

Common Ground Series

With my suitcase half-packed for my trip to Ireland, the call went out for the borders to close and all Americans to return home. My long-awaited pilgrimage to see the green of Ireland in the spring would have to wait for the foreseeable future. This trip was to be the catalyst for a painting series for which I already had a solo exhibition scheduled later that year.

As the world descended into chaos, my daughters needed homeschooling, my life changed, and there was this ache of a whole series of paintings of Ireland not made. What was I going to paint? I was so stressed out being a single mom of one child during kindergarten on the couch and the other 5th grade from the kitchen table. Illness, and loneliness everywhere. And here I was, missing my missed vacation. But you know what? Our struggles are valid no matter their size. This isn't a comparison. We all go through things. The loss of this dream was hard for me, and so was the loss of the plan. But I made one critical mistake. I said, "What else can go wrong? I can't handle one more thing." What was I thinking?

That night a huge lightning storm set afire the mountain I grew up on. My mom fled. My family waited to see if the house would burn down. The fire merged with other fires and became known as the CZU Complex fire. It took out hundreds of homes in the Santa Cruz mountains in California. I watched as fire maps updated. Sometimes they would show the house as destroyed. The mountainous terrain confuses the heat readings of the satellites. Firefighters informed the close-knit neighborhood that they weren't coming. They had bulldozed a fire line on the other side of the neighborhood and would come back to defend that fire line if needed. The fire was too big, and they were stretched too thin. Through teamwork and several miracles, the neighbors organized into a band of firefighters and won their battle.

Three weeks later, both the Almeda fire and the Slater fires swept through communities closer to me. Fire was here. Fire was making its presence known. Fire could no longer be ignored. I turned my art to fire.

I started working with encaustic, to incorporate heat into my art-making process. I traveled to forest fire sites and grabbed charcoal from the forest floor. Often, I had been to the same places before and was able to compare with photos the differences in the landscapes. I listened to lectures on fire, old-growth forests, and land management. I sought out situations where I could be the most ignorant person in the room, soaking up knowledge and asking questions.

My series nearly died again. "What are you working on?" Forest fires! "Oh. Who wants to see more of that?" Would anyone want to see my art? What if all we needed was an escape? I struggled on. This series was so stubborn. So hard fought. Other series just poured out. Not this one. Like fire itself, I had to befriend the struggle.

I saw another artist's work about the Almeda fire. She mentioned that she was coping with the loss of it via her art. I instantly and fully accepted that idea. However, if that felt acceptable to me for her artwork, why wasn't it acceptable for me for my own? What was this block that insisted on being present?

Was I afraid? Afraid of not making powerful enough work to meet the subject? Yes. Afraid to oversimplify. To minimize someone else's journey. Yet, to speak of my journey. My own experiences.

I had a subject block. I also had an approach block. The last two series were from hiker's photographs. And previous were my own experiences hiking in the woods. Here I could not lean

onto someone else's journey. I wanted to incorporate the feelings. The sketches. The visits. The moments. The brevity of the landscape that we are so easily tricked into thinking, "This. This is the way it is, the way it has been, the way it will be."

The way through was to dive into non-committal sketches. Growing from these sketches I would take the impactful and plan out paintings. I moved. I had to have my studio packed up for over a month. This time allowed me to focus on these sketches without the pressure of the painting.

This decision made me brave enough to work through my block. Then reading the paper I saw an amazing photo. I wrote the editor of the Grants Pass Daily Courier for permission to paint his photos. He gladly and generously gave it to me. All the Kalmiopsis Wilderness works are inspired by that gift.

And when it was time to paint, the ideas had a way to flow through me out into finished pieces. Working larger than the sketches, I could be bold with my strokes, and capture the emotions of the stillness after the fire swept through. The passion of the flames in the moment. The recovery and the beginning of the next cycle for the forest with the green that only spring can bring. And so, with the original plan to hunt spring green in Ireland, I ended up hunting the spring green of my West Coast home.