



Andie Thrams, *Field Studies No. 19, Naupaka*, 2014

ON CONSIDERING EXTRACTION

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Ours is a profoundly difficult time, wrenching if one has a pulse that beats in harmony with any of nature's rhythms. As we plummet into a worrisome future, the concept of extraction holds disturbing resonance in resource and cultural spheres. How did we get here? What can we do? Can we avoid hopelessness? Does art matter?

OUT OF THE GARDEN & INTO THE FIRE

"For some people, what they are is not finished at the skin, but continues with the reach of the senses out into the land... Such people are attached to the land as if by luminous fibers; and they live in a kind of time that is not of the moment but, in concert with memory, extensive, measured by a lifetime. To cut these fibers is to cause not only pain but a sense of dislocation."

—Barry Lopez

Earth has always been our Garden of Eden. We were never kicked out. We extracted ourselves from Paradise by embracing hierarchies, assuming ourselves superior to certain other humans and creatures, more important than rivers, oceans, and forests. This arrogance has separated us from the natural world and created a vacuum within which we have justified extracting Earth's resources in destructive and unsustainable ways. This is not an effective longterm survival approach. If we fail to reconnect ourselves to the Garden (our biosphere), we may find ourselves in a living Hell.

Much of Western art, technology, and religion reflect separateness. The grand landscape painting traditions of the West reveal a distant view, portraying nature as something other, an idealized or frightening world from which we extracted ourselves. We spend hours interacting with brightly lit screens, holding them between us and the world, finding them more seductive than the wildness of our real embodied selves. We are locked into technologies that burn fossil fuels, warming the planet and harming most lifeforms. How can one grapple with this?



Andie Thrams, *Field Studies, Populus tremuloides*, 2019

THE NET OF INDRA

"...and take ourselves as no more and no less than another being in the Big Watershed."

—Gary Snyder

On considering extraction, I wonder what energies and actions can move us toward a sustainable and more compassionate way of being? I grapple with these fearsome times by exploring interconnection. This is where I know myself to be effective and hopeful.

Indra's net, an ancient metaphor in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies, describes the infinite interconnectedness and interpenetration of all beings in the universe. Contemporary science confirms this entwinement of life forms. Trees are connected to each other and other plants via vast networks of underground mycorrhizal fungi. Salmon DNA is found in coastal forest trees. Our bodies hold the cells of more "other" organisms, such as bacteria, than they hold of what we think of as "us." Slime molds, butterflies, fish, birds, whales, and likely all that lives is being scientifically proven to be connected to each other in fascinating, tangible ways.

BACK TO THE GARDEN

"And we've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

—Joni Mitchell

When we reawaken our dormant awareness of connection to all lifeforms, it is harder to justify ex-

ploitation and mindless extraction. What rekindles connection? Here is one person's path.

Concerns about burning fossil fuels, greenhouse gases, climate change, plant and animal extinction, unsustainable mining, fisheries, and forestry practices are not new. When the first Earth Day occurred in 1970, I was a senior in high school becoming aware of environmental degradation. I have carried this increasingly alarming awareness throughout my life alongside the delight of artmaking adventures outdoors from Baja to Alaska. Grappling with this paradox has been my very own lifelong zen koan.

I have found insight into this koan through painting and creating artist's books in remote forests. This work sustains my connection to the natural world, helps me deal with environmental angst, and brings me hope.

WHY ARTIST'S BOOKS?

Starting with coloring books, and later sketch books and journals, I have delighted in sitting on the ground outdoors, drawing, painting, and writing on paper. Studies in art, natural history, and design at UC Berkeley led to work in illustration and graphic design in Northern California and Alaska. The natural history field journal tradition has inspired and generated a lifelong practice. For a long while, I thought of my journals as visual diaries and source material for studio work. I never considered them art.



Andie Thrams, *Birdsong, Redwood Mountain Grove, Hermit Thrush*, 2018

When I landed at San Francisco Center for the Book in the 1990's, to learn how to bind my own journals, I was introduced to the book as a handheld art form. This was a revelation, expanding how I thought about field journals. Soon after, the Sitka Center for Art & Ecology offered sanctuary for creative exploration. During a four-month art residency, I hardly used the provided studio. Instead I worked daily in the surrounding coastal rainforest, rain or shine, on unbound field journal pages. My studio was the forest, and the artist's book was becoming a resonant form.

Many aspects of the book form suit me. Folded or rolled sheets of paper are easily tucked into a pack or kayak. The materials I use, watercolor, ink, and gouache, are lightweight and also easily transported, allowing me to work in remote places. Moving through the pages of a book is like walking into a forest. One must enter in and move through to explore a book's content or wander a path. I find technical and spiritual resonance in illuminated manuscripts—the way a book of hours marks everyday sacredness—and in the accordion-folding screens used as alter pieces in Shinto shrines.

My field journals evolved into one-of-a-kind artist's books, made mostly outdoors. They hold drawn and painted imagery, often with hand-written text addressing environmental grief and natural history observations. Painting, walking, drawing, meditating, and observing nature are inseparable aspects of my practice. I trek into wildland forests on foot or by kayak for hours, days, or weeks. During these sojourns, I sit on the ground, next to trees and other

plants, sometimes beneath a tarp, and work in response to each moment, clouds, plants, birds, animals. I invite the unpredictable in by painting with local river, lake, or sea water; allowing found bark, leaves, soil, sap, and fungi to mark the paper; setting work out in the rain; drawing with forest charcoal; painting with found twigs dipped in ink. The artist's book has provided a form to chronicle experiences of reverence and connection to place.

FEELING SMALL IS A GOOD THING

"I'm a little beast in a big, big universe."

—Hushpuppy, in the film
Beasts of the Southern Wild

I often work alone, and can feel very small, even as prey, but not without power. Feeling small creates attentiveness and a healthy sense of not being the center of the universe. I am but one tiny thread woven into a vast network, as the Net of Indra and the science of ecology declare.

Many experiences of powerful connection have happened while working alone: crossing paths with a swimming bear while paddling my kayak across a deep fjord in Prince William Sound, wandering through dense wildflowers in the Brooks Range to find myself face to face with a golden-eyed wolf, painting in a blueberry thicket in Denali National Park while caribou walked so near I could hear the clicks of their ankles, and receiving late afternoon visits from a pygmy shrew while painting in Glacier National Park. One of finest moments was



Andie Thrams, *Field Work, Kenai Fiords*, 2017

with a bear in a backcountry sequoia grove in Sequoia National Park who calmly but persistently approached my painting spot till I had to retreat to a nearby tall boulder—with my food in tow, but not my art supplies. This bear proceeded to gently bite into my plastic ink bottle, so carefully that she left tooth marks, but no punctures. Why did she do that? While exploring my art materials, she paid no attention to my repeated loud pleas, "Hey Bear! Leave those art supplies alone!" Finally, when my soft spoken husband arrived, he suggested I stop talking mean to this tolerant and curious bear, and quietly asked her to leave my art supplies alone and go. Which she did, leaving no damage behind. I still have that ink bottle.

These experiences and that bottle remind me I am a small creature woven into beautifully complex systems that include unknowable things. When I

carefully trace the edge of a leaf with pen and ink, and think I am the observer, other creatures see me, many I will never know of. Who is the observer and who is the seen? My awareness extends beyond who I perceive myself to be, and each mark draws the world more deeply into my being. A mutual interpenetration occurs and I am changed. Reverence and awe expands where our edges are; and this can alter how the world responds to us.

There is no end to my delight in being an embodied human in Earth's Eden. There is no limit to my love for the beauty

and mystery of life. This is biophilia, a word defined by Edward O. Wilson in his book, *Biophilia* (1984) to mean "the rich, natural pleasure that comes from being surrounded by living organisms." And yet...

SOLASTALGIA

Alongside all this delight and attentive observation lives great despair, for what is happening to our beleaguered planet can't be ignored. The more one experiences a profound connection to this Earth, the more painful is awareness of its destruction. There is a relatively new term for this particular despair. Solastalgia is a word coined by Australian environmental philosopher, Glenn Albrecht, to describe the unique emotional pain produced by environmental degradation impacting people in their home habitats. This is homesickness for places we can never



Andie Thrams, *Field Studies, Enchantment*, 2019

experience again, for flowers that no longer bloom where we saw them before, for old growth forests where we wandered, now gone, the open pit mine scarring the wide open spaces where we once star-gazed. This is the terrible pain of our times, and we ignore it at our peril. It is unbearable and paralyzing if we don't also experience sustaining connections to Earth and to each other.

A PATH

"Use what you have. Do what you can."

—Bill Stewart

What rekindles a connection to Earth's energies is unique and findable for all. If more of us follow a path that fosters connection, our extraction-based culture will diminish, and fewer of us will fall into despair. Delighting in the Garden is life-sustaining and where resilience to fix our dislocated culture and repair our planet can be found.

My path is making art outdoors, studying natural history, sharing biophilia and solastalgia through artwork and teaching. This work is my prayer for wildness on Earth and keeps me connected to the Garden and hopeful.

When we first go outdoors, I ask my students to leave their devices behind. What happens next always gives me hope. Invariably, after moments of

fidgiting, almost everyone of any age or ability, will sink into quiet wonder, listen attentively, jot down notes, trace a leaf, fall into the magic of now—available to us all the time, but often obscured by screens and feelings of isolation. It is so simple a thing: go outside and be still. It reconnects us to Eden and is always within reach.

I find solace believing my admittedly small acts matter, that these modest persistent efforts foster kinship and connection, even if for only a few, making a culture based on mindless extraction harder to accept.

BIOPHILIA

*"A walk through the forest strokes your fur,
the fur you no longer have. And your gaze
down a forest aisle is a strange, long
plunge, dark eyes looking for home.
For delicious minutes you can feel your whiskers
wider than your mind, away out over everything."*

—William Stafford

Not sure what else to say here, I walk into the icy December morning. A cold sun streams through interior live oak and ponderosa pine, backlighting lichen-covered twigs and putting a dull sheen on manzanita leaves. I hear staccato chips from a ruby-crowned kinglet, chattering bushtits, the raspy-voiced oak titmouse, and raucous northern flickers. The air is calm

and carries the crisp scent of pine. I feel deep gladness and an impulse to trace all the shapes and patterns I see with pen and brush. Then, I cry.

I notice dying needles high up in a pine and wonder: bark beetle? I know it'll all burn here, sooner or later (it last burned in the 1960s), and I worry we may be here when it does, or that we won't. I remember the wild delphinium, ginger, and tiny orchids I used to see in these woods, and haven't for a number of years. I am sad about neighbors cutting down everything that grows out of fear of fire. Why so few robins coming through this month, when we used to see hundreds each December? Are they just late? Are these "normal" fluctuations? Or more endless indications of the havoc we wreak?

I know I am part of what ails the Earth. My attempts to live mindfully don't make much of a dent. Still, I believe it matters if we try. So, I do. What we really need though, are fundamental changes to our social and political systems, with intelligent leadership willing to legislate sustainable policies. Seems to me voting is the single most influential act one person can take in the face of our culture of extraction. So, vote I will.

I'll also continue to experience and share the empowering feelings of solastalgia and biophilia, to feel it all and not forget what is happening. I'll try not to despair too much so I'll have energy to take action. And, for as long as I can, I will wander, sit quietly in wild places beneath giant trees, listen to birds, study and record as many shapes and colors as I can, and let every brushstroke weave me more deeply into my surroundings. I know feelings of separateness will fade, and a sense of wonder and reverence for our small planet will gladden my heart, and strengthen me for whatever is to come.



Andie Thrams, *Field-Studies No. 32, River Dream*, 2019