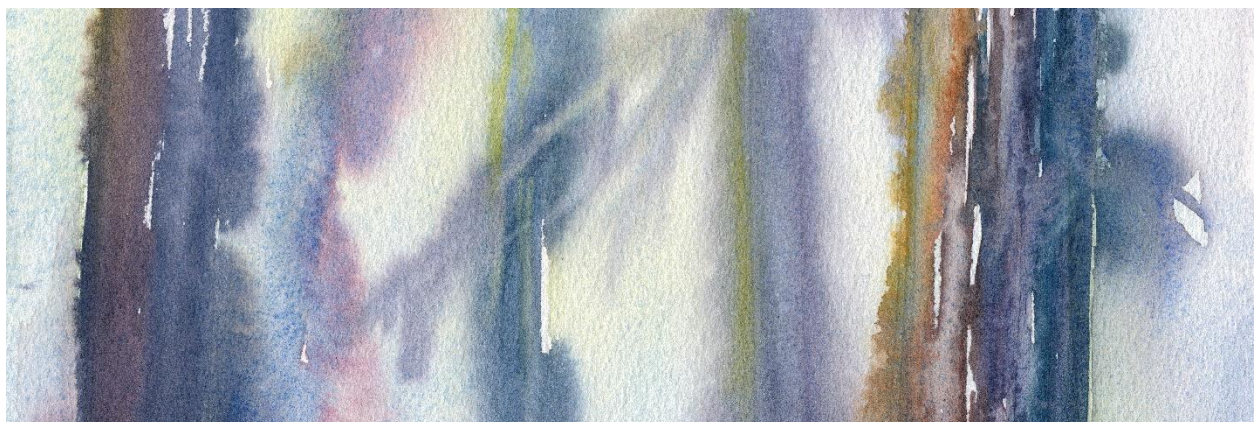
April 13

9:30am. A giant plop of water hits my wet page of watercolor paper and a huge starburst of white appears in my painting. The Hemlock at my back drops another enormous water droplet into my paper. It has been doing this throughout the painting- from large dollops of water to tiny constellations of mist that I didn't know about until the white-starred pigment belies their presence. I've watched as my control of a medium I know well dissolves in the swaths of paint that refuse to dry. Like the other paintings I've made outside here, I surrender to the process.

As I work, I realize this painting is just as much my creation as the forest's; the conditions around me shape everything about it. None of my marks remain where I put them or colors stay mixed the way I expect; water and damp separating and granulating and moving pigment. At the end, as I am about to add the last details in the nearly dry paint, the tree takes the reins instead. The drop of throughfall creates beautiful patterns in the trunk of the biggest tree I painted, blue-green shadowed bark highlighted by fractal veins of white revealed in the slow movement of water. To me, it seems like the tree above me says "no, like this." I lift my brush, set it aside, and watch what unfolds on my page. The tree would know the presence of its brethren the best, after all.

And that last big drop of water fell at the exact moment and place to leave a perfect splotchy mark. Now dry, it mirrors my inadvertent fingerprint at the bottom of the page, the "makers mark" that inevitably appears when I carry paintings while they dry. As I look at it, the very subtle rays of the drop are visible in the paint - a mirror of the branches above me.

And this piece - co-authored with the forest - bears the print of my collaborator, too.



Closeup of the first painting made below the Hemlock tree. In this zoomed image, the patterns created by throughfall are visible in the tree trunks as well as in the chromatic striation on the left side of the image.

April 14

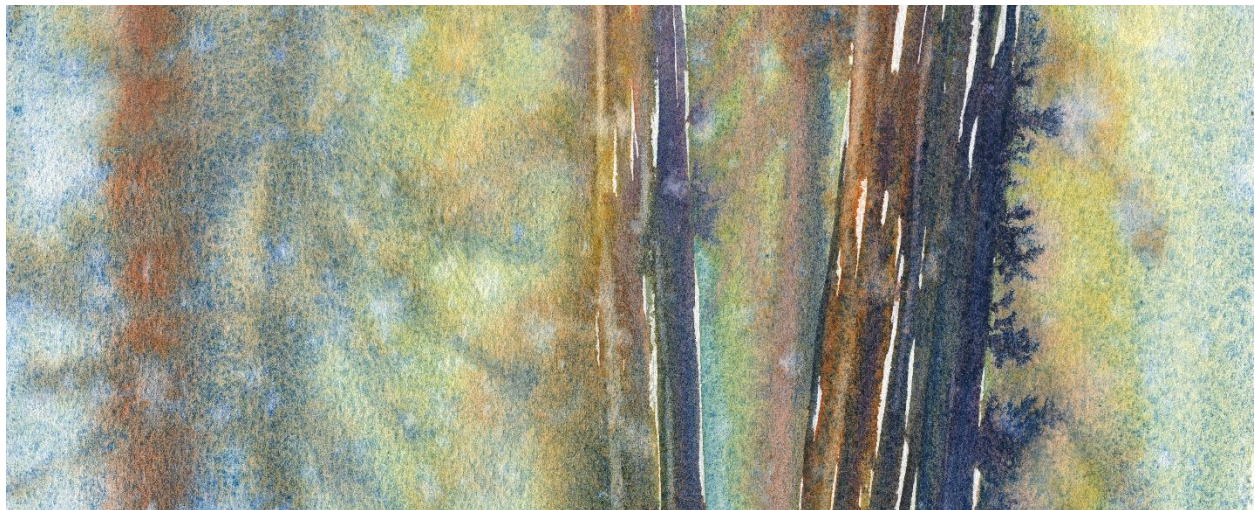
9:00am. I return to the Hemlock again this morning to paint with it again. Different composition, different colors, more vibrant. In my pursuit of not painting in greens I am seeing all the other colors that grace the forest. Purples and blues and hints of yellow. Even pinks.

April 20

Raining. After a brief evening of sun yesterday I knew where I wanted to go this morning immediately. I paint, and the dull blues I originally chose inevitably change to brighter colors due to the separation of the pigment and a unconscious shift to how the place feels. And it is a place of peace, deep attention, and joy.

The finished painting bears the texture of the morning forest. Hard edges lost in the granules of pigment and soft edges of wet blending. Discrete drops of white try to blend in, but to my practiced eye I can now find each drop and trace the path of its drying in the marks I made. And on one side of the trunk on my page, a new phenomenon; beautiful strong fractal patterns. It was just damp enough to wick the pigment in patterns of miniature trees. I am enthralled by the magic of these paintings, and of seeing and understanding and learning through paint.

When I am here time is not measured in the typical linear numbers. It is measured in the drops on my page, in the shifting light I am sitting still enough to see, in the cold I feel seeping through my sit pad, in the cool moss behind my calf, in the patterns evolving on my page.



Closeup of the fourth painting made with the Hemlock. This section exemplifies the fractal patterning that occurred on the right side of the tree trunk as well as the visible pale dots and splotches that mark each raindrop to hit the page.

April 21

Morning. I shared it with favorite grove of trees creating one last painting here. And it is one of my favorites. The light just barely slanted through the trees, and I decided to call it forth. It is Easter, and I celebrated my mass in the cathedral of the woods. Backlit moss became my stained glass windows, intertwined branches overhead the domed church ceiling, and the trees all around me my community to celebrate the joy of life with, to share a feeling of hope, and to honor the privilege of the day. And I think that these feelings ended up in the painting, in the choice of color and composition of the two steadfast trees I painted graced with the first morning light.



A larger image of the first painting created with the Hemlock Tree on the Lower Lookout Creek trail. In this high resolution scan you can see the patterns the throughfall created across the entire page. 14x11 in.



The first rain painting I created at the Andrews. 15x22 inches.

April 9

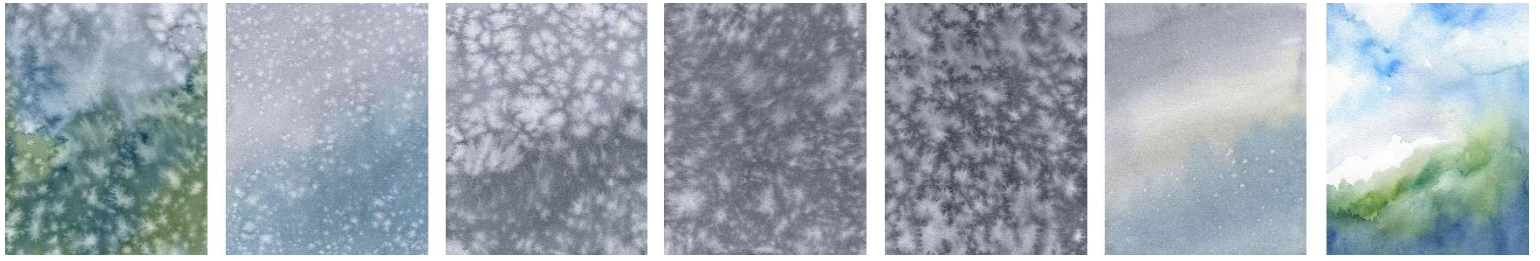
5:00pm. It is so quiet. We often think our homes are quiet, but they rarely are. Family, neighborhoods, cities, suburbs. They all have a unique sound pattern, an auditory fingerprint. My home's print is defined by the distant undercurrent of i90 across the lake, the parents heading upstairs, quiet footfalls of not-so-graceful cats. Here, the fingerprint is all different; simpler. Rain. Drips. Wind. And that's all. My breathing. Or at least it seems simpler. I wonder how this fingerprint will be colored in after two weeks of learning to listen to the forest?

I wonder what the wind sounds like in the leaning trees perched on the ridge. In the rain they are pale and ephemeral and un-grounded in mist. Are they the ghosts of the trees taken from the clear-cuts I drove by? Do trees have spirits? Do those stacked in the back of the logging trucks return to say goodbye to their forest home?

April 11

Rain.

I sit down to finish the painting I started last night. As I paint the trees, I want to know their stories. Each silhouette is unique. It is difficult to wrap my head around the idea that some of these trees are over 500 years old. From the multi-layered shapes I can now tell it is an old growth forest. On my page they look so small. I hope that some of the reverence I feel...the peace I sense beneath their boughs... comes through in the painting. On my page the trees occupy the liminal space between land and sky. In painting them I feel like I come to know them, in a way.



"Storm Passing Through." Seven paintings capturing seven moments of a rainstorm over a 16 hour period.

April 15-16

The rain has arrived in huge drops that look like enormous snowflakes on my painting. Inspired by some of Leah Wilson's work, I decide to do a longitudinal study of the rain. First sample taken at 3:00pm of the stand of old growth trees on the distant ridge. I decide on the completely arbitrary number of 10 seconds as my exposure time to the rain.

5:00pm. Second snapshot of the rain, and the colors have shifted dramatically. The greens and slight yellows have faded into a soft wash of blue and grey. The rain has abated slightly.

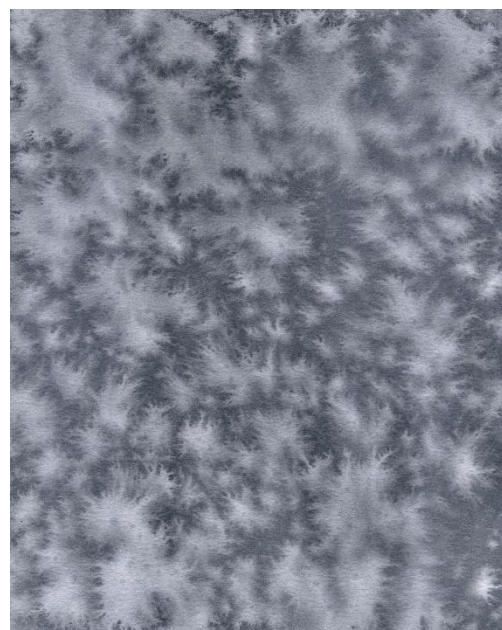
7:00pm. All the color is gone. Light tones of grey. The ridge is simply a darker mass on the page.

9:00pm. Full nighttime now, and it is raining again. On my damp page the large drops radiate in starbursts of white and drift across the surface. The view is one monotonous shade.

2:00am. I could only muster the enthusiasm for one nighttime alarm. Hardest rain yet. It looks like my painting and I stepped under a shower for a brief moment.

7:00am. The soft tones of blue with a light yellow arrive with the gentle dawn, and the rain is almost gone with it. The little dots are just barely visible.

9:00am. The storm has passed, and the distant ridgeline is slowly unfurling from bands of cloud.



Closeup of two of the rain samples: Sample 1 at 5:00pm on April 15th and Sample 2 at 2:00am on April 16th.

OLD GROWTH GROVE: LOWER LOOKOUT CREEK TRAIL



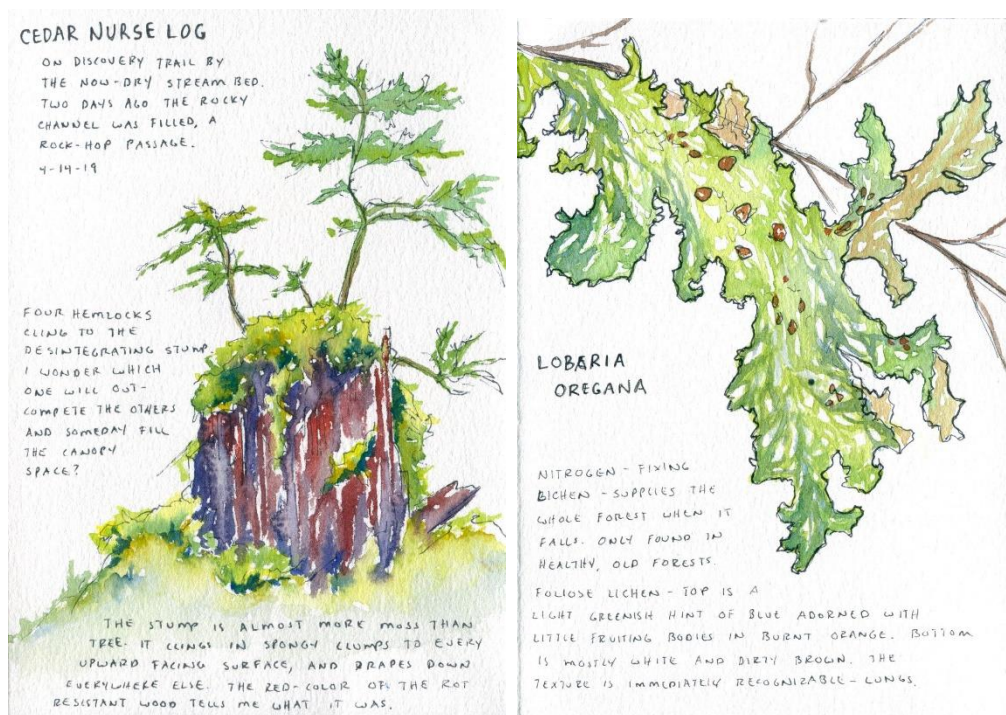
Painting studies made on the Lower Lookout Creek Trail. On the ends are studies of two cut logs, and in the middle is the first painting I made in the forest. It depicts a strand of "researcher trash" left to designate the edge of a transect crossing the creek.

April 10

My first impression of the forest: staggering verticality. The second thing I notice on entering the forest is the change in sound. The steady beat of heavy rain is replaced with an irregular cacophony of drips and drops and patters. The orchestra of trees. The boughs of an immense Douglas Fir tower overhead and I eventually settle in between its roots in the moss. I make a sketch of "Researcher Trash" - a metal pole with pink flagging, one side of a creek transect marker. I am drawn to these artifacts. As much a valid record of time and data as the lichen littering the forest floor. This, too, tells a story; of the researchers who come here to learn, to study. How many of them come to love this place like Fred does? Do they, too, sense the soul of this place the longer they linger beneath these towering ancients?

April 11

11:00am. Lower lookout creek trail. I settle on sketching two stumps. My umbrella is latched in my sternum strap and I am juggling a small paper, palette, and brush. I decide to see how many colors there are, and I am quickly overwhelmed with them. This is why I love to paint outside, on site, in front of my subject. It is a practice that demands complete focus and observation - an immersion in the details. With each mark of my pen and drop of color, I learn. I may not know the language of stumps, but in this visual exploration I feel like it is a conversation. An inquiry, of the most respectful sort. "Let me learn about you just as you are, here, now" is the thought that hovers in my mind and directs the exploration of my brush.



DISCOVERY TRAIL

April 11

I am still overwhelmed by the complexity of this place, but it is slowly becoming a more comfortable complexity. I am learning the mixes of colors to translate the myriad shades of green and accept the droplets of rain that add voices to my page. I let the dampness of the forest dictate my painting. Colors applied in large swaths are blended and merged by the droplets of rain that sneak past my umbrella despite my best efforts. I give up hope that the page will dry at all, and instead watch the ultramarine blue settle beneath the yellows and greens and browns while my legs slowly wake from their ignored-cross-legged seat. Gently, carefully, moving lightly... I slide off my soft moss-covered log and nestle the painting in the crook of my arm. The walk back seems even longer than normal. The conversation of place and pigment continues as more rain sneaks past my umbrella.

April 13

1:00pm. I set out to paint an old growth tree on the Discovery Trail. I found a perfect old downed log with a thin cushion of moss to hold my paper and palettes. It is misting lightly, and I decide to start painting anyway. The paper

in front of me is larger than what I have made so far; intimidating at first. My original marks of paint are quickly lost in the wayward flow of damp pigment and raindrops. Time passes – I don't know how much – and the only thing that turned out as expected was the huge old Douglas fir trunk. It feels steadfast, with a trunk made of a myriad of colors. The trees behind it became vertical lines, very different than the old growth stand directly in front of me with leaning trees conspiratorially nestled in the crooks of neighbors. No, I ended up painting the plantation trees, the contrast of the ancient trees with the monoculture of forestry models writ large on my page. Sometimes, a painting takes on a life of its own from the background processing of my mind.



April 14

Today's colors

- Trillium white and blue green leaves in the fading light
- Pink pink pink of huckleberry buds and green caterpillar
- Moss - so green, maybe even brighter and less yellow than when I arrived
- Old cedar stump red purple blue shadows
- Orange soil, orange split wood
- Water! Closer view of creek- blue green milky
- The color of the water around the newt's home in the now-drying gravel bar



Sketching a Trillium alongside the Discovery Trail

April 19 & 21

I see the sun slide from one side of a trunk to another and I wander on the soft moss until the first shadow covers my page. The idea for a "shadow painting" emerged at the log decomposition site, when for a brief moment the huckleberry bush created a shadow pattern on a blank page. It vanished before paint could touch paper, the ephemeral forms utterly distracting and beautiful - the distilled essence of the plants shape. So, I sought out the fleeting sun today, not anticipating the difficulty: everything moves. Me, the sun, my subject, and my paper. But, I embrace the movement and let the presence of the sun be made visible in my page.



Three of the shadow paintings made with watercolor paints on the Discovery Trail. Left is the shadow of a large sword fern, middle the shadow of a Hemlock branch covered in dangling moss, and right is the branch of a Yew tree.



Painting of the view from the clearing on Road 130.

April 12

2:00. The painting is done, I think. This one was a long drawn out conversation, full of respectful noticing. Seeing the clouds moving fast, less blue in my sky than moments before. A single band of yellow, old growth trees illuminated in a rare break of full sun. I feel it warm the page, my jacket. The heat is so welcome after days of rain. Even the birds and bugs seem to welcome it too - I hear a winter wren, and see a large damp bee land hopefully by my palette. No flowers here, I find myself apologizing, watching at it settles on drying its wings beside me in the sun. I lose track of time, watching the bee and the clouds, and am jarred back to the present with a small "plop," a small harbinger. I resist putting on my jackets, and the bee that is smarter than me flies away. "Fool", the cold breeze tells me. "Watch harder" say the building clouds I finally notice over my shoulder. The rain is already here, threatening to blur the border between natural old trees and plantation trees all the same height. I leave as much of the stark contrast as I can, and the raindrops somehow leave that area dry; they seem to agree.

I stop by the old log again. Tiny drops of rain shielded by umbrella, painting turned to face the sun. Like a giant bird drying its wings in the sun after rain. I relish the warmth on my face, surprised to feel my page warmed, the pigment safely settled into the white fibers of my page. The smell of fir is all encompassing, an olfactory embrace. I see steam rising from the trunk, and move my face close to it. I breath in your breath. Will it help me to know how to paint these beings?



April 15

For the last three hours, I have been lost in the intricacies of alder trees. It is rather amazing to realize that much time passed. With most pieces it does not seem like that long. It was a little warmer than this morning when I painted the background, and I no longer had to wear gloves, relishing the unencumbered hands.

This spot I painted is dominated by the sound of the creek. Water level still high - just barely low enough for me to sit where I am - the sound is all encompassing. I hear nothing else. It becomes infused in my painting, and even the water that carries my pigments was collected from the moving stream three feet in front of me. Moss and bark, I am fascinated by the colors. Blue-gray warm tones, cooler green blue gray hints, and warm splotches and highlights in the direction of the weak sun. I choose granulating pigments again - they are from the earth's minerals, which seems appropriate. And they create the most interesting patterns as they move and settle in the vehicle of the water. I like to imagine the trunk of each tree as a microcosm of the things that surround me; heavy ultramarine pigment the sand and rocks - steadfast and settled even as the water moves. Yellow and green, light pigments carried on the whim of the water up a trunk and across the entire background, like the leaf detritus scattered around me and caught in places on the trees. And the warm scarlet tones, the woody debris. It intertwines with the blue, leaving and settling at will.

I enjoy the challenge of avoiding any greys or blacks in these paintings. It forces me to see - really, really, see - the colors in their infinite multitudes. And it creates space for a feeling, creating room for the emotional landscape that underlies the physical experience. I often see color as the vehicle for mood - combined with value it has a magic ability to stir a feeling. So much of these three hours was spent just mixing the colors, not wanting to waste or spill pigment. Slow, methodical, deeply observing. The best way to see something.

LOG DECOMPOSITION SITE



April 17

The blowdowns across the trail - three large ones - are on obstacle course that somehow add to the sanctity of this place. The focus required to navigate the shattered trees crowds out distractions. When I finally find the little mossy clearing in the woods mind is liberated to take it all in. And a magical spot it is. Green, green... moss so incredibly vibrant after the rain coats everything. The sun is out and illuminates neon moss clumps and provides the most beautiful soft viridian backlight to everything. I walk for a long time and my footfalls quiet in the thick moss and layers of forest duff. It is silent here. I am fascinated by the way light catches on the rugged bark of the giant fir trees. The more I look, the more I notice the shapes of the shadows. This part of the forest is inviting, like the domed ceiling of an intimate chapel. I feel at peace here, comfortable here, reverent here.

I finally decide to paint the first log I found, as it is the most obvious illustration of the intent of the place. The red cedar log is coated in a mat of moss that drapes down over the deep red purples of the decaying trunk. There are sections missing and gone all along its length- cut out by researchers to study the decay of the tree. I am drawn to how the log, as it decomposes, seems to subside gently into the forest. In the way I paint, I try to mimic this sense of connection between forest and log, and in my painting I let the reds of the cedar flow into the greens of the ground. No longer “living” in the technical sense of the word, but the tree is still so very *there*. I hope this is what death is like. A slow and cushioned embrace from the world.

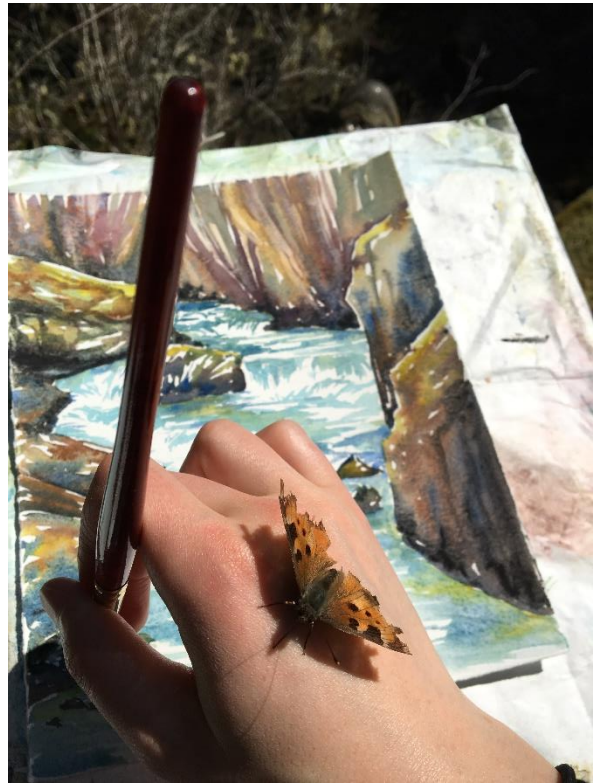
I am reluctant to leave. I carry my painting like an offering beneath the trees with the still damp pigment slowly drying in the rare sun. And maybe an offering is the right word, especially in a place like this. It is my way of saying thank you - I see you - I feel the power that resides here. In paint and color and pigment I do my best to say I feel the deep animacy and presence of this place. As my offering, I will bring it into the world.

ROCKS ABOVE LOOKOUT CREEK

April 19

On the last day I sit beside the creek for hours. After 12 days of rain I relish the simple joy of leaving the umbrella behind and the feeling of warmth on my neck. A butterfly lands on my ear, its tiny shadow traversing the wavering nimbus of my hair visible faintly on the rock. When it leaves, I hear its wings beat. A subtle sound like the ravens I listened to in the desert rolling in the drafts of a canyon. A sound more felt than heard.

The painting spread across my lap is in my comfort zone; a more familiar territory of sun and rock and water. As I paint I feel the conversations with Hemlock and the rain echoing in my choices of color and lines. I find myself leaving white spaces; I want the place around me to fill them in. I let the paints blend with abandon and allow the drying midday light to tell the story with me. I relish the way my brush strokes look different when another butterfly lands on my hand. Its orange and grey wings are tattered, now drying in the sun. Its tiny legs and curious proboscis tickle across my hand, and after ten minutes of its company I slowly begin painting again. The butterfly continues to traverse my hand as I move from palette to paper and back as the blue lines of sun saturated water take shape on the page beneath both of us. For half an hour, we paint the watery lines of the creek together.



As I pack up and begin walking out, the butterflies come back and again land on my shoulders and I see their shadows dance on the earth beside mine. I thank them aloud for the gift of their companionship and company. Heart full, spirit whole, mind of wonder carried on tattered wings.

The painting is done. Not an exact replica but the amalgamation of the many hours now spent in that one spot sitting in the moss with my legs comfortably draped over the rock. I see in my lines a different soundscape of water, less overwhelming than the time painting the alders right at water level. In the colors I remember watching the light change, each part of the painting the intersection of memory and current conditions. I notice the amazing amount of simplification. Of learning to see. I feel like so much of my time here has been learning; about my medium, myself, my work, and this place. All through the medium of sight.

Walking back to the studio I carefully carry the painting. Each of the paintings I made here feels like they carry a little piece of me with them. They are windows into how this place is changing me, records of how the sounds are seeping into my bones and the silhouettes of trees are etching themselves in my heart and mind. They tell the story of my interaction with the forest and how it became part of me, too.

