

*The
Future
on
Fire*

*/ Andreas
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On August 4th, 2017, I found myself standing in the midst of a charred area of sagebrush and ponderosa pine forest on the formation known as Knox Mountain, a 385-hectare park managed by the City of Kelowna. I had come here to see what the aftermath of a human-caused wildfire looked like. There was scorched earth and burnt trees as well as vegetation coated with bright-red chemical fire retardant. Surprising to me, there were also bunchgrasses already pushing up from charred crowns despite a relative lack of precipitation. As a newcomer to unceded syilx territory, this was my introduction to the concept of a fire-adapted ecosystem. I wanted to witness the aftermath of a fire firsthand, following my initial televisual encounter with the Okanagan Mountain Park fire of 2003, which burned hundreds of homes in the Kelowna area and forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of residents.

The entanglement of humans learning to manage ecology through fire, and the more-than-human community developing strategies of adapting to fire is a fascinating dialogue that I may never tire of exploring. My early photographs of fire-ravaged forests grew out of my initial love for the Okanagan region. These first images resulted in a series that I called *After the Fire*, which includes several images featured in this portfolio. Following my initial output over a three-year period, my focus on wildfire as a source of renewal became complicated by the emotions I felt following the 2021 White Rock Lake fire or the fires that occurred that same year in Lytton during the record-breaking heat dome. As an artist, I felt unable to move forward and propose new trajectories without repeating my previous imagery. And then a surprise came to me *ex somnio*. Despite being wary of deploying the cliché of the dream vision, I could not deny the nocturnal clarity that entered my mind like a bolt of lightning. In December 2022, I grabbed my camera and a bicycle light and headed out into the forest of Myra-Bellevue Provincial Park, which had burned shortly after its inauguration in 2002, and I began making portraits of individual trees under cover of darkness. Whereas my past photographs spoke to a collective forest, I now sought to highlight the individual through the use of artificial lighting. The bicycle light gave way to an outdoor strobe. In an effort to maintain a sense of optimism while leaning into photographic images that were dark, both literally and symbolically, I embarked on a month-long residency in the Similkameen Valley during May of 2023. I continued to use artificial lighting and embraced a deeper sense of sorrow for the ravaged landscapes that I depicted. This became a new body of work titled *Silent Witnesses*.

While wildfire often occurs naturally, by lightning for example, or is human-caused either accidentally or through arson, fire can also be deliberately applied to the land for numerous purposes and by various agencies. Farming, agriculture, and forestry practices rely on open burning of brush, prunings, stumps, discarded crop material, and slash. These materials are assembled into piles and burned according to protocols outlined in the Wildfire Act and Wildfire Regulation, in conjunction with Provincial and Regional directives.¹ Pile burning, however, is only one component of a broader range of prescribed burning. Regional districts, provincial parks, and national parks all employ prescribed burning in order to mitigate wildfire risk within their managed areas, as well as to benefit ecosystem regeneration. Some of these practices are informed by traditional ecological knowledge obtained from a vast network of Indigenous peoples for whom cultural burning is essential for ceremonial practices and ecosystem renewal. This type of anthropogenic fire

1 British Columbia Ministry of Agriculture, Order No. 870.218.28. 2014, "Farm Practice: Burning," https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/farming-natural-resources-and-industry/agriculture-and-seafood/agricultural-land-and-environment/strengthening-farming/farm-practices/870218-28_burning.pdf.



/fig. 1/ Research image, August 2017. Bunchgrasses present new growth within a few days of a small spot fire occurring on Knox Mountain, an urban park within the City of Kelowna.



/fig. 2/ From the series *After the Fire*, August 2018. The Kenow wildfire burned over 19,000 hectares of Waterton Lakes National Park. Over 80% of the hiking infrastructure was impacted by the fire. This image, made one year after the fire, demonstrates how ecology is quick to reimplant itself within the less severely affected portions of the park.

is also referred to as “good fire” or “beneficial fire” by Indigenous communities, and these terms are gaining prominence among academics and the public.²

Considering the forced displacement of Indigenous peoples that occurred in tandem with the formation of national parks, it may seem paradoxical that Parks Canada began reintegrating prescribed fire into certain national parks in the 1970s. Such expulsions were often predicated upon tensions between Indigenous subsistence hunting and settler-colonial sport hunting, as well as plant harvesting. Fire was used as a tool of driving Indigenous peoples from their homes. One example can be found in Robert Jago’s 2023 article in *The Walrus*, titled “Canada’s National Parks Are Colonial Crime Scenes.” In it, he cites a statement by James Plewak of the Keeseekoowenin Ojibway First Nation regarding the formation of Riding Mountain National Park in Manitoba, which reads “Our people were burned out of their homes... Indians and parks were considered not to be compatible.”³ The Canadian Pacific Railway was instrumental in the establishment of Canada’s first national park at Banff, and the company brought about massive environmental change. Wildfires caused by cinders from locomotives swept through nearby valleys, impacting Indigenous lives and depleting game more dramatically than any subsistence hunting activity.⁴ I would like to highlight that railway-caused wildfires are not exclusively a phenomenon of the past, as legal proceedings regarding the potential liability of the railway company in the destruction of the Village of Lytton, BC due to a wildfire in 2021 remain before the courts. Regardless of these historical and contemporary circumstances, today’s fire management regimes within national parks differ greatly from that of private lands insofar as fires of natural origin are often monitored yet left to burn so long as critical infrastructure is not threatened, rather than immediately being suppressed.

Legacies of settler-colonial fire management can be handily summarized by the figure of Smokey Bear, the great symbol of the US Department of Agriculture, who famously placed onus on the citizen by declaring “only you can prevent forest fires.” Beginning in the 1940s, fire suppression was the name of the game and this philosophy largely extends into the present day, including the so-called “10 a.m. Rule,” whereby agencies vow to contain the spread of fire by 10 a.m. the day after it is detected. This objective is still maintained by Alberta Wildfire and other agencies in Canada.⁵ Employing a somewhat different strategy is Ember, the FireSmart Fox, a mascot thought up by the Canadian Interagency Forest Fire Centre. This animated character lives in the wildland-urban interface, and encourages a range of multi-ethnic residents in the neighbouring community to rid their homes of wooden shingles, clear debris, relocate firewood on their property and remove organic material from their gutters.⁶ While the dominant management strategy within the wildland-urban interface is prevention and suppression, this trend has shifted over time within parks through prescribed burning. Commemorating the centennial of Canada’s national parks, Tony Ianzelo’s 1984 film *From Ashes to Forest*, a co-production between The National Film Board of Canada and Parks Canada, investigates some of the first controlled burns in Banff National Park and suggests benefits of increased fire in Wood Buffalo and Waterton Lakes National Parks. Despite the beneficial results of these practices, prescribed burning continues to attract a fair degree of apprehension due to generational habits influenced

2 Amy Cardinal Christianson, host, “Indigenous Fire Keepers Workshop in Merritt BC, Canada with Pierre Kruger,” *The Good Fire*, September 23, 2019, podcast episode, 23 min., 01 sec., <https://yourforestpodcast.com/good-fire-podcast/2019/9/22-interior-fire-keepers-workshop-in-merritt-bc-canada-with-pierre-krueger>.

3 Robert Jago, “Canada’s National Parks Are Colonial Crime Scenes,” *The Walrus*, October 10, 2023, <https://thewalrus.ca/canadas-national-parks-are-colonial-crime-scenes/>.

4 Theodore Binnema and Melanie Niemi, “Let the Line Be Drawn

Now: Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada,” *Environmental History* 11, no. 4 (October 2006): 724–50.

5 “How We Fight Wildfires: Alberta Wildfire Has Several Ways to Detect New Wildfires and Uses Aircraft, Special Equipment And Firefighters on the Ground to Fight Them,” Province of Alberta, accessed May 11, 2024, <https://www.alberta.ca/how-we-fight-wildfires>.

6 For more on Ember, see “Ember, The FireSmart Fox,” FireSmart BC, accessed October 2, 2024, <https://firesmartbc.ca/ember/>.



/fig. 3/ From the series *After the Fire*, August 2018. Campers inflate floats and prepare to enter the Kettle River near Rock Creek, BC. A fire forced the evacuation of the Kettle River campground in 2015, and active fires were in the area again when this photograph was made in August of 2018.



/fig. 4/ From the series *After the Fire*, September 2020. Shortly after the establishment of Myra Bellevue Provincial Park, a great portion of the parklands burned during the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park fire. This view depicts the proximity of the park to the City of Kelowna, with the Bennett Bridge and City of West Kelowna visible to the left side of the frame.



/fig. 5/ From the series *After the Fire*, August 2020. The Mount Christie wildfire threatens homes and wineries in the community of Okanagan Falls while Adirondack chairs sit vacant on the opposing shore of Skaha Lake.

by campaigns such as that of Smokey Bear, and events such as the prescribed burn on the outskirts of the Banff townsite in 2023 that became an out-of-control wildfire do not help assuage public skepticism.

While the Okanagan Valley is not wholly designated as a protected parkland, it shares many attributes of park-like scenic areas, namely that it is a popular tourist destination and year-round recreational playground. It is also one of the most fire-prone environments in the country. Fire events such as the 2023 McDougall Creek firestorm that tore through communities along the western shore of Okanagan Lake, destroying nearly 200 properties and scorching roughly 15,000 hectares of land, have a direct impact on residents and tourists alike. During the summer of 2023, I recorded radio transmissions between structural firefighting teams as well as aerial and ground-based firefighting by the BC Wildfire Service (BCWS). In one particular recording dated Sunday, September 17th, BCWS personnel called in to the Kamloops Fire Centre with an evacuation recommendation pertaining to the Upper Park Rill Creek fire as it moved towards the Glen Lake area. The rank-4 fire (of moderately high intensity) threatened cabins and campers at the Madden Lake recreational site. Upon advising campers of the evacuation alert, one or two groups were going to pack up and leave, while the other two decided to remain on site and spend the night. While this audio work was intended to be exhibited in conjunction with a series of photographs at the Kelowna Art Gallery from February until June of 2024, the BCWS and West Kelowna Fire Rescue were concerned that it might retraumatize the community. As an alternative, Fire Chief Jason Brolund engaged in an audio walk with me along the western perimeter of Rose Valley Regional Park. The resulting fifteen-minute sound work, titled *The Scars in Our Community*, explores our relationship to trauma, grief, and resilience, and what needs to be done in our community to live more cooperatively with wildfire.⁷ We also talked about the role of photography in documenting these types of events. My work is most often presented in public art galleries, artist-run centres, and museums, but this particular exhibition holds special importance to me as it was within my home community in the months immediately following a major interface fire. There is even a direct sightline between the gallery and the location of the fire. The reception of my work was positive and I had the opportunity to listen to visitors describing their own experiences with the fire, reflecting on how the locations of my images looked differently beforehand and recalling memories of spending time at some of these sites with family and friends.

In July 2023, I was invited to prepare a workshop for the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) conference that took place in Portland, Oregon. My collaborators on this project were Jenn Ladino and Erin James, English Professors from the University of Idaho, who run the Confluence Lab. The Confluence Lab engages in creative interdisciplinary research projects that bring together scholars in the arts, humanities, and sciences, together with community members, to engage in environmental issues impacting rural communities.⁸ We called our workshop “Visualizing Fire Futures.” Broadly speaking, Erin’s presentation investigated the media rhetoric surrounding representation of wildfire and how such tropes “stagnate when juxtaposed with frontliners’ personal experience narratives.”⁹ Jenn’s presentation expanded on a wonderful paper she published in 2022, titled “How Nostalgia Drives and Derails Living with Wildland Fire in the American West.” In

7 “The Scars in our Community,” audio recording, 2024. Available on the artist’s website: <https://www.andreasrutkauskas.com/silent-witnesses>.

8 “Who We Are,” Confluence Lab, accessed June 20, 2024, <https://www.uidaho.edu/class/english/confluence>.

9 Erin James, “Visualizing Fire Futures,” The Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment Conference, pre-conference workshop lecture, Portland, OR, July 9, 2023.



/fig. 6/ From the series *Silent Witnesses*, 2023. The charred husk of a ponderosa pine reminds visitors that the land can take generations to recover following a major interface fire. This image was made in Myra Bellevue Provincial Park twenty years after the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park Fire.



/fig. 7/ From the series *Silent Witnesses*, October 2023. The McDougall Rim trail is a multi-use trail rising above Rose Valley Regional Park in West Kelowna. This image reveals a new sightline towards downtown Kelowna, sntsk'il'nten Regional Park and the Big White ski resort in the far distance following the 2023 wildfire. (previous page)



/fig. 8/ From the series *Silent Witnesses*, May 2023. A fire-scarred ponderosa pine bears evidence of woodpeckers probing for insects underneath the charred bark. This scene was made within an area adjacent to Skaha Bluffs Provincial Park, which is undergoing ecological rehabilitation following the 2020 Mount Christie wildfire.



/fig. 9/ Research image, August 2023. Thick smoke blankets the Central Okanagan in the days following the McDougall Creek firestorm. This view from the Hot Sands Beach in Kelowna City Park would be filled with bathing tourists and locals if it weren't for the smoke and regional travel restriction.

this text, four prevalent nostalgic figures, recurring in popular representations of wildfire, are identified: the Giant Sequoia, the Heroic Firefighter engaged in “the Good Fight,” the Lone Frontiersman, and the “Noble Savage.”¹⁰ Moving from these prevalent nostalgic figures, Jenn opened up space to explore what she called “fire feelings.” Collectively, we prompted participants to contribute to a gallery wall of multimodal resources, ranging from press clippings to photographs and film stills depicting fire, as well as firsthand accounts of experiencing wildfire or its aftermath.

Since this workshop, I have been preoccupied with how nostalgia can motivate emotional responses to wildfire and perpetuate the expectation of untenable experiences. The four popular representatives examined in Ladino’s text are all united as figures that represent our desire to return to what no longer exists. Economically speaking, wildfire is bad for business. Categorical analysis of the impacts of fire can be defined as *functional* (the possibility of mechanical, equipment or organizational problems while travelling), *physical/health* (possibility of physical danger or harm), and *financial* (possibility that a recreational trip will not provide good value).¹¹ As I began to prepare this text from the Village of Keremeos, BC, I found myself considering the particular story of the Cathedral Lakes Lodge. The Crater Creek wildfire, discovered on July 22nd, 2023, ultimately burned over 45,000 hectares of land, primarily within Cathedral Provincial Park. The lodge sits neatly within the centre of the park. Despite witnessing with my own eyes the complete destruction of the basecamp facilities and access bridge leading over the Ashnola River, the lodge’s website and Instagram account made no mention of the fire. A few weeks into the fire, an Instagram post even advertised “escape to Cathedral Lakes Lodge for an unforgettable experience that’s as refreshing as a breath of mountain air!”¹² Shortly after this post, news media described in detail how seventy people were evacuated from the area, including a mixture of lodge guests and backcountry hikers who were asked to shelter in place at the lodge. Apart from foregrounding the economic impacts on tourism, the wildfire reopened a rift between BC Wildfire and the Lower Similkameen Indian Band. The latter have requested improved contact with fire services as lack of proper communication results in conflict regarding the deployment of a particular fire management strategy.¹³ Building trust and facilitating knowledge transfer between researchers and practitioners, settler or Indigenous, is critical as we move into a future on fire.¹⁴ Perhaps it is time for us to acknowledge that the rose tint of our summer landscapes is attributable, not to a proverbial pair of glasses, but to fire. Our environment is changing and we will need to come up with better ways to co-manage forested lands in the spirit of reconciliation.

10 Jennifer Ladino, Leda N. Kobziar, Jack Kredell et al., “How Nostalgia Drives and Derails Living with Wildland Fire in the American West,” *Fire* 5, no. 2 (2022): 53, <https://doi.org/10.3390/fire5020053>.

11 Man-Keun Kim and Paul M. Jakus, “Wildfire, National Park Visitation, and Changes in Regional Economic Activity,” *Journal of Outdoor Recreation and Tourism* 26 (June 2019): 34–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jort.2019.03.007>.

12 Cathedral Lakes Lodge (@cathedrallakeslodge), “Embrace the beauty of nature’s canvas with clear skies above and crystal-clear waters below,” *Instagram*, August 10, 2023, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CvxblyprkQf/>.

13 CBC News, with files from Brady Strachan and the Canadian Press, “Dozens of People Rescued After Being Trapped by Wildfire at Remote B.C. Lodge, Officials Say,” *CBC News*, August 16, 2023, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/cathedral-lakes-lodge-crater-creek-fire-stranding-1.6938375>.

14 Tara K. McGee, Allan Curtis, Bonita L. McFarlane et al., “Facilitating Knowledge Transfer Between Researchers and Wildfire Practitioners About Trust: An International Case Study,” *The Forestry Chronicle* 92, no. 2 (2016): 167–71, <https://doi.org/10.5558/tfc2016-035>.