

## **Fragments, shorn**

by Lisa Zaher

Dawn Roe's elegiac installation, *Wretched Yew* gives us fragments—fragments in space and time, unfinished. This essay is a response in kind.

## Making / Knowing

Harvesting yew branches and leaves, wrapping photosensitive paper around branches, soaking the film, placing the leaves down—treatments intended to prepare its surface to record better, to record differently, to revitalize its materials to perform, to do a job—Roe’s labor is an act of care, of “love-as-treasure.”<sup>1</sup>

Shifting across formal practices and modes of making, the work proposes an epistemology of making—not a cataloguing of how to make, but rather an enquiry into making as knowing. Here we find making as repetition; as communion; as salvation, “the discovery of a transcendent exercise of sensibility, of image-making, language and thought” opening onto the possibility of understanding our human condition and Being itself.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 92.

2 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 195.

## **Time / Duration**

Roe gives us time: time as record and trace, time as memory, time as exposure, time as labor, contemplation, and history. We find it in the trees, within the frames and between them too, on the film, and through her gestures. All testimonies to time.

## **Weather / Weathered**

At the time of this writing, fires rage up and down the West Coast, displacing communities and ravaging the land in the Pacific Northwest where yew trees have lived for centuries. Markers of endurance, the Pacific Yew has faced many threats to its existence over time, each time returning in defiant acts of resistance, holding on as its roots burrow deeper and deeper into the land.

Our weather, performing the energy of chaos and chance, echoes on the fragile surfaces of Roe's prints. Burning, fading, scratching, tearing, warping—these accidental marks, transforming by chemistry, light, and air, are the wounds of the present, the ongoing presence of enduring pain—love-as-treasure perpetually at risk, needing care.

## Place / Space

Returning to the Pacific Northwest, Roe grounds the *Wretched Yew* in a particular place—a once contested region of America, home to numerous Native American tribes, including the Chinook, Clatskanie and Molalla tribes that were dispossessed of their land by American forces—a physical and psychical place of trauma. Entering into the landscape, and returning to sacred sites as she sustainably harvests the yew leaves and produces photographic objects, Roe renders place into space. Through her labor, she activates the land and the memories that reside there. Using photosensitive materials to register the marks and traces of fragments of yew, along with lens-based images that record her actions, Roe captures a dichotomy of place and space, of fixity and instability, of the particular and the generic that renders her elegy a personal cry that we each can hear and feel.<sup>1</sup>

Place yields to space as Roe moves out from the specifically mapped locale to the spaces within her frames. Embedding frames within frames, she creates visual paradoxes, suggesting both passages into depth as well as time, opening up virtual windows that begin to engender a more comprehensive story, at once personal and universal. Finding resonance between her photographic materials and the natural fibers and excretions of the yew, the work shuffles back and forth between these two senses of space and place. Marked by photographic materials ranging from lens-based video sequences, still photographs, digitized film, and static frame sequences, the work reveals time—not as devouring space in its incessant move forward, like the passage of film frames through the projector—but rather as unfolding multiplicities of space, invoking memories and their weight in the present.

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See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Preface to the Second Edition of *Landscape and Power: Space, Place and Landscape*," *Landscape and Power*, 2nd edition, pp. vii-xii (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

## Still / Moving

Conventional approaches to understanding the temporality of specific photographic-based media fall short in contemplating Roe's work. Her still and moving images in the series do not simply resolve into a respective 'pastness' and a 'becoming-present'. Her still images, mostly made as time exposures, read as durational records of events. Film segments, some of which are similarly made by coating the film stock in cyanotype material, or else in tannin extracted directly from the bark of the yew trees, do not merely deliver "death 24x per second."<sup>1</sup>

And yet death is here, in the frames and in the fragments.

With a scream that streaks, that punctuates our time, that tears through our perception like the scars on the film stock, Roe's video-elegy is a song of loss and a reflection of remembrance as a pressing act, here and now. A poem, a song, a cry—the utterances that reach out beyond their records to announce the material weight of loss—death as a gnawing, burning and tearing into our being.

## Death / Life

Death is here, but so is life. There is an often-cited passage from Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*, where Barthes reads Alexander Gardner's portrait photograph of Lewis Payne in his cell, awaiting death by hanging, as an assertion that photography "produces Death while trying to preserve life."<sup>1</sup> Announcing, "He is dead and he is going to die..." Barthes reads the temporality of the photograph as the brutal juxtaposition of a future and a past, a future anterior—what will have been—whose conclusion is death. However, what often goes unremarked is the relationship Barthes draws out between the photographic support and the viewer/reader of the image as both equally mortal. Recalling an image of his mother and father together, he laments that when he dies, all that will remain of this image of love, of "love-as-treasure," will be "indifferent Nature"—the decaying photograph, yellowing, fading, tearing (94). And so it is strange, and even paradoxical that Barthes would go on to say that there is in photography a "defeat of time" (96) and that "the Photograph prepares [us] ... to be no longer able to conceive duration, affectively or symbolically" (93). As Roe's work makes clear, photography's "indifferent nature" does quite a good job, affectively and symbolically, of showing duration.

## Nature / History

It is a mere coincidence that Charles Wilkes' map of the Oregon Territory was published in 1844, the same year that William Henry Fox Talbot published *The Pencil of Nature*. Yet, the development of photography and American Western expansion are both equally caught up in man's quest to know, catalogue and ultimately conquer that natural world. (A decade or so later photography would aid the United States Government's Western surveys). In his foundational text, Talbot speculated that photographs would become "nearer to perfection" once we knew more of nature's laws.<sup>1</sup> Yet, if there is anything we have learned since Wilkes and Talbot's time, it is that the laws governing phenomena within nature are unpredictable. Even a perfect image can suffer the effects of weather and time, and all efforts to conquer nature are futile. Roe's *Wretched Yew* proposes another way, not a conquering eye/I but a being-in-the-midst. Her photographic materials are kindred bodies with nature, entangled in the same earthly conditions, "liv[ing] and [dying] well with each other in a thick present."<sup>2</sup>

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1 William Henry Fox Talbot, "Introductory Remarks," in *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1844), 1.

2 Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.



As the light breaks out through the yew tree, we see through the trees. We see through sprocket holes and through the film itself. Our sight slips while the materials pull and grind—fragments leaving traces in the thick.

I sometimes hold it half a sin  
To put in words the grief I feel;  
For words, like Nature, half reveal  
And half conceal the Soul within.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "*In Memoriam A.H.H. OBIT MDCCCXLIX*," canto 5, lines 109-112.

