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OXYGEN ART CENTRE
REMOTE RESIDENCY
AUGUST 2021

## OXYGEN ART CENTRE

Based in Nelson BC, Oxygen Art Centre is a rural artist-run centre that provides space and programming for artists and the public to engage in the creation, study, exhibition, and performance of contemporary art. Founded in 2002, Oxygen is an integral and long-standing cultural hub for artists of all disciplines. Oxygen's annual programming includes an Exhibition & Residency program and Education program, as well as events, presentations, readings, and workshops.

Oxygen Art Centre acknowledges with gratitude that we are located on the tum xula7xw / traditional territory of the sn̓Saýckstx / the Sinixt People. As uninvited guests we honour their ongoing presence on this land. We recognize that the Sinixt Arrow Lakes, Sylix, and Yaqan Nukij Lower Kootenay Band peoples are also connected with this land, as are Métis and many diverse Indigenous persons.

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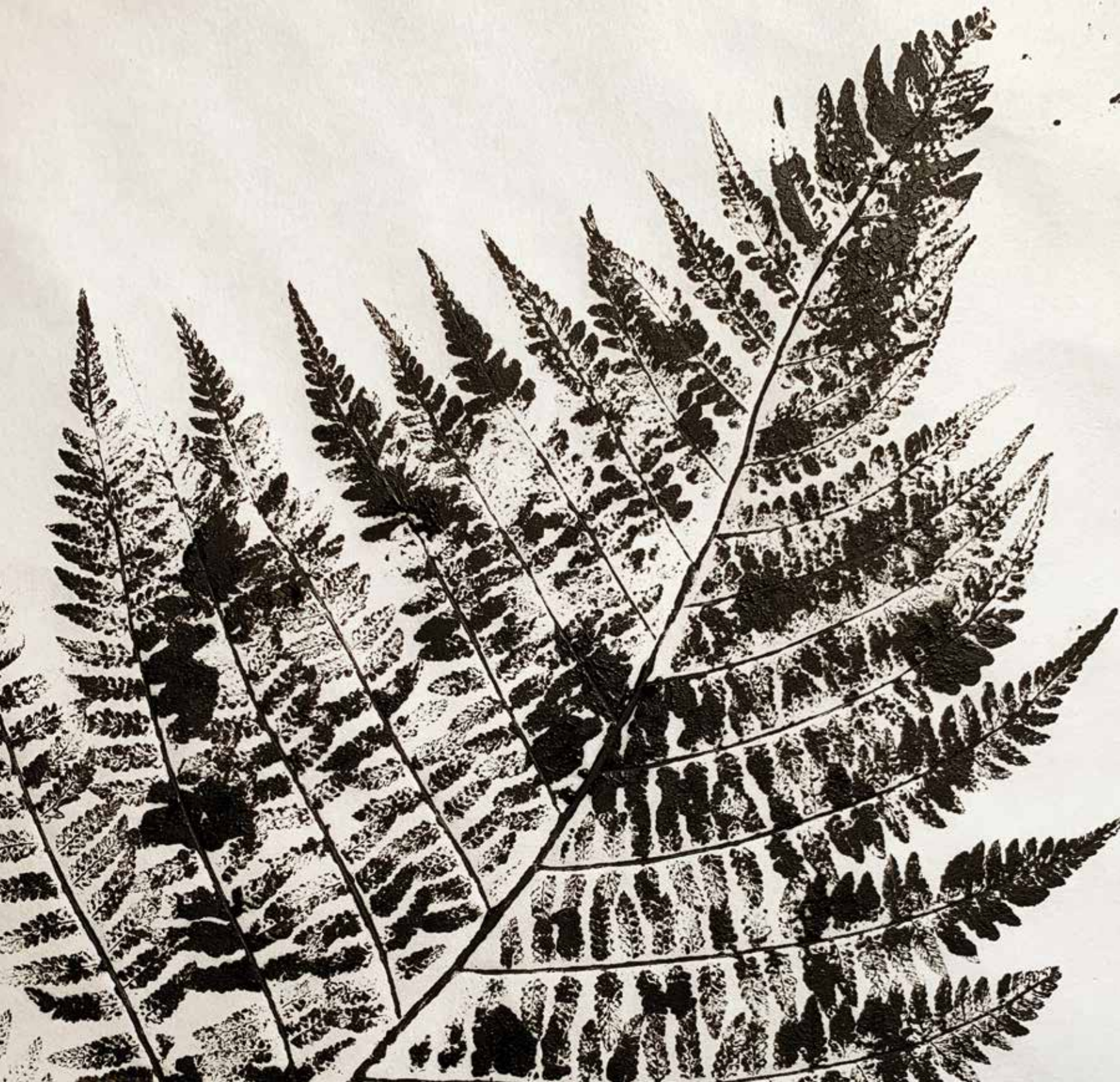


# INTRODUCTION

**Rachel Rosenfield Lafo**

*When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal, swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place, a sanctum sanctorum. There is the strength, the marrow, of Nature.*[1] —HENRY DAVID THOREAU

In his essay "Walking," Henry David Thoreau wrote that he desired to be "a part and parcel of Nature."[2] Anna Daedalus and Kerry Davis follow a similar path, having immersed themselves, both literally and figuratively, in a Sitka spruce swamp near their home in Southwest Washington. In the tradition of many artists who address environmental concerns, they are exploring, interpreting, and artistically documenting the shifting states of the swamp, resulting in their current project, *Palūs* (Latin for marsh or swamp). Produced during a remote residency with the Oxygen Art Centre in Nelson, B.C., they partner with nature by engaging in diverse site-based practices.

During their daily walks the artists observe the essential nature of the swamp—its tidal ebb and flow, changing water levels, varied light conditions, and native fauna and flora, which are sometimes visible and at other times hidden. They perceive the swamp as a living, breathing entity, using the redolent phrase "liquid respiration" as a descriptor, leading them to take a phenomenological approach by using a variety of techniques to record its ephemerality. Their conceptualization of the project is all-encompassing; their process experimental and performative as they try out different ideas, adopting some and discarding others.

The artists first focused on water in 2013 for their collaborative project *Columbia River Shadows*, creating a series of photograms of the Columbia River by submerging photo-sensitized paper in the river at night and then exposing it to a flash of light. The resulting images read like X-rays of the river, revealing abstracted visions of the plant and animal life and miscellaneous anthropogenic debris that flow within it.

Shadows have remained a consistent motif in their collaborations, not only in the *Columbia River Shadows* series but also in the series *Shadows* (2013) and *Leaping Darkness* (2015). Just as their project *Shadows* was an attempt to achieve "palpable emanations of being,"[3] so too *Palūs* records the temporality and transience of nature. Acting as shadow catchers,[4] they place canvas and muslin screens of different sizes in the swamp to capture shadows which are then photographed digitally. These *Swamp Cinema Shadow Screens* highlight vegetation details that might not otherwise be noticed, revealing the unseen as translucent silhouettes. The *Torii Tidal Screens*, so named for the gates in Shinto shrines that serve as separations between the secular and the sacred, are placed in the swamp for weeks at a time, registering water marks and shadows on their canvases.

Syncing their investigative methods with the rhythm of the ever-changing conditions of the Sitka spruce swamp, Daedalus and Davis's methodology is similarly fluid and adaptive, exploratory in that they do not know what will result, often working with methods that are fugitive. They are drawn to historical photographic processes such as the anthotype, a cameraless technique in which photo-sensitive material derived from plants is coated on paper, overlaid with leaves and lichen, and then exposed to the sun, resulting in evocative earth toned images of plant life. They have also used the Japanese Gyotaku method of printing to produce direct imprints of snakes and native plants through the method of rubbing the inked organisms onto paper. Yet another component of their project is *Boundary Ribbons*, 60-foot-long strips of canvas bridging the dike road between the swamp and pasture that record marks made by passing cars, pedestrians, animals, and water, embodying the daily rhythms of the ecosystem.

*Palūs* currently exists as an artist residency and publication. One hopes that the artworks that result from Daedalus and Davis's investigations can be presented in an exhibition to further bring attention to the importance of swamps as vital environmental regulators that enhance water quality and serve as essential habitats for vegetation and wildlife. Their creative efforts manifest the interconnectedness and interdependence of nature, as reflected in this quote from the naturalist John Muir: *"When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe."*[5]

1 Henry David Thoreau, "Walking," in *The Writings of Henry D. Thoreau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), p.228

2 Thoreau, "Walking," 205.

3 From the "Artists' Statement" in the brochure for *Shadows,* Oregon Nikkei Legacy Center, Portland, OR June 6–August 11, 2013.

4 The term comes from the title of the exhibition, "Shadow Catchers: Camera-less Photography," Victoria & Albert South Kensington, October 13, 2010–February 20, 2011.

5 John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1911), Sierra Club Books 1988 edition, p. 110.

# ABUNDANT LIGHT

**Andrew Emlen**

It takes ten people, each with arms outstretched to touch the fingertips of the next, to encircle the big Sitka spruce at Lake Quinault. Another Sitka spruce in Redwoods National Park stands over 100 meters tall. A Sitka spruce growing on a coastal upland site can become one of the largest trees on earth, with a straight, symmetrical trunk that may be devoid of branches for the first 40 meters or more. The same species in a freshwater tidal swamp, however, is something different. When Meriwether Lewis beheld Sitka spruce growing along a tidal section of the Columbia River on 18 February 1806, he wrote up a species description, even though he had already done so after observing Sitka spruce growing in an upland environment two weeks earlier. His mistake is easy to understand. In the swamp the soil is regularly saturated with water, so that little oxygen is available to speed the breakdown of organic matter. Nutrient turnover is therefore slow, and this fact is written in the forms of the spruce. Unlike the upland Sitka spruce, which start out looking full as Christmas trees and quickly reach a large size, the swamp spruce appear scraggly—branches are sparse and stunted. These trees persevere in a difficult environment.

The oldest spruce of the freshwater tidal sloughs of the Columbia are survivors of the 9.0 subduction zone earthquake of 26 January 1700, when all the ground suddenly dropped a meter, leaving the bases of the trees submerged far longer at every high tide. After a few years, growth slowed to nearly nothing, each ring of growth tight against the last. New sediment came in on those high tides, and eventually the trees grew new sets of roots at the new soil surface one meter higher. After toughing it out for several decades, they eventually started growing as fast as they were before the quake. The 400-year-old trees are not enormous, certainly not in comparison to any Sitka spruce of the same age that has grown in an upland setting, but their gnarled forms are a testament to their endurance. They are making a living in a habitat where the other conifers of the region cannot thrive.

The word swamp does not normally conjure an image of abundant light, yet that light, along with the ragged forms of the trees, is immediately apparent in a Sitka spruce swamp. Here the slow-growing trees are never able to close the canopy as they would in an upland; each tree has staked its claim to an area set apart from the others, and the resulting light penetrating below allows a rich understory packed with wetland shrubs: Sitka and Pacific willow, red-osier dogwood, red elderberry. The hummocks around the bases of the mature trees support upland plants as well. This dense understory is what provided cover and forage for the threatened Columbian white-tailed deer decades after it was believed to be extinct. It is entirely appropriate that Anna and Kerry have made light the focus of their work; light casting shadows upon screens, light chemically transforming the pigments derived from the plants themselves. The abundant light defines these swamps.

Equally, the rise and fall of the tides recorded on the *Palūs* project Torii screens is an appropriate emblem of the spruce swamps. Just as the tides leave their traces on the screens, an intricate network of drainage channels form within the swamps as the constantly rising and falling waters seek an outlet. These channels are a nursery for fish, including juvenile coho salmon and steelhead. They also are corridors for mammals including beaver, river otter, and raccoon. Waterfowl take cover in these channels as well—mallard, common merganser, and wood duck. It's a habitat that is now uncommon. Early large-scale logging left the Sitka spruce swamps undisturbed, as the wood was considered too small and knotty to be of value. Even with the discount on a steamboat ticket one could get for bringing a load of firewood, many of the swamps were left undisturbed. That changed as the lowlands along the Columbia were cleared, diked, and turned into pasture for dairies in the early 20th century. Of the 30% of the original Sitka spruce swamps which remain on the Columbia, no remnant is larger than 450 hectares. The site documented by the *Palūs* project is an attempt by the Columbia Land Trust to reverse the loss of swamp. In 2011, the Trust received permission to breach a dike and restore tidal flow to this 22-hectare parcel. Trees of species unable to survive the inundation now serve as foraging and nesting sites for woodpeckers and other cavity nesters. Many of the 110 or more bird species that use Sitka spruce swamps of the Columbia have returned. The young Sitka spruce, ever resilient, are slowly breaking above the canopy of wetland shrubs. *Palūs* is a means of appreciating this slow drama as it unfolds.

# IN VIVO PALUSTRIS

**Robert Michael Pyle**

They call it the Surge Plain: where the estuary rushes home to spend the night.
Upstream, beyond the farthest reach of highest tide, or back behind the levees,
cattle low and tractors hum and farmers bring in hay. These days, most goes
for haylage in big plastic marshmallows. But in a few favored fields, actual kids
still stack bales as they always have, ever since dikes turned swamp to sward.

Down here, where daily waters ebb and flow and hunger is a given,
harvest comes in different forms. Purple martins take the flies that fed
as maggots on the corms of skunk cabbage whose spathes nourish snails.
Woodpeckers find or make their Goldilocks holes in dead cottonwoods
or jutting root wads. Kingfishers perch and rattle from any overwater branch,
then drop like rocks to bring in smolts, or smelt. Waterbug takes copepod,
frog embraces damsel, heron hoists frog, passing sucker-clutching osprey in the air.
Nothing goes to waste out here on the surge plain, where the rich river brew meets
the upswelling wash that every six hours either runs away or comes home. “Surge,”
because of that. “Plain,” because it is flat, almost at the level of the very sea itself.

Over the seasons, see the progression of colors at the violet end of the rainbow.
Salmonberry’s pink, blood currant’s incarnadine insult on the March air. Crimson
gorget of the rufous hummingbird coming to these two before anything else.
Then the red stems of osier, the rosy towers of Douglas spiraea, foxglove’s orchid shout…
thistle, bugle, marsh fleabane, the outrageous magenta of fireweed…until finally come
the mauve Douglas asters of autumn. And what’s left? Only winter’s empurpled sunset.
Now listen to these words themselves: *pur-ple, surge, spi-raea*—don’t they sound like
the very sluicing of the tides through the roots of the spruce, the stems of willows?

You can also hear the people of the swamp sucking through the mud—Douglas
of the Scots tribe and fir fame, once come to view the plants in these sodden hills,
finding the aster and spireaea that bear his name. Then Sitka of the Tlingit tribe
and the spruce that carries their name. But before any of these, Wahkiakum paddlers
who knew these sloughs and worked them, as you might know your own garden.

How elderberry marries with salmonberry, swamp candles bond to horsetails.
These names mean nothing to the plants. But they utter their sibilance by sucking in,
slooshing out, sucking in, swooshing out. And here’s who follows those laden tides:
The microbes, very basis of the broth. Any number of small fry and pissants,
working to run the world and keep the swamp alive. Coho and king, otter and mink,
beaver, newt, and muskrat. Water lily seeds and chorus frog spawn, both in jelly.
Sora rail and marsh marigold, daubing shadows under overhanging boughs
with yellow surprises. Bald eagle flashing yellow bill from tip of spruce,
surveys the surge with a certain satisfaction. And for all we know, wonders:
after all the dikes, drains, and dairies, how is any of this left at all?

## ARTIST STATEMENT

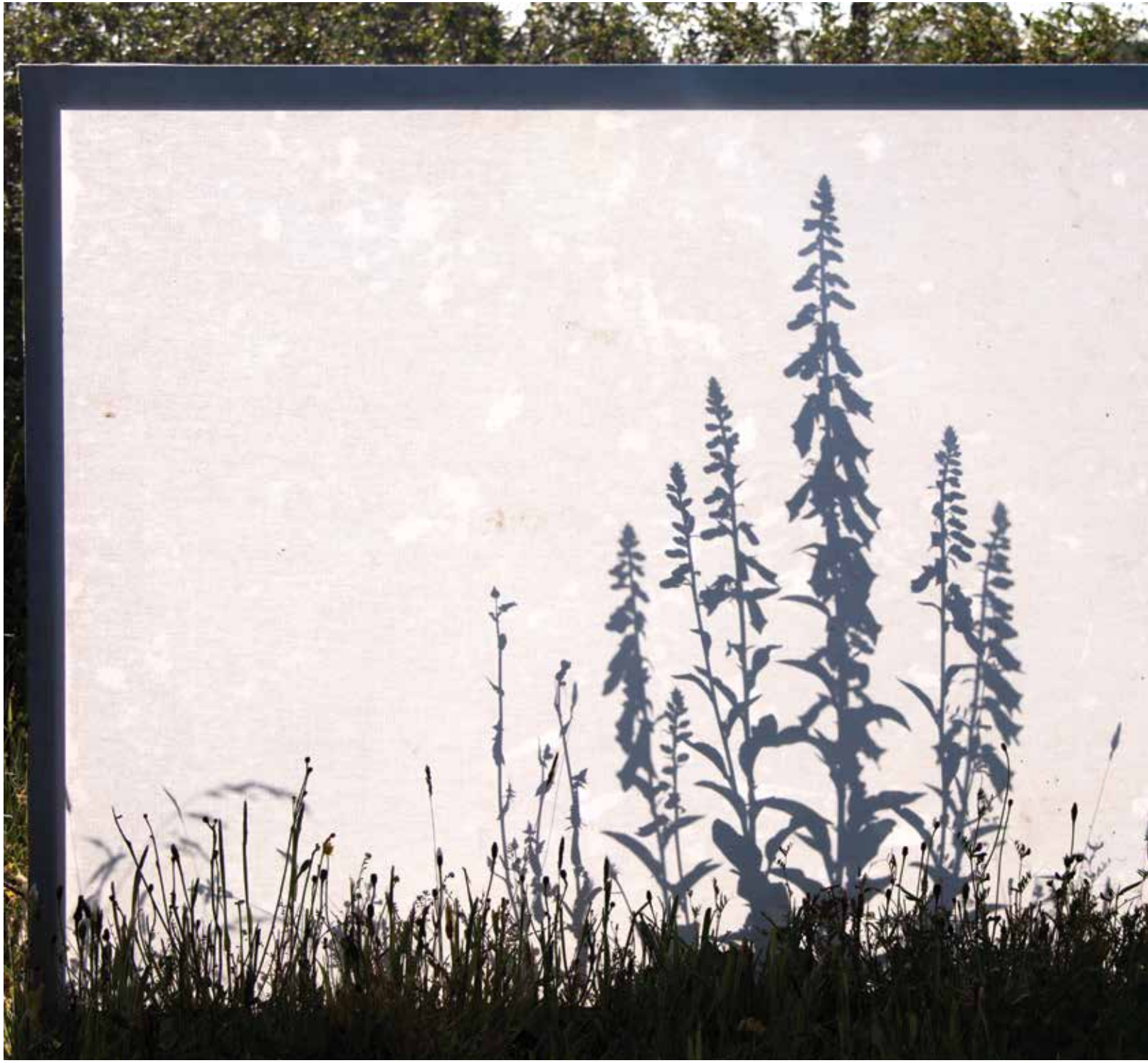
**Anna Daedalus and Kerry Davis**

*Palūs* is a meditation on a Sitka spruce swamp along the Grays River, which flows into the Columbia River Estuary 20 miles east of the Pacific Ocean in Southwest Washington State. Having relocated in 2019 from Portland, Oregon to a rural hamlet on the Grays River, we are fortunate to live and work next to 55 acres of restored tidal wetland protected by the Columbia Land Trust. In a continuation of our work with the Columbia River, we see the project as a way to situate ourselves and our society within a historical and geological context, and deepen our intimacy with this riverine place ruled by tides. The multiple mediums and modalities used in the project are intended to reflect the dynamic, multilayered nature of this place. Through constructions, documents, and time-based installations, *Palūs* bears witness to flowing time and contemplates impermanence, both in process and outcome. Many of the mediums in *Palūs* use a hands-on approach; and the project foregrounds physical, tactile experience and the ideas of presence and immediacy. The living water, weather and plants mark our materials, leaving tangible traces of their presence. As records and evocations of these ephemeral moments of contact, our hope is that the work will invite haptic sensing in addition to visual and intellectual perception and suggest the possibility of embodied and experiential understanding.

The *Torii Tidal Screens* serve as focal points for daily observation, registering the varying levels of the tide as the swamp water marks the 4' x 5' canvases. Depending on placement, light and other conditions, the screens sometimes fleetingly reveal shadows cast by such things as shimmering water or plants growing out of floating logs.

For the *Swamp Cinema Shadow Screens*, we let the swamp project its own film on rare sunny mornings without fog. The variously shaped screens define and spotlight the dense swamp vegetation. These images of lichen, red-osier dogwood, alder, fern and horsetail emerge as motifs throughout the project, echoed again in anthotypes and *Palūs Prints*. For the anthotypes, we've utilized plants from the swamp, both as medium (emulsion) and subject matter. We make photosensitive emulsion from skunk cabbage (aka swamp lanterns), salmonberries, red elderberries and blackberries. We create contact prints over hours in full sun of *Spiraea Douglassi*, willow and other native plants. The images will fade over time, especially if left in the light; and their fugitive nature reflects the changing water/landscape that constantly reshapes itself.

Draped across the dike road, the *Boundary Ribbons* are 5' wide x 60' long strips of canvas that stitch together swamp on one side and pasture on the other. Vehicles, people and wildlife leave their traces, and the waters in the ditch and swamp wick up at each end. The ribbons evoke free flowing water as it breaches the levee and returns to the river's historic surge plain. The project culminates with the paired installation, *Surge Plain*. After months of replacing the swamp-stained canvases in the Torii tidal structure, we mounted 8 screens in simple frames and temporarily sited them in the pasture. Arranged in an undulating line, the grouping faces and dialogues with the *Boundary Ribbons* as well as the swamp beyond. Marking tide levels in a would-be surge plain, the screens' collective palimpsest of layered indexing likewise chronicles half a year of flowing time.



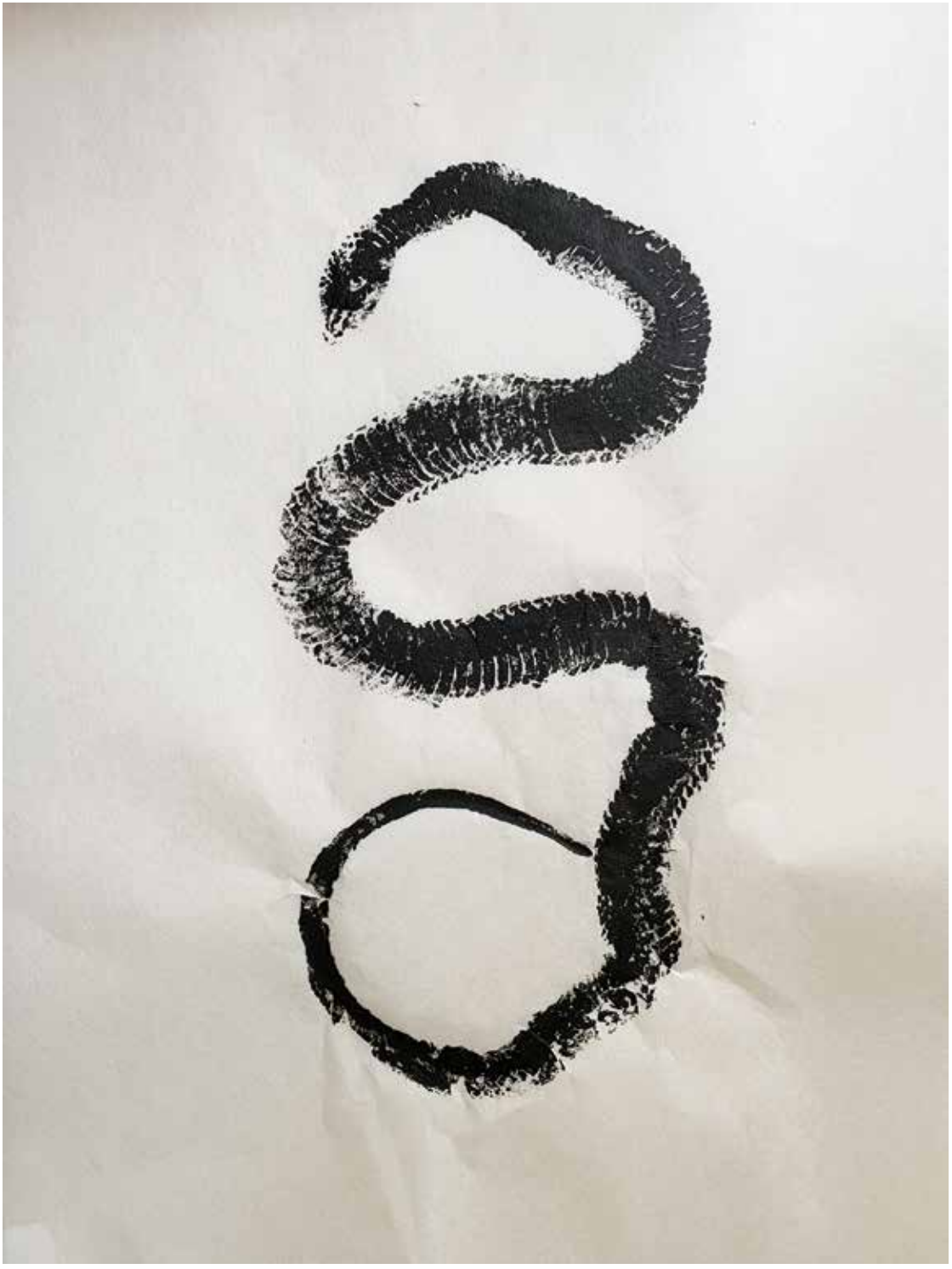
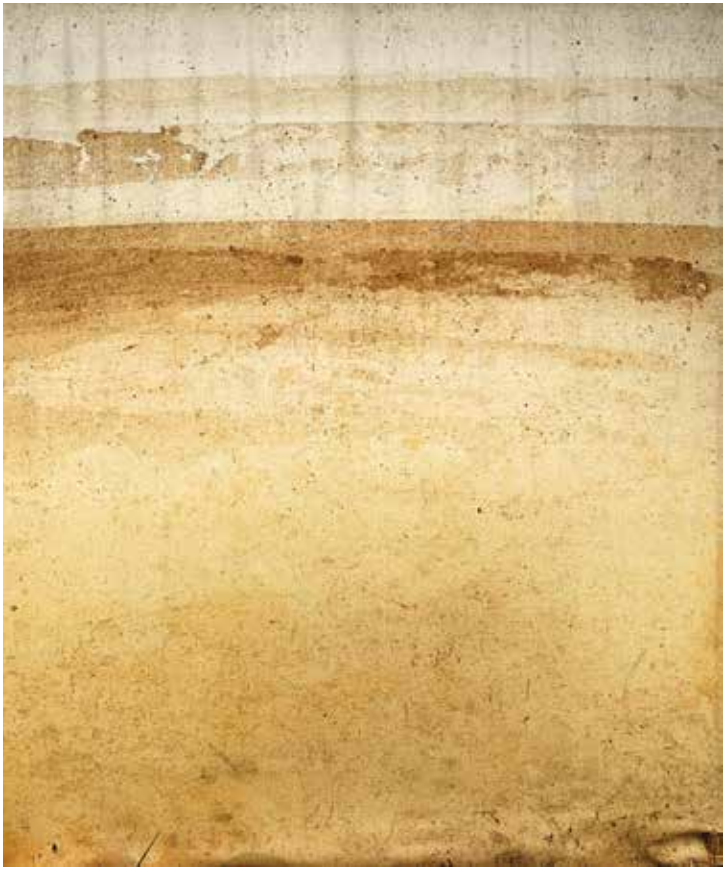


IMAGE LEFT: Anthotype image of red elderberry and horsetail on skunk cabbage emulsion.

ABOVE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Redtwig dogwood branch on salmonberry emulsion; Salmonberry branch on red elderberry emulsion; Fern and willow on blackberry emulsion; Alder and Douglas' spirea branch on red elderberry emulsion.



## BIOGRAPHIES

**Anna Daedalus and Kerry Davis** are a married artist team whose multidisciplinary individual and collective work spans photography, installation, assemblage and book arts. Their four major projects have focused on themes of interdependence, environmental crisis and resilience, the Anthropocene epoch, and geologic time. Their work often employs alternative photographic techniques to foreground physical, tactile experience and the ideas of presence and immediacy. Davis studied photography and filmmaking at Portland State University and Oregon College of Art and Craft. Daedalus earned her BA from Reed College. Their collaborative projects have been supported by grants from the Regional Arts and Culture Council and shown regionally, including Portland State University's Littman Gallery and Southern Oregon University's Schneider Museum of Art. Their individual work has been featured in numerous publications and exhibited throughout the Pacific Northwest. Cofounders of Roll-Up Gallery, an erstwhile contemporary exhibition space in Portland, the team lives and works in Southwest Washington State near the mouth of the Columbia River.

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**Rachel Rosenfield Lafo** is an independent curator and writer based in Portland, Oregon who previously was Director of Richmond Art Gallery, BC; Director of Curatorial Affairs at DeCordova Museum + Sculpture Park; Lincoln, MA, and Associate Curator at the Portland Art Museum.

**Andrew Emlen** is a naturalist, kayak guide and musician whose cello is crafted from Sitka spruce and whose band, Skamokawa Swamp Opera, is named for the Columbia River town where he lives.

**Robert Michael Pyle's** twenty-five books include *Wintergreen*, a love song to his hills of home in Southwest Washington, the novel *Magdalena Mountain*, and four collections of poems.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS & GRATITUDE

The Sitka spruce swamp featured in the project rests on the unceded lands of the The Chinook Nation. What we now call Gray's River and Wahkiakum County are the ancestral lands of the five westernmost Tribes of Chinookan peoples: the Lower Chinook, Clatsop, Willapa, Wahkiakum, Kathlamet and many other Tribes who made their homes along the lower Columbia River. As settlers and guests, we recognize the strong and diverse Native communities in our region today, from Tribes both local and distant, and offer respect and gratitude for their stewardship of these lands — past, present and future.

We also especially thank Julia Prudhomme, Greta Hamilton and all the staff at Oxygen Art Centre for their support and for being flexible enough to make this residency a reality. Thank you Genevieve Robertson for introducing us to Oxygen Art Centre and the residency program. We're grateful to Columbia Land Trust for their restoration work and continued protection of these vital swamps. Peter and Janice Marcynzsyn generously hosted installations in their pasture; and Jim Sanderson helped us make a home in this quietly beautiful place. Finally, thank you to Rachel Rosenfield Lafo, Andrew Emlen and Robert Michael Pyle for their insightful writing.

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