

## **IN FORESTS: An Interview with Andie Thrams for *Writing Nature***

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*Artist Andie Thrams lives in the foothills of California's Sierra Nevada and sojourns frequently in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska, where she lived for many years. After working as an illustrator and designer, in 1980 she began producing prints, cards and calendars from her natural history images, publishing as Larkspur Graphics. In recent years, Andie has turned from the demands of production and marketing to focus on a more contemplative art practice. She also shares her methods in workshops throughout the year. Andie can be contacted at <http://www.andiethrams.com/>.*

*Writer, editor, and visual artist Sarah Rabkin has a bachelor's degree in biology from Harvard University and a graduate certificate in science communication from UC Santa Cruz. A UCSC instructor in writing and environmental studies for 24 years, Sarah has also led dozens of field workshops around the American West. She loves spending time at and around the Sierra Nevada Field Campus, and sharing her love of field journals with other mountain enthusiasts. She has published numerous articles as a freelance writer. Her articles, columns, essays, and reviews have appeared in the San Jose Mercury News, Yosemite, Places, Writing Nature, and other publications. She has led outdoor writing and journal-keeping workshops in California, Alaska, Utah, Colorado, and Wisconsin. She has taught at the Four Corners School of Outdoor Education, the Yosemite Association, the School for Field Studies, the Central California Writing Project, the Santa Cruz Lyceum, UCSC Extension, Northland College Lifelong Learning, the Watershed Festival of Poetry and the Environment. She also has taught several writing workshops through various school districts and draws upon her experiences as a high school science teacher to promote science and nature writing by students. Her recently published book, *What I Learned at Bug Camp*, can be found at [http://www.juniperlakepress.com/Bug\\_Camp.html](http://www.juniperlakepress.com/Bug_Camp.html).*

SJR: Why have you gravitated toward the book as an art form?

AT: I am enchanted by the intimacy and power of books—the beautiful combination of image and word on the page; the sense that as you hold them in your hands, books can transport you to other realms, reveal secrets, illuminate thoughts; and the way they require you to move through space and time: their sequential nature.

I bound my first book in sixth grade. We wrote and illustrated our own stories inside. It delighted me to make a real book and fill it with my own visions. I still love the alchemy of art and craft, creating something new and complete from raw materials—the physical from the envisioned. Our made objects are our spirits in the physical realm as much as our bodies are. For me, books embody this especially well. Once made, they sit quietly, closed, containing a spirit awaiting our attention, ready to be opened and revealed. Magic.

**SJR:** How did natural history, wildness, and time outdoors become a central focus of your life and work?

**AT:** Growing up, I lived in the often-foggy hills of Oakland, California, amidst oak, pine and eucalyptus trees. My parents gardened and played golf and tennis, but my brother and I leaned towards exploring the untended wilder regions. We were close in age and constant companions outdoors. We were lucky to have the unsupervised freedom and open spaces of that era and spent most of our time, when not in school, roaming the local hillsides and thickets.

Inspired by where we grew up and by our parents' love for gardening, Brent and I still share a Druid-like worship of plants, especially trees. We have each carried a sense of the sacred we found outdoors into our adult wilderness experiences. By high school, we were camping and backpacking. By age 25, I had moved to Alaska, drawn to the wild misty coastal rainforests of the far north. Outdoor expeditions on foot, by raft and by kayak, became a way of life, often shared now with my husband, my brother and his family, friends—and sometimes alone.

I have distinct memories of making crayon drawings outdoors as a child. This inclination never went away. Coloring books morphed into sketchbooks, diaries into journals, and from sometime in high school on, all my outdoor experiences included bringing along art supplies and some form of a journal.

I was moved by the outdoors, loved learning the names and natural history of plants, and deeply wished I could draw and paint what I saw—to paint a leaf, flower, bee, or sky, to make it look real. This did not come easily. I would have given up long ago, except for the power of the longing.

SJR: How have your ways of making art evolved over time?

AT: Since high school my art process and artist survival techniques have led me to work as a printmaker, painter, cartographer, designer and illustrator. Around seven years ago, I became undeniably disenchanted with the natural history images I was making for publication. I was literally unable to make any more images. This was bewildering and frightening, as I had always made my living as an artist in one way or another. I was very scared about financial survival.

During that time, I felt pulled into forests. I was becoming acutely aware of their worldwide decimation, at the same time I was noticing that I was almost always happiest, felt most alive, and was deeply inspired in forests. I began longing to make art about trees and my reverence for them—to somehow document western forests.

I started going into forests for extended periods of time—doing lots of gazing and aimless wandering, sometimes writing and sketching. I was invited to spend two weeks in an art residency in Glacier National Park, Montana, followed by a three-month stint as Artist in Residence at Sitka Center for Art and Ecology, on the Oregon Coast. These residences were powerful and amazing gifts that invited me to cultivate new ways of working.

Rather than continuing to render with careful accuracy, I tried to respond to each forest moment openly, without having an image in mind. The work became more about sinking into wild surroundings and reveling in my own wild ways of making art outdoors, sitting on the ground, with wind blowing bits of debris into the paint, bugs biting, rain falling, tea spilling, paper crumpling, being cold, feeling frustrated, getting excited, being moved

by the unknown, the beautiful, the unpredictable, finding my way back in the dark—both literally and figuratively. Rather than using watercolor in more traditional ways, I started to embrace working with less control, finding growing delight and strength in the way the outer wild would permeate my inner process.

Now, though I do still create paintings in the studio, I make most of my art outdoors. I have continued to work in wild, often remote, western forests from California to Alaska, creating a collection of hundreds of illuminated field journal pages along the way. During a second residency at Sitka Center this last winter, I began to bind these pages into a series of one-of-a-kind artists' books called *In Forests*.

SJR: What attracts you about field journals?

I've always found inspiration in journals, diaries and sketchbooks. They hold the special qualities of a book along with the raw authenticity of unplanned private exploration. They often carry the extra magic of secrets, mistakes, real moments and sudden revelations.

I love the portability of a field journal. Pages in a book are protected and fit into a rucksack, purse or pocket. It is a form that invites diving in. If I'm not in the mood to paint or draw, I can write. I like to use grids for page formatting, which creates varied spaces. If time is short, I can fill a small space and feel glad. Even the name, "field journal," conjures up an invitation to get things down in the moment free of big expectations. It is a form for exploring a life. The whole world is our field.

SJR: What draws you to the forest as a place to work?

AT: I simply love trees and forests. They feel like home to me. They are my muse. I love the scent, the dampened sounds, the soft ground underfoot, how I feel there. And, I love the light in forests. The kind of fleeting glowing light that moves about, illuminates discrete places against deep, dark, mysterious backgrounds, and then disappears.

Illumination fascinates me on multiple levels. The Latin root, *illuminare*, means to enlighten or illuminate. The decoration of medieval manuscripts is called “illumination” because of the precious and semi-precious materials (gold, silver, lapis, etc.) that were used to create luminous pages. And, of course, all painting is a form of illumination—observing light, then using paint to conjure light. There is also the illumination of the spirit; the glow from within a being who is struck by the light of spirit.

The parallels between forests and books are intriguing. With both, one must take time to move through, turning pages, taking steps, to discover what is there. Still, mysteries will remain—high above, deep below, beyond the immediately seen—with only fleeting moments of illumination.

Forests seem to be where all these fascinations intersect.

SJR: You refer to your artwork as a “devotional practice.” What does this mean to you?

AT: My earliest experiences of a spiritual nature are entwined with the first books I recall seeing: the very beautiful children's books my grandmother gave to my brother and me. She always gave us the Newberry and Caldecott winners and other books, too—hardback volumes, often beautifully illustrated and bound, with deckled or gilded page edges, gold-stamping on the covers, and lovely end papers. We were read to often by family and at the local branch library. When people sit down with books, we leave behind the busy external world with all its distractions. We shift consciousness—we enter into another experience, sink more deeply into our own, embrace the deeper realms. This is also what people do in prayer, on walks and backpacking trips, whenever the choice is made to shift awareness, to notice, appreciate, revere...

And, this is also what artists do.

As “manuscript” simply means handwritten, I think of illustrated field journals as contemporary versions of the illuminated manuscript—often embodying reverence for place: a sort of book of hours, with moment-by-moment witnessing of the sacred. When I sit on the ground in wild forests, I seek to renew my spirit’s connection to trees and forests and to reveal a sense of the sacred I feel there. At very rare moments, I feel I am observing illumination, creating illumination, and receiving illumination, all at once. Because I choose to do this regularly, I see my work as a devotional practice.

**SJR:** Has organized religion contributed to your sense of art practice as sacred?

**AT:** The church I grew up attending had modest stained glass windows, lovely hanging lanterns and books where I first saw reproductions of illuminated manuscript pages. I loved the feeling of sanctuary in church—the soft hush, the beauty of glowing light. It is the same feeling when I enter a forest, a museum, or a botanical garden.

**SJR:** Has your work been shaped by the influence of particular artists or schools of art?

**AT:** I first saw Impressionist paintings in a museum around sixth grade. I was dazzled by the color and brush strokes that conjured up sublime sunsets, trees, flowers—and by knowing these paintings had been made outdoors. I remember gazing out at the world, longing to be able to make paintings like the Impressionists—and being devastated by my inability.

Obviously I am also deeply inspired by medieval manuscripts and their lineage, including children's books, comics, and graphic novels. Contemporary book artists are reinventing the book form in fantastic ways. The books of Kiki Smith and Anselm Kiefer, along with many other currently working book artists, are big influences. Painters whose work with plant imagery is of powerful inspiration to me are Jim Dine and Judy Pfaff. I love it when words are woven into the imagery of artwork, the way they do in Japanese prints and in Squeak Carnwath’s paintings. And for the past decade or so, I’ve been part of a loosely

affiliated tribe of devoted keepers of illustrated journals, a group of kindred spirits who provide ongoing inspiration and encouragement.

SJR: How do you create the illuminated pages?

AT: When I started this work in forests in 2001, I chose a size for each field journal page-spread or folio (one sheet folded to create two pages). I designed a formatting grid for page layout, in much the same way medieval manuscripts were designed (and most books ever since). I also use a medieval technique to repeat formatting for each new folio. So, all the pages have a common size and underlying design grid. I tear down sheets of Arches hot press watercolor paper for the folios and grid-format them in pencil before I enter the forest, but otherwise what I do is unplanned; the work receives little or no alteration later.

I sometimes work standing, usually sitting on the ground. I work spontaneously and directly on each sheet, which is clipped to a board, drawing, painting and writing using watercolor, ink, gouache, pencil and (rarely) pastel. I go on foot with a pack full of whatever I need to work outdoors for hours, days or weeks at a time. I usually work alone. I leave the marks of fieldwork on the pages: rain spots, bits of debris, stains, smudges, oddly worded sentences, misspellings, and other surprises.

SJR: What do the finished, bound *In Forests* books look like?

AT: Each one-of-a-kind volume measures 9.5 (high) x 8.75 (wide) x 0.75 (deep) inches closed, and 114 inches fully extended. Each has seven folios (five are original field journal folios, plus title page and colophon page folios) connected with stained tyvek strips. The books are accordion-bound into a case structure, with boards covered in tyvek and book cloth. They can be handheld and read like a book as well as opening up accordion-fashion so as to see all pages at once.

SJR: Any concluding thoughts?

AT: Though I have worked in sketchbooks and journals most of my life, I had seen that work as source material for my other projects. It is now clear to me that this work is not merely source material. It is the real work, the real deal for me, and it is enough: revealing what can only happen under the influence and power of a particular place in time.

Sometimes I wish I might do something more conventional and secure. Mostly, I am overwhelmed with gratitude to have finally stumbled into what feels to be my life's purpose. It is a confluence of reverence for wildness, for the art of the book, and of faith in the artmaking process. Now, as this body of work reaches completion and begins to move out into the world, I hope it might open other hearts to forests along the way.

Thank you, Sarah, for this time to look back and contemplate the why of it all, for your insightful questions, open heart and mind, and especially for sharing the path of this work in journals for so many years.