

Conditions for an Unfinished Work of Mourning: Wretched Yew

Produced over a two-year period in the North American forests of the Pacific Northwest where wildfires have become increasingly destructive in recent years, *Wretched Yew* is part of an ongoing site-responsive series considering the potential of place and topography as harboring evidence of wounds and repair. I seek exchanges in territories and locations imbued with a certain heaviness – as a palpable weight generated by past occurrence or poetic resemblance. The imagery resulting from these encounters places histories of pain endured by the land and individual bodies in relation through photo-based still and moving forms. Relentless and difficult to grasp, the slog of geologic time and personal grief correspond through the ephemerality of images and how they tenuously come to be.

This phase of the project centers on the *Taxus brevifolia* genus of yew tree and its location in the Pacific Northwest as a marker of endurance. Serving as resilient understory cover and long revered by Indigenous nations, the Pacific yew was primarily disregarded by foresters of the settler state – both economically and environmentally – until it was discovered to produce a plant alkaloid highly effective as a chemotherapy drug. Almost entirely eradicated in the 1990's, the existence of remaining old growth yew is of profound significance to this ecosystem. Having spent my formative years in Portland, Oregon during this decade – a tumultuous time when the pervasive sight of clear cut hillsides served as the visual backdrop to personal struggles with addiction, depression, and loss – I found an in-depth engagement with the cultural and ecological legacy of this species to provide a provocative framework for thinking through ongoing cycles of neglect.

Connecting the complex narratives and mythological associations of the yew – known as a symbol of death and regeneration – to my own concerns around the limitations of photographic modes of re-presentation as reliable artifacts of the past, *Wretched Yew* is deliberately varied in both aesthetic and material. Working on location, direct print and film exposures of noted trees and their surround were produced over timed intervals using UV-sensitive direct contact printing processes, digital scans, photographs, and video documentation of and with Pacific yew. Many of the camera-less works were impacted by the extreme variability of exposure resulting from the habitually uneven illumination of the Northwest skies. I deliberately embraced these legibility issues and further disrupted the expectation of exact replication by presenting several images as fragmented composites. The dominant use of the utilitarian photogram process also serves as a nod to the DIY ethos of punk culture. This aspect connects with the use of music in the work and the musicians who collaborated on the soundtrack to the video piece.

Wretched Yew developed from a prolonged interest in philosophical and poetic modes of thought and structure, but was equally informed by a deep, personal engagement with the Pacific yew, its land and history, as well as my own. The individual project components were designed to collectively function as acknowledgement of the unsettled sorrow permeating these mental and physical spaces, operating as a set of discrete elegies. The still image traces and scans are halted and register as documents, whereas the moving film and video clips exist as recordings. Temporal duration is extended differently in each of these archival forms – as forever persisting within the document and repeatedly recurring in the recording. Making this endurance visible effectively situates ourselves in time and history, in an ever-elusive present that perpetually collides with the residue of the past. In recognition of this/these moment(s), as a productive way forward, I propose an embrace of radical despair.

This project offers gratitude to all whose labor and knowledge contributed to the work, and to the original caretakers of the lands holding these trees – citizens of Pacific Northwest Indigenous nations and their descendants wrongfully dispossessed of their current and ancestral territory, many who now live as members of the Confederated Tribes of Grande Ronde and continue to steward these lands.