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Suze Woolf [From left to right] *Knotted* (North Cascades National Park, Washington), Watercolor on Torn Paper 52x25; *The Landscape of Fire* (Kootenay National Park, British Columbia, Canada) 2012, Watercolor on Paper 57x20, Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#); *Stehekin Sentinel* (North Cascades National Park, Washington), Watercolor on Torn Paper 52x20 | © Suze Woolf

Fire in a Warming World: One Environmental Impact

Suze Woolf

A life-long outdoor person, I have watched a warming climate become increasingly evident in my Pacific Northwest home: familiar glaciers melt away and favorite hikes pass through many more burned-over sections. That the climate was changing was apparent to backcountry travelers long before it was a frequent news item.

All over the American West, fires expose newly visible topography. With black trunks, red needles and ash meadows, evergreen colors are inverted. These devastated areas are disturbing, dramatic and oddly compelling. The remains of forest fires are a source of both anxiety and peculiar beauty.

Fire is a difficult issue. No one wants to see beloved places altered and yet it is an important natural forest cycle. In North America, the largest and most devastating fires are also the most recent. 100 years of fire suppression and climate change have altered historical regimes. The scale and severity of contemporary conditions lead to complex second-order effects: fuel build-up, insect invasions, erosion, microclimate temperature extremes and other feedback loops increase the volatility of change.



Suze Woolf *The Landscape of Fire* (Kootenay National Park, British Columbia, Canada) 2012, Watercolor on Paper, 57x20

© Suze Woolf, Currently on display in [Environmental Impact](#)

Burned trees are an imperfect metaphor for global warming – forest fires are only one of many impacts; and other factors, such as management practices and increasing suburbanization -- are perhaps more proximal causes. Yet the pathos and implacability of those blackened and twisted forms can't be denied. Little else reminds me so vividly of the world we've made.

After years of painting fire landscapes with conventional techniques (rectangular compositions, foregrounds, middle- and distant-spaces), I found the close-up fire-scar patterns on individual trees most compelling. They became landscapes unto themselves. The biology of each tree interacts with each fire's physics uniquely; each "sculpture" has similar char but reflects different light, size, position, time-since-fire... These "statues" are always the same and always different.

"Environmental Impact" contains a detailed rendering of char from a tree in Canada's Kootenay National Park ("The Landscape of Fire" watercolor on paper, 15" x 52"). On a winter hike there during my artist residency at the Banff Centre, I found the iridescence of a burned tree near Marble Canyon extraordinarily beautiful, but surrounded by the Vermillion Pass Burn of such scale as to be humbling and disturbing.

There are ironies in using watercolor to depict these "tree skeletons:" subject matter—beauty found in terrible things, and terrible things in all that beauty. And medium—water, the opposite of fire. While nowhere near life-size, the paintings' closer-to-body-size gives them a more visceral impact.

After the initial rectangular macro studies of charred wood, I suddenly remembered no panels or stretchers prevented me from making my paper substrate any shape I wished. Since then, each of the more than 30 burned tree portraits I've painted follows the contours of its subject silhouette. I score and tear them to shape before I begin painting.



Suze Woolf [Left] *Knotted* (North Cascades National Park, Washington), Watercolor on Torn Paper 52x25 [Right] *Stehekin Sentinel* (North Cascades National Park, Washington), Watercolor on Torn Paper 52x20 | © Suze Woolf Both are touring in [America's Parks through the Beauty of Art, Encore Exhibits](#), in museums across the United States throughout 2016

Furthermore, attempting to better connect the meaning of the work with the process of making it has taken me down unexpected artistic roads: using soldering irons, wood burning tools and chef's torches as drawing tools, learning to cast paper from molds of burned logs (I recycle the paper I tear off the individual tree portraits), installations and experiments with rubbings. I've also visited sites with scientists studying the long-term effects of carbon in forest soils.

Art can help people see what they may have otherwise missed or ignored, jump start conversations, make connections. I have heard my paintings have helped residents of fire-prone areas accept change -- to see, if not beauty, at least fascination. During my artist residency on the east side of the North Cascades National Park I began to think of the Rainbow Bridge Fire burned area as my personal sculpture garden. And now, the local people do too. My larger hope is that heightened awareness of our impacts spawns action at the individual or societal level.

The painting, *The Landscape of Fire*, featured in this post is currently on display in the traveling museum exhibition [Environmental Impact](#). *Knotted* and *Stehekin Sentinel* are touring in [America's Parks through the Beauty of Art, Encore Exhibits](#)



Suze has been drawing all her life. After an initial undergraduate degree at McGill University, she pursued fifth-year studies in printmaking and ceramics at the University of Washington. An early adopter of computer graphics, her professional career has included the graphic design of printed materials and interface designs for commercial and prototype software applications. In the last few years she has devoted herself to watercolors.

She carries her paints into Washington's Cascade Mountains, the Canadian Rockies, by the shores of the Columbia River, underneath the overhangs of barns, to the ledges of the Grand Canyon – in short, throughout the North American West. She has completed artist residencies at the Vermont Studio Center, the Banff Centre and most recently was Artist-in-Residence at Zion National Park. She has received many awards and is a member of the Northwest Watercolor Society and a signature member of the National Watercolor Society.



From traditional landscape sketches –she calls them her love letters to the planet -- to large scale industrial subjects, unnoticed infrastructure, and burned-over forests, she finds intense visual experience prodding her everywhere she looks. She thinks her best work is derived from subject matter that is both beautiful and disturbing.

Learn more about Suze Woolf: www.suzewoolf-fineart.com; www.suzeart.wordpress.com

This post is part of the [MAHB's Arts Community space](#) –an open space for MAHB members to share, discuss, and connect with artwork processes and products pushing for change. Please visit the [MAHB Arts Community](#) to share and reflect on how art can promote critical changes in behavior and systems and [contact Erika](#) with any questions or suggestions you have regarding the new space.

MAHB-UTS Blogs are a joint venture between the University of Technology Sydney and the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere. Questions should be directed to joan@mahbonline.org

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