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Letters from a Remote Landscape

In the Oregon Outback, I love to drive toward every vanishing point only to discover that the road unfolds before me with new vistas. I've returned often to the High Desert on the northern edges of the Great Basin in Southeastern Oregon, to the Abert Rim, Warner Valley, Plush, Hart Mountain, Summerlake, Chewaucan River and Paisley. These places have held my interest for decades.

After experiencing a serious accident and brain injury in 2019, I found myself in a colorless hospital where I was deprived of fresh air, color, and nature. I dreamed of returning to Plush and Hart Mountain after regaining my strength. Maximizing the intensity of the colors I used would be central to my vision. *Colors from the Outback, 2020* and *Desert Light, 2022* documented the use of intense pigments. For this exhibition, I wanted to explore more deeply the use of ecstatic colors.

The identification of fungi and lichens has always been a passion. During my convalescence, a friend gave me *Entangled Life* by Merlin Sheldrake. It coincided with wanting to understand how lichens adapt to desert environments and how their colors are derived from rocks on which they grow. Sheldrake described new scientific discoveries. My desire to return to the Hart Mountain area, where brilliant lichen colonies encrust the faces of huge volcanic rocks, burned anew.

I met Ben Mercer, a documentary film producer, at my opening in 2022. Later, he asked if I would work on a film with him. For 2 years, Ben and his crew have focused on filming processes and techniques I use in my paintings. To understand my vision, I suggested a trip to Hart Mountain. This landscape has given me phenomenal dreams. I imagined the exhilaration of being under its power again and enveloped by its stark beauty and geography. I began my packing list. It would include brushes, paints, paper, buckets, and the sketchbooks where I would record color studies and compositions.

When we arrived in Plush, Oregon after an eight-hour drive from Portland, the desert was still hot. Ben and his crew were in for a surprise. They had never traveled to Southeastern Oregon nor stood on the edge of the Abert Rim. We were welcomed in Plush by friends who have lived and worked in the Warner Valley their entire lives and still attest to its allure.

We witnessed dramatic cloudscapes, sunsets, and indigo skies of ethereal beauty. We saw vivid green thules that shimmered in bright sunlight and moved with the wind. Dark green conifers stood between rock piles. Sage scented the air. Violet gray rocks made bright lichens even more vivid. Shadows cast by rocky mesas changed as the sun moved.

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We walked on brown dust. Yellow ochres, red oxides, and acid greens colored the rocks. These are details that first cemented this remote landscape in my memory.

We saw ancient petroglyphs that told their stories on angled faces of massive rocks. This place of indelible beauty still holds sacred power. As a calligrapher, I've studied both ancient symbols and early alphabets. The level of abstraction and intelligence reflected in these human innovations is to secure their very survival and connection. The petroglyphs were peopled by symbols of hunters, sunworshippers, and shamans who lived thousands of years ago. Antelopes were depicted and abstract geometric drawings invoked the presence of a spirit world. Astronomical and astrological symbols abound. When I read these rocks, time disappears. Messages from the past transcend into the present.

I've made two trips to Hart Mountain with Ben Mercer and his crew. In June, we came upon the rock that I had first photographed in 1983. Beside it, I opened a 20-foot scroll of watercolor paper, anchored it on dusty uneven ground and drew on it with charcoal foraged from the desert. I rubbed dirt into the paper's rugged surface. Brilliant lichens nearby inspired me to dip a broad brush into vermilion ink and make energetic abstract gestures. The title for this piece is *Phoenix*. This exhibition reveals the transcendent nature and austere beauty of this remote landscape.

Margot Voorhies Thompson, 2024