Elegy For a Forest

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ELEGY FOR A FOREST

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ABSTRACT

Elegy For a Forest is a body of work that contemplates the potential loss of an ecosystem through an embodied, subjective exploration of a fir forest impacted by human activity. This work examines the dead and dying Fraser fir trees of Mount Mitchell State Park and Great Smoky Mountains National Park using a variety of printmaking strategies to reference the environment’s fragile existence and the ephemeral nature of the experience. Processes include woodcuts with monotype, photopolymer gravures, and photopolymer gravure artist books. These techniques are rendered with a reference to romantic sublime landscapes of the 19th Century. These prints thus aim to recall the history of the pictorial language of nature and to highlight both the majesty of nature and the tragedy of our carelessness with it.

Overall, these prints are an effort to understand and convey the complex environmental issues surrounding the decline of the Fraser fir and to elicit concern in the viewing public for these issues.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

At the Clingmans Dome parking lot, there is an overlook view to distant mountains that seems to stretch into hazy nothingness. People will gather in large numbers, crowding the sidewalks, filling the air with the sound of their voices, focusing on the beauty of that distant view—dense forests, sparkling water, drifting clouds. All of these things seem to suggest an unspoiled wilderness beyond the overlook. It is easy to forget we are not alone and that we have altered the very land under our feet and spread before us. Reminders of this punctuate the slopes—tall, thin and skeletal, the standing remains of firs are interspersed among the living forest just beyond a built infrastructure we recognize as the product of human activity.

A little over 70 miles away at Mount Mitchell State Park, a roadway snakes its way to the summit offering diversions to the park office, a restaurant and a campground before coming to rest at the final parking area for visitors. This route yields magnificent views of mountains in the distance on a clear day, and more immediately large swaths of dead forest scattered along the slopes in the park. Hiking trails pass through several of these patches. Walking along these trails can be unsettling at times as the wind will make the trees creak and sway as you pass beneath them.

These trees are an important component to the ecosystems in both places providing both shelter and nutrients for the existing community of flora and fauna. Beyond the value of these forests as ecosystems they also provide something intangible. When I walk through these evergreens, the wind blowing their scent through the air, it
creates this complex mix of thoughts and feelings—a sense of calm, wonder and concern for their future. Just witnessing the number of trees already dead and the many more that show signs of infection makes me wonder how much longer these rare habitats will last. What does it mean to lose an entire ecosystem?

My Master of Fine Art Thesis work contemplates this loss through the investigation of fir trees in two parks, Mount Mitchell State Park and Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The artwork aims to draw attention to dead and dying firs and to serve as reminders that although nature may be resilient, it can also be fragile. These images were created through a variety of printmaking processes and strategies. Processes include woodcuts with monotype, photopolymer gravures, and photopolymer gravure artist books. From a scholarly perspective, I documented and interpreted the landscape in these areas, concentrating on the fir trees that inhabit each location.

The thesis artworks present views of the parks that are subjective in their rendering but are anchored in an earnest documentation of a specific place and time. This includes attempts to visualize the humidity of a particular day, a quiet moment under a forest canopy, and the quality of light at different times of day. Photopolymer gravures, such as *Fir Snags, Clingmans Dome, 2018* (Fig. 1) and *Trees in Rain and Fog II, Deep Gap Trail, Mt. Mitchell, 2018* (Fig. 2) present photographic accounts of the areas explored in differing weather conditions, which serve to accentuate the overall mood of the images. The artist books break apart the photographic view, creating a fragmented image the viewer must engage to see in its entirety. The woodcut images further this interpretive aspect by dispensing with the photographic image altogether. Instead,
human-influenced elements are accentuated through the carving process. The figures of
the dead trees stand in contrast to the scenery around them. Moreover, in the print, *Forest
with Ramp, Clingmans Dome*, 2018 (Fig. 3), these elements are coupled with the solid
mass of the pedestrian viewing ramp that angles into the cluster of trees, drawing
attention to them. The large woodcut images *Overlook, Clingmans Dome*, 2018 (Fig.4)
and *Picnic Overlook, Mount Mitchell*, 2018 (Fig. 5) are similarly composed. This tactic
emphasizes the relationship between the fir die-offs occurring in each park.

One of the two primary fieldwork sites, Clingmans Dome, is in the Great Smoky
Mountains National Park (GSMNP) on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee. This
park experiences the highest number of visitors of any U.S. national park. In 2016, 11.3
million people were logged as visiting the GSMNP (National Park Service 2017).
Operated by the National Park Service, it is protected by the service’s mission that it
“preserves unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park
system for the enjoyment, education and inspiration of this and future generations
(National Park Service 2018).” Despite this mandate, GSMNP is subject to the highest
levels of air pollution of any U.S. national park. A majority of this is the result of wind-
blown contaminants produced by fossil fuel industrial corridors in the south and Midwest
(National Park Service 2015).

The other principle site, Mount Mitchell, is located within Mount Mitchell State
Park in the Black Mountains of North Carolina. This park was visited by 375,471 people
in 2017 (North Carolina State Government, n.d.). North Carolina’s Division of Parks and
Recreation, whose mission is “to conserve and protect representative examples of North
Carolina’s natural beauty, ecological features and cultural resources within the state’s park system (North Carolina State Parks. n.d.),” is responsible for managing this park. Despite their differences in size and visitor numbers, both fieldwork sites possess similar ecologies. Both locations contain spruce-fir forests along their highest elevations and both have shown significant decline of their Fraser fir population due to human activity.

The dead fir trees at these sites offer visible and quantifiable evidence of the power people have in shaping the world around us. Humans affect the environment more so than any other species on earth. Fossil fuels used to power homes and vehicles create pollution that can drift over undeveloped areas, contaminating soil and water miles from the original source. Materials imported from other countries may harbor pests that can run rampant without natural predators. In both of these examples, the consequences occur at a temporal and geographical distance from the initial action. Because there is a delay between our actions and the resulting impacts, we are able to deny that the visible effects are consequences of our actions. My prints are a meditation on this complicated and often problematic relationship we humans have with our environment.
CHAPTER TWO

HISTORIC AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUES SURROUNDING SOUTHEASTERN SPRUCE-FIR POPULATIONS

Mount Mitchell and Clingmans Dome share many commonalities. Both are high altitude environments (Mount Mitchell measures 6,684’ and Clingmans Dome 6,643’). Both are among the tallest peaks on the east coast (number one and number three, respectively). Spruce-fir forests typically occur at elevations over 5500 feet in the southeast. As relics from the previous ice age, they are adapted to survive in a colder climate, confining them to the highest peaks. Although Native Americans and subsequent European Americans altered these environments, radical alteration began in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. The swift changes of this era were caused by the advancement of logging technology. During this period of time, intensive logging and logging related fires accounted for the wholesale destruction of forests. In an effort to preserve these environments Mount Mitchell State Park and GSMNP were created (Division of Parks and Recreation Mountain Region 2017, 2, National Park Service 2016, 15).

As high altitude environments, the spruce-fir forests in the south occur as isolated communities. As such the logging damage at the turn of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century reduced populations dramatically (White 2012, 18). This has made recovery of the Fraser fir problematic. Additionally, air pollution and invasive insect species such as the Balsam Woolly Adelgid have handicapped fir recovery (Ragenovich 2006, 1). Despite these difficulties, researchers have found evidence of recovery in recent years. However, the future remains uncertain for the Southeastern Fraser fir forest due to the ongoing threat of
adelgid outbreaks, as well as impending climate change (McManamay et al. 2011, 16). A report released on November 23, 2018 by the US Global Change Research Program states that we are now witnessing the effects of human-induced climate change. This report predicts that global temperatures will continue to rise, even with drastic reductions in fossil fuel emissions (U.S. Global Change Research Program 2018). This temperature increase will put greater stress on these ecosystems, reducing their range and exacerbating other stressors. These factors could work in concert to undermine the recovery previously observed.

These forests are home to a variety of rare, threatened or endangered species that rely on a healthy ecosystem for sustenance. For this reason, the standing deadwood of the recently deceased firs can also be understood as a visible reminder of the potential ecological losses at scale. As such, the thesis artwork serves as a visual record of the decline of a specific species in two specific places while serving to remind viewers of the fragility and general decline of larger ecosystems.
CHAPTER THREE

LANDSCAPE

Nature has been central to the United States’ identity since its independence. As U.S. artists sought to define their place in the early 19th century, they looked to the wilderness, something that had largely been destroyed in Europe. Romanticism provided a vehicle for these artists to depict American lands. Romantic depictions of landscapes expressed nature in terms of a universal spirituality, often emphasizing the sublime, a concept expounded upon by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. These landscapes were marked by dramatic expanses, storms, primeval forests, or seas and frequently consisted of a mixture of places, both real and imagined. This type of depiction emphasized the power of the natural world.

Nineteenth century artists exploring these concepts included those of the Hudson River School. Most notable among these painters was Thomas Cole. His paintings depict nature as an inspiration for spiritual contemplation and as a meditation on human progress. One of his more famous paintings, *The Oxbow on the Connecticut River* (1836), shows a split view of the river valley. On the left, a storm cloud towers above an unruly assemblage of forest and obscures the view in the distance. This scene encloses a developed plain and gently rolling mountains with clearing skies in the background, creating tension between wild and cultivated land. The painter can just be seen in the lower center of the painting, seated in the wilderness overlooking the cultivated valley.
Cole created this painting during work on his series *Course of Empire* (1836), a cycle of five paintings that depicted the settlement, development and collapse of a hypothetical empire. *The Oxbow on the Connecticut River* unlike *Course of Empire*, shows a moment in time during the development of the East coast. Together, *The Oxbow on the Connecticut River* and *Course of Empire* offer insight into his ideas about American expansion. In a letter to patron Lumen Reed, he wrote of his concern about the deforestation of a valley he regularly visited, stating, “This throws quite a gloom over my spring anticipations. Tell this to Durand—not that I wish to give him pain, but that I want him to join with me in maledictions on all dollar-godded utilitarians” (Noble 1964, 160-161). Despite Cole’s reservations about expansion, his landscapes, along with others, seemed to encourage the nation’s growth.

Paintings from this period offered a connection between spiritual belief and land, particularly development of the land. Manifest Destiny, a term created in 1845, suggested that God had ordained expansion of the U.S. This idea fueled exploration and settlement of the western frontier. As a result, the myth of the United States became interwoven with these depictions of nature. The conventional reaction to this was that nature was something to be conquered, its resources exploited, and its native inhabitants removed. During this time the landscape genre became more popular and diverse ways of depicting it also grew in popularity. Engraved scenes coupled with text and distributed in the form of pamphlets, guidebooks and other publications helped spread an interest in the natural world to a larger section of the population than would experience it in person or
through paintings. In doing so, printed images also spread a sense of nationalism (Johnston 2016, 6).

Photographs and prints of western landscapes both helped justify expansion and facilitate the establishment of the national park system. In 1871, USGS director Ferdinand Hayden hired photographer William Henry Jackson and painter Thomas Moran to travel with survey crews to map and record features of the western frontier for government use and promotion. This resulted in both a documentation of the land in the form of photographs and an interpretive record in the form of Moran’s paintings (Hughes 1997, 199). The natural splendor of the American West became a symbol for the country through the images that were created there. These images primarily upheld the idea of unspoiled wilderness separate from humanity, until the mid-twentieth century when artists began creating scenes of modern life in these areas. In 1975, the photo exhibition, *New Topographies: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape* presented to the public a view of the American landscape as intertwined with human development, causing a shift in perception of what constituted nature and culture.

Environmental concerns of the time period shaped and continue to shape our perception of how art depicts our relationship with our environment. Contemporary artists continue to react against the myth of nature existing outside of culture. Many of these artists, such as painter Erika Osborne and photographers Kirk Crippens and Gretchen LeMaistre, utilize historic methods of representation to call attention to contemporary issues, as seen in their large-format photographs of redwood trees disfigured by burl poachers. Erika Osborne utilizes 19th century sublime landscape
pictorial language to illustrate their legacy. Sprawling valleys with dramatic clouds are crowded with tract housing, the clouds smoke from raging wildfires. Kirk Crippens and Gretchen LeMaistre composed detailed large format photographs in the same manner as their 19th century counterparts, creating luminous portraits of redwood trees disfigured by burl poachers.

In order to better address contemporary environmental concerns, many artists make use of scientific data or collaborate directly with scientists conducting research. *Petrochemical America* is a photographic and visual narrative project by Richard Misrach and Kate Orff that describes the complex issues affecting Louisiana’s industrial corridor along the Mississippi river. *The Last Glacier*, a collaborative project between printmakers Todd Anderson and Bruce Crownover and photographer Ian van Coller, presents viewers with renditions of the remaining glaciers in Glacier National Park by each participant. These images serve as a visual record of a rapidly disappearing natural feature due to climate change. Artist Adrienne Hughes also addresses climate change by using infrared photography to capture stressed environments. This results in color landscapes that have an otherworldly quality to them, emphasizing the discord present in the environment while retaining their beauty.

The prints represented in my body of work appear to adhere to the idea of nature existing outside of culture, an idea that developed during the Romantic period and persists to this day. Many of the images seem to be devoid of human interference on the surface. Mountainous landscapes with dead and dying trees in the foreground could be the result of natural phenomena. Closer inspection of the images suggest otherwise—an
open field abruptly abutting a line of trees, a pathway through the forest, the sawed ends of logs covered in moss, all subtly speak to human presence. More overt signs such as the massive spiraling concrete ramp that stretches above the forest floor at Clingmans Dome or the slight glimpses of human figures in the distance shout the presence of human intervention. These indications suggest that the forests depicted are not untouched wilderness areas. Although these overt signs are included, I chose to de-emphasize them to allow the viewer to focus on the forest and raise questions about the indirect signs of human presence.

The photopolymer prints “Campground Spur Trail, Mt. Mitchell,” 2018 (Fig. 6) and “Trees in Rain and Fog II, Deep Gap Trail, Mt. Mitchell,” 2017 (Fig.2) suggest this connection between past, present and future by showing the long-fallen and overgrown logs in a densely forested area in the first, and the ghostly standing snags in the latter. The trees have died off in the past and regenerated in one image. In the other they have died but still stand, enveloped in clouds that bear traces of our influence through pollutants. Depending on the order in which they are viewed, these images can be read as a cycle of life and death, with the dying stand of trees progressing to the state shown in the forest, or viewed the other way around, as an indication of what may be yet to come for the regenerated forest. What future will exist for the trees is uncertain.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE VIEW FROM HERE

My Master of Fine Arts Thesis artwork is an attempt to convey concern for the future of the Fraser fir and the ecosystems it supports. I have attempted to communicate the mixed and sometimes contradictory emotions that being in these places can elicit. Knowing Mount Mitchell and Clingmans Dome’s forests are threatened should temper the calm and joy of experiencing them.

The artworks are rendered in distinct ways including woodcut and photopolymer gravure prints, artist’s books and text. Each rendition serves a different but related function. Each artwork is meant to invite the viewer into a contemplative relationship with the art object. For example, the photopolymer gravure prints recall mountainous, nineteenth century landscape photographs. These prints play on the built-in expectations many art viewers have of the landscape genre. My photopolymer gravures aim to have the viewer to think about the landscape over time, including its environmental degradation. To achieve these effects, my prints reference 19th century romantic visual language to reference this historic pictorial language of nature and to highlight both the majesty of nature and the tragedy of carelessness with it.

The technique of printing photopolymer gravure images enables me to render images in a way that is both documentary and gestural, depending on how I apply and wipe the ink. The images “Trees in Rain and Fog II, Deep Gap Trail, Mt. Mitchell,” (Fig. 2) and Mountain View from Observation Ramp, Clingmans Dome (2018) (Fig. 7) were both photographed on rainy days. Each image shares a blurred and indistinct forest.
In *Trees in Rain and Fog II, Deep Gap Trail, Mt. Mitchell*, trees are scattered diagonally across the bottom of the image. This creates a band of darkness that fades as it continues vertically in the image. Simultaneously, a group of shadowy dead trees rise up in the middle of the image while the living elements of the forest form a barely visible background silhouette through the fog. The viewer is seemingly cut off from entering this forest as the deadfall and spectral dead trees appear to block the way. This photopolymer gravure thus presents ambiguous imagery, atmospheric quality and gestural printing in my attempt to convey environmental challenges such as air quality degradation, a sense of sadness, and uncertainty for its future.

*Mountain View from Observation Ramp, Clingmans Dome (2018) (Fig. 7)* was photographed immediately after a storm. This photopolymer gravure shows an empty expanse of sky that merges into the darker forested bottom of the print. The elevated viewpoint of this print presents the tops of trees with fog rising up between the layers of forest to obscure a mountain in the background. This elevated view allows the viewer to focus on the forest below but does not allow a clear view into the forest itself. Punctuating the dense canopy of the forest are numbers of naked trees. The misty, softly focused atmosphere of the image invites contemplation of the scene. Is the forest recovering from a past die off event or will the young trees succumb to the same fate as the larger ones?

A different kind of forest scene is depicted in *Campground Spur Trail, Mount Mitchell, (Fig. 6)* and *Forest, Appalachian Trail, Clingmans Dome (2018) (Fig. 8).* In both of these images, the viewer is immersed in the forest at ground level. *Campground*
*Spur Trail, Mount Mitchell* shows the interior of a spruce-fir forest with moss-heavy fallen trees projecting out towards the viewer. A soft light accentuates the ground cover that on close inspection reveals more dead firs in the undergrowth. This image puts the viewer in close proximity to the subject. Although the forest appears chaotic and dark, it is also lush and thriving and in this way presents a hopeful glimpse into the recovering forest.

*Forest, Appalachian Trail, Clingmans Dome* depicts a narrow band of forest on the edge of a mountain. Two trees rise abruptly in the far right side. The trees are highlighted by rough bark and deep shadows which create a pleasing visual texture for the viewer while compositionally framing the overall scene. Small firs in this print create a sparse screen blocking a majority of the view while the tall dead trees bar the view to the faint mountains in the background. In this image a path to the overlook is recognizable and the viewer looks along it through the dead stand of trees in order to see beyond. In each print, the viewer must confront the presence of the dead firs.

In a similar manner, dead trees screen the views to distant mountains in the large format woodcuts *Overlook, Clingmans Dome* (Fig. 4) and *Picnic Overlook, Mount Mitchell* (Fig. 5). I utilize scale, bright colors, composed imagery and delicate Washi support paper to draw a viewer’s attention. The bright, exaggerated color palette in each print also suggests some type of disturbance within the forest scenes. In both prints, I created a blended background sky through monotype. This process created an emotive effect unique for each print. *Overlook, Clingmans Dome* presents the viewer with a distant, elevated view of a mountain overlook interspersed with large dead trees. I
accentuate these trees by leaving their trunks white against colorful bands of teal forest and pink mountains. These detailed elements contrast with the solid mass of color representing live forest and mountain range. As viewers survey the image and focus on the stark trees in this space, I hope they might be reminded of their own experiences in nature.

*Picnic Overlook, Mt. Mitchell* offers a more intimate view of a forest adjoining an overlook. The forest, which appears on the same plane as the viewer, obscures the overlook. The live trees are rendered as dark silhouettes against the sky. This contrasts with the spindly dead trees that extend upward and beyond the dark mass of forest.

Though the focus in both images is on death, there is also beauty and hope that the trees will survive. The solid mass of forest outnumbers the dead individuals and the colors, while referencing artificiality, are also bright and appealing. I created these prints because the fir forests on Clingmans Dome and Mount Mitchell are important places to the environment and to the people who visit them.

In contrast to the large and brightly colored woodcut prints, the artist books are small in scale and tonal in their color schemes. The topographic tunnel books *Forested Trail, Clingmans Dome* (2018), (Fig. 9) and *Old Mitchell Trail, Mt. Mitchell* (2018) (Fig. 10) are constructed from seven layers of photopolymer gravure prints cut with portions of their respective topography and layered using folded paper sides. The two books present sections of trail in both locations and show the dead but also feature thick growth of healthy trees. *Old Mitchell Trail, Mount Mitchell* features a slightly bent dead tree stretching up through a thick layer of new growth. Saplings are scattered throughout. The
forest has been cut away in a large serpentine section with the upper portion echoing the curve of the central tree. Each layer of the print is cut away in successively smaller sections, distorting and revealing a shadow of Mount Mitchell’s topography in the image. *Forested Trail, Clingmans Dome* operates in a way similar to *Old Mitchell Trail.*

However, the topography of Clingmans Dome is cut away from a direct view of a stretch of trail. A large diagonal tree follows along the topography. With the inclusion of the cutout mountaintop, a person is reminded of the scene’s mapped location as he/she views the image.

The photopolymer gravure prints of these scenes provide a visual record of how the area looked at a specific time, while the cut out areas suggest a metaphor for human manipulation of the environment. I incorporate this human system of mapping onto images of nature as a symbolic gesture to suggest that we change a place as we come to know it. The negative space created by the inverted topography can also suggest increased susceptibility of the firs to climate related change at lower elevations.

An artist who has used cut paper with topographic imagery is Maya Lin. In her series *Atlas Landscapes,* Lin cuts topographic features into layers of maps, creating new combinations of visual information. My use of the topographic map is specific to place, however, and is imposed onto photographic images that are physically separated by space, which creates a different experience for the viewer.

For the panoramic flag book *View along the Deep Gap Trail, Mt. Mitchell* (2018) (Fig. 11), I cut four by three inch segments of fifty panoramic photopolymer gravures and attached them to an accordion folded strip of paper to create an extended and fragmented
view of a trail. Widespread devastation of the forest is apparent on this section of trail. The flag book is constructed to encourage the viewer to walk along the image and to experience it as a passage of time. As the person scans the image, perspective changes, either obscuring or bringing into focus sections of the image, until the fragments coalesce into a unified landscape and the viewer is able to see the entire panorama. Each four by three inch flag in the book can operate on its own as a photographic image, but removing them from the context of the others diminishes the function of the whole. I presented this image as a fragmented panorama to reflect on the fragmented nature of the location.

Parks are protected islands surrounded by developable land and the spruce-fir forest communities are confined to the highest elevations in the mountains. I also wanted to express the fragmented way in which we collect knowledge. We learn in bits and pieces and fill in the gaps as we gain experience. This flag book can be seen as a reflection of that fragmentation, both in the land and in our experience and knowledge of it.

When considered collectively, my Master of Fine Arts Thesis artworks can be understood as evidence of environmental degradation on a regional scale. They also serve to remind viewers of the emotional value such places can offer. When fully contemplated, the artworks require viewers to acknowledge human devastation to our natural landscapes. The artworks thus aim to move viewers beyond topical understandings of landscape and into an educated arena. These landscapes are rare ecosystems and each of us plays a role in mitigating or abetting the conditions that lead to their degradation.
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FIGURES

Figure 1: *Fir Snags, Clingmans Dome* (2018)
Photopolymer gravure (16 ½” x 11 ½”)

Figure 2: *Trees in Rain and Fog II, Deep Gap Trail, Mt. Mitchell* (2018)
Photopolymer gravure (16 ½” x 11 ½”)
Figure 3: *Forest with Ramp, Clingmans Dome* (2018)  
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Reduction woodcut, monotype (48” x 32”)

Figure 5: Picnic Overlook, Mt. Mitchell (2018)
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Figure 11: *View along Deep Gap Trail, Mount Mitchell* (2018)
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