



These are some thoughts on being artists/citizens trying to create work yet respond – albeit abstractly and often subtly – to destructive practices from other disciplines. Our own interdisciplinary practice explores systems on the brink of collapse and regeneration.

It is both an existential as well as practical pursuit.

– Robyn Voshardt /Sven Humphrey, February 2007



In late 2005 we traveled to the eastern side of the Oregon Cascades for an artists' residency, in an area that had been decimated by fire eighteen months earlier. Coming from Florida, where the news hadn't received adequate attention, it was a shock to arrive in a landscape where scorched earth surrounded clusters of towering trees.

The official cause of the 90,000 acre fire was deemed by the Arson Task Force to be "holdover" lightning from storms occurring several weeks earlier, though controversy surrounds the cause. Many locals have suspected that the fires were intentionally set by the Bush administration as a backdrop for promoting their Healthy Forests Initiative. President Bush held his scheduled press conference preaching the fear of fire and extolling the virtues of controlled burns as flames blazed in the background.

Much like the rest of the cognitive dissonance coming out of Washington, the labels given to Forest Service policies, like "controlled burn" and "healthy forest initiative" are not always what they seem. Both the government (from liberal to conservative) and environmentalists are wrestling with semantics while old-growth forests continue to burn at an alarming rate. The Forest Service actually mandates that fires starting from "natural causes," like lightning, be allowed to burn without early intervention. The result of that policy is that public lands with old-growth forests then open up for "salvage" timber harvesting of charred trees (*shown at left*). It's an attitude of let it burn now so we don't have to spend the money fighting "inevitable" fires later.

Consider that the Oregon B&B Complex fire of 2003 opened up 10 million board feet of lumber from old-growth forests, the equivalent of 5500 ranch-style homes.

"The easiest way to clearcut an ancient forest is to set fire to it first...In Oregon more than 45,000 acres of prime ancient forest in the Siskiyou Mountains was torched by the Forest Service's firefighting crews to start a backfire in order to 'save' a town that wasn't threatened to begin with. The fires were ignited by shooting ping-pong balls filled with napalm into the forest of giant Douglas firs. By one estimate, more than a third of the acres burned the summer of 2002 were ignited by the Forest Service as backfires. That's good news for the timber industry since they get to log nearly all those scorched acres for next to nothing. Fire sales always come at a bargain price." [St Clair, pp. 115-16]



After the initial days spent looking and trying to make sense of the devastation, we proceeded to start a series of drawings.

The only large drawing paper available within 50 miles was some architectural drafting plan vellum we found at a local surveyor and mapmaking supply store. We liked the idea of introducing “wilderness” into a space normally reserved for official plans, documents, permissions, revisions and approvals – and the fact that it is a container for both grandiose and mundane building schemes.

The resulting series of *Caldera* drawings uses only ink, applied using our breath instead of a brush. The process was both physically taxing and intuitive. Other drawings entitled *Smolder 1*, etc., were made with ink, water and salt, which we later discovered is a primary ingredient in large-scale fire retardant applications.

We also hiked and drove local logging roads to record audio and video footage. Passing through private forest lands adjacent to public forest on rough dirt roads (public by law to the edges of the roadbed) gave us an uneasy feeling and we didn’t linger. Alongside tree stumps and burning brush stood frightening scarecrow-like totems meant to scare off curious people like us as well as environmentalists.

These were startling signs that more was going on in that place than we realized. We went there with no preconceptions of what we’d find, and only since time has passed have we started to assemble research with our observations.

Though our art practice is inherently process-driven, it’s difficult for us to ignore this background information. Outside of communities dependent on timber, there seems to be little public awareness or understanding of the far-reaching politics behind forests and fires.

Top:
Studio at Caldera residency, Oregon

Middle and below left:
On location, Oregon public and private forest lands.



Notable quotations and references:

“George W. Bush, fresh off a brush clearing operation at his Crawford ranch, snubbed the Earth Summit at Johannesburg for a trip to Oregon, where he vowed to fight future forest fires by taking a chainsaw to the nation’s forests and the environmental laws that protect them.”

“Bush is exploiting a primal fear of fire that almost overwhelms the crippling anxiety about terrorists.”

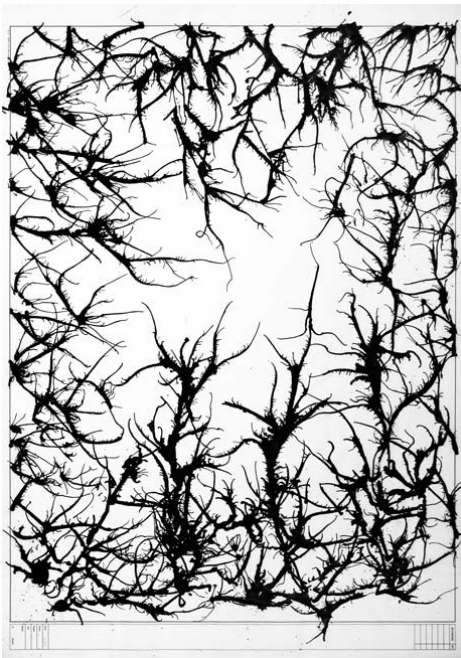
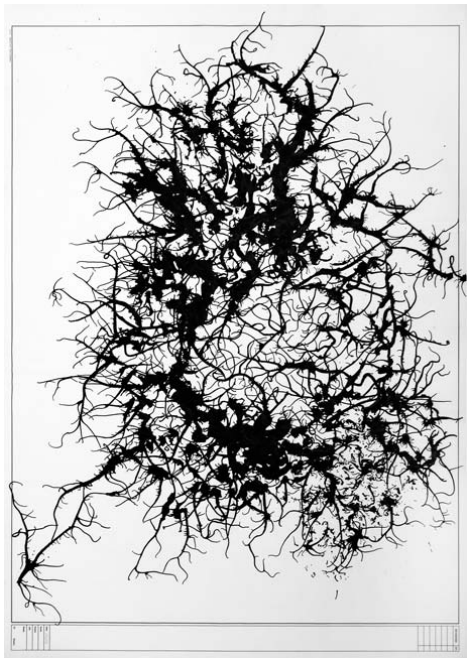
“When Bush arrived in Portland to make official his handout to big timber, he was greeted by nearly a thousand protesters on the streets of the Rose City, Earth First!ers and anti-war activists shouted down Bush and his plans for war on Iraq and the environment. The riot police soon arrived in their Darth Vader gear. The demonstrators, old and young alike, were beaten, gassed, and shot at with plastic bullets. They even pepper sprayed children. Dozens were arrested; others were bloodied by bullets and nightsticks.”

– from Jeffrey St. Clair, *Been Brown So Long It Looked Like Green to Me*, Common Courage Press, Maine, 2004

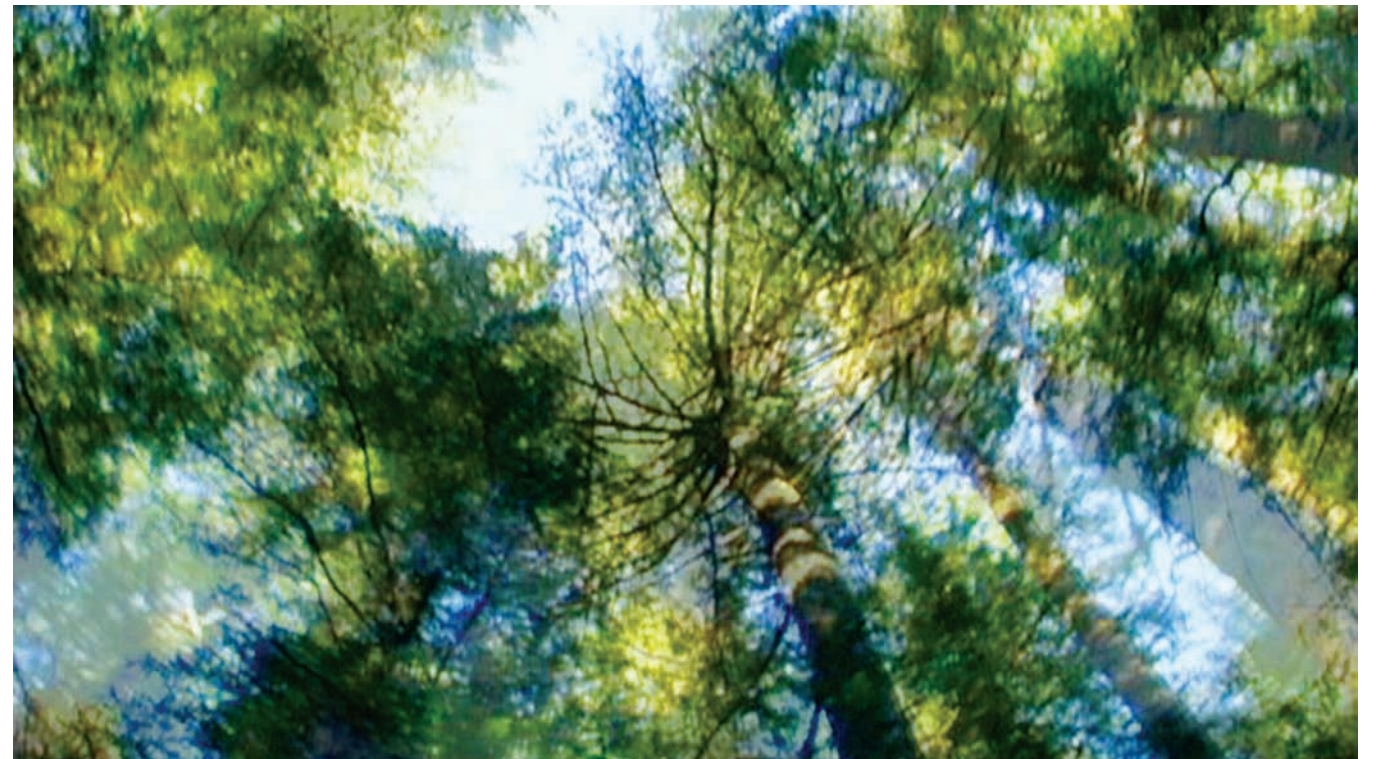
also: www.sosforests.com



Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey, *Caldera 8*, 2005, ink on vellum, 42 x 30 in.



Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey
Caldera Drawings, 2005
 ink on vellum, 42 x 30 in. each



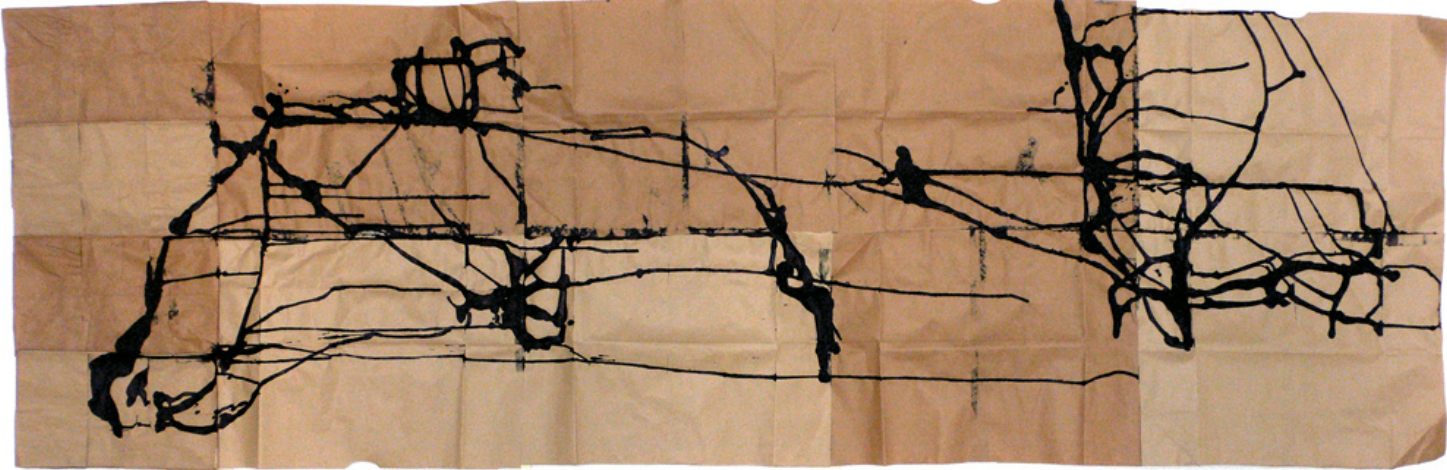
For the DiVA Streets installation, February 17–24, 2007:

In our video *When I Look Up, I Fall Down*, the action of transplanting footage gathered on location from an Oregon old-growth forest to a commercial shipping container in the midst of Manhattan reinforces the mental disconnect between nature and its conversion to consumables.

The lush tree canopy no longer offers a sense of shelter. Experienced in such a confined, temporal space, the disorienting spin and audio amplifies the larger ecological as well as personal conundrum more acutely than a white-box gallery context.

Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey
When I Look Up, I Fall Down, 2006 (1 min. 6 sec. loop)
 DVD, video/sound, variable dimensions

DiVA Streets is presented in conjunction with the DiVA NY07 Fair, and consists of ten shipping containers with video projections placed around the streets of Chelsea. The project is open to the public for the week prior to the Armory Show and other art fairs, when the international art world descends upon New York. We wanted to present an alternative image for visual consumption, one that would possibly leave a lingering afterimage with the viewer.



Sprawl, 2006, ink on found paper, 23 x 84 in.

Current drawings and video respond to our experience dealing with systems and issues of control and intent on an environmental and personal scale. After being in Florida for ten years prior to moving to New York, we coped firsthand with the aftermath of uncontrolled growth and development, as well as the completely misguided and pro-development attempts to correct it through regeneration projects.

It's a horrible feeling to participate and speak out at public charrettes conducted by Andrés Duany, the well-known New Urbanist consultant hired to redesign your small town, and in the end see that your house and your block are no longer on the map. We also see this process happening under the guise of “renewal” in post-Katrina New Orleans. Disaster becomes a real estate opportunity and displacement occurs due to economics as much as environmental causes.

What is less overt but undoubtedly destructive is the proliferation of public/private partnerships between communities and developers, where private homes and land become fair game for new planning schemes. Drastic changes in eminent domain legislation no longer require that land be seized at fair market value (obviously a debatable amount) only for roads, schools or truly the “public good.” In exchange for increasing the tax base of affluent as well as struggling communities, private homes and property are being erased off the map by local governments – designated as “blighted” so lots can be assembled into large parcels for condo and shopping center developments.

This redesignation of private/public space and redistribution of wealth lodged in our minds and is omnipresent in a place like New York. Our studio is in a fifth floor walkup building, which happens to have no scheduled trash pickup. This lack of “service” made us acutely aware of our patterns and levels of consumption in our studio practice. We now utilize and recycle as many materials as possible, including brown paper shopping bags, figuring we can at minimum extend their lifespan and reintroduce and requantify them as art objects within a different system of value and elevated level of consumption.



Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey
The Fall, 2006 (3 min. 43 sec.)
DVD, video/sound, variable dimensions

This meditative yet ominous footage came from a month-long trip to a rural area in Nova Scotia that stands on the brink of overdevelopment. A branch from a 150-year-old apple tree is the focus of this extreme view of nature and the elements. As the apple gets whipped around in the wind and rain, the autumnal process of decay takes hold. Though it shows an isolated view, the title of the work suggests civilization's broader impact on the environment.



The Pale, photograph from Holdfast series, 2006–07



Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey
Holdfast project in progress

Images shot on location in Nova Scotia, October 2006.

Again, we traveled to a remote and rugged area without knowing what we would find. The place is confronting similar problems to Oregon, including deforestation/clear-cutting and especially an ecological imbalance due to overfishing.

Our subsequent research is uncovering concerns and hypotheses as to why seaweed and aquatic plant life has begun to deteriorate and die at an accelerated pace – an issue overlooked by the Canadian government and unnoticed by many locals along the coast.

Influence from Canada's offshore gas and oil industry operates much like the timber industry in Oregon. A seemingly endless abundance of natural resources are squandered without forethought to adequate management and sustainability.



These blocks for the Wechsler-Bellevue test are not up to our previous standards. However, they are the best that we can obtain at present without resorting to methods which would multiply the cost.

Dr. Wechsler has examined a sample of this run and stated that in his opinion these blocks should prove satisfactory in all but a few exceptional cases. Dr. Scheerer has also examined a sample, and stated that they are NOT suitable for use with the Goldstein-Scheerer tests.

If you find the blocks unacceptable, they may be returned for credit. Written notification is required before such a return is made.

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL CORPORATION
10/47

Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey

Anomaly, 2001

digital c-print, 57.5 x 48 in.

An earlier photograph about systems and quantifying human performance from a broad cross section of the multitude...even when the system is acknowledged as being flawed and ultimately based on the bottom line.

the space
between here and now

the area
where a wave recedes
before another one crashes

the place
where some people feel at home

the arena of nothingness

the town
beyond the crease of the map

Robyn Voshardt/Sven Humphrey

Flatland, 2001 (1 min. 30 sec.)

DVD, video projection & sound installation

variable dimensions, as shown 144 x 192 in.

Flatland is a search for an elusive place caught between language and the imagination. This experiment with text, timing, and silence challenges the viewer to make visual associations at a pace that doesn't allow the mind to linger. The process points to a feeling of dissociation and manipulation inherent to our media saturated culture.

Flatland text reads:

the space between here and now
the area where a wave recedes before another one crashes
the place where some people feel at home
the arena of nothingness
the town beyond the crease of the map
the dream where all the grass is green
the road that winds up going in a circle
the water before the bow of the boat
the back of a bald man's head
the horizon where the sun drops down
the mark in the carpet left by the vacuum
the envelope of darkness before the dawn
the edge of the mind before it falls