

Salmon Arm Art Gallery Presents

Fire Wild

A visual arts exploration of BC's relationship with wildfire, featuring the work of Kathy Atkins, Myrna Button, Lisa Figueroa, Lucy Grainger, Manuela Koller, Lyn Richards, Carol Schlosar, Patricia L. Smith, Vanessa Skotnitsky, Maria Thomas, and Liz Toohey-Wiese

July 9 to August 20, 2022

Opening Day Saturday, July 9, 11am to 1pm
Gallery Hours Tuesday to Saturday, 11am to 4pm
Artist's Talk Thursday, July 21 at 2pm

Kathy Atkins

With generous support from



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You are standing on the unceded and ancestral lands of the Secwépemc people.

The board and staff of Shuswap District Arts Council acknowledge that they have benefited from the systems and structures that have oppressed Indigenous people for nearly two centuries.

We apologize for the harms that have been inflicted upon Secwépemc people.

We endeavour to work in accordance with the 94 Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Report. We pledge to support reparations and reconciliation through our mandate, using the arts to build respectful relationships, create cross-cultural community engagement, and to make space for Indigenous cultural and artistic expression. Our policies reflect the importance of supporting authentic Indigenous voices, as well as guiding the education of settler cultures by including Indigenous perspectives in every exhibition and program.

Director/Curator Tracey Kutschker wishes to personally thank Neskonlith Councillor Louis Thomas, as well as artists and storytellers Dolan Badger, Mary Thomas, Delores Purdaby, Aaron Leon, Gerry Thomas, Kenthen Thomas and Geri Matthew for their generous guidance, advice and wisdom over the past 18 years. It is now time for settler cultures to take on the re-education of our collective history, and to make the changes that are needed to decolonize our systems and structures.

Curator's Statement

Tracey Kutschker

The Call for Interest in an exhibition about wildfires was put onto the Arts Centre's website in February of 2021, inviting artists to address some of the topics around BC's historic relationship with wildfire. This was prompted by many conversations in the gallery during the Dust to Dust exhibition in late 2020, about death, grief, loss and transition. Wildfires came up frequently as a loss or transition that many experienced after the various BC Interior wildfires over the past 20 years, so it was natural to create an opportunity for artistic expression on the topic.

Then came the heat dome of summer 2021 and all the wildfire emergencies, with displaced families, whole communities burning to the ground, and the carcinogenic blanket of smoke that fell upon us all. The artists who had already submitted their proposals were calling to talk about the urgency of the situation. Some had experienced evacuation, and all of them had experienced that one apocalyptic day when the sky turned red and we thought it was the end times. New ideas had emerged, and the exhibition took on a new meaning. It was a chance to deliver messages about the climate crisis and ways to mitigate this global catastrophe.

I selected artists from all over the province as well as locally: Liz Toohey-Weise from Vancouver, whose images were created during her artist residency in the Vernon area while the White Rock Lake Fire of 2021 burned nearby, Carol Schlosar from Sicamous whose quilted canvas documents the things we take with us when forced to evacuate, Manuela Koller from Kelowna, whose passion for the regrowth and renewal post-wildfire is demonstrated through her red and black inky paintings, and Lyn Richards from Kamloops, whose fibre forest addresses the communications network between trees in distress. Artists who reside in the Shuswap area have certainly had their share of wildfire emergencies over the last 30 years. My goal was to have a range of media represented among the Shuswap artists, and to include different perspectives.

With a trio of mentors, digital artist Maria Thomas participated in the Marie Manson Virtual Artist Residency from May to July this year. Secwepemc knowledge-keeper Louis Thomas shared stories about Indigenous perspectives on the role of wildfire in nature, while the curatorial team guided Maria in ways to present her concept within the context of the exhibition. Working with these mentors over zoom, Maria shared the ways she was addressing *FireWild's* overarching issue. *To What End* is the digital drawing created to show how many of us are going about our day-to-day mundane tasks while the younger generations are seeing the global climate catastrophe for what it is – terrifying and unabating.

1. Manuela Koller

Magma and Love

acrylic, ink pen, pastels \$240

While fire can destroy the land, the cycle of life continues every day beneath the surface. The fungi kingdom is the great recycler, and in eating death it also creates new life. We know more about the movement of celestial bodies than about the ground beneath our feet.

Manuela Koller is a Swiss-born artist and trained floral designer with over 30 years experience. Her passion for botanical art derives from her florist's diploma, as every aspect of plant life is studied and understood. Applying her knowledge of colour theory and composition from this art form, her mixed media approach is a vibrant graffiti and artfunk style. Koller explores universal themes and combines her ideas with layers of emotional spirituality, reflected on paper as bold and macabre images.

2. Liz Toohey-Wiese

August 4

wildfire ash on yupo paper, \$1800

August 4th memorializes a day during the 2021 fire season where the entire city of Vernon was put on evacuation alert. As a resident of Vancouver and a frequent visitor to the North Okanagan this was Toohey-Wiese's first experience of being close to the danger of wildfire. With strong winds pushing the White Rock Lake fire towards the eastern side of Okanagan Lake, there were fears that spot fires may start within the city limits. On a local Facebook page, she found a post in which locals were posting images of burnt bark, twigs, moss and debris that had been carried by the wind across the lake to fall from the sky and into their yards. The image of a hand holding a piece of burnt debris to illustrate the size of the detritus became a repeated image of memorialization: a human hand tenderly cradling a piece of a destroyed tree. These paintings are made from the ash of the Mount Christie wildfire near Penticton, one of the few fires in the Okanagan in the relatively quiet 2020 fire season.

Liz Toohey-Wiese is a settler artist residing in Vancouver on the homelands of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səlílwətaʔ (Tsleil-Waututh) peoples. She holds a MFA from NSCAD University and a BFA in painting from Emily Carr University. She has exhibited in both solo and group shows across Canada, in addition to having been an artist in residence at the Sointula Art Shed, Island Mountain Arts and the Caetani Cultural Center. Deeply interested in the history of landscape painting, her work contemplates contemporary relationships between identity and place. Her most recent work explores the complicated topic of wildfires and their connections to tourism, economy, grief and renewal.

3. Kathy Atkins

Aspen Groves: Resiliency & Adaptation

mixed media

Aspen Groves No. 1 (oil on canvas)	\$950
Aspen Groves No. 2 (oil on canvas)	\$950
Aspen Groves No. 3 (oil on canvas)	\$950
Fire Strips (mixed media on mylar)	\$100

For the creation of this piece, Atkins set out to focus on a species of tree that had the potential to resist, survive and flourish when confronted with the tremendous force of a wildfire. She chose aspens, not just for their ability to resist and adapt to fire, but for the colour and the interplay of sound and shimmering lights that occur when their foliage is rustled by the wind. Behind a layer of tinted mylar strips a grove of aspen oil paintings resides, juxtaposing the aggressive palette of an overpowering and quickly moving wildfire with the natural barrier of the aspens.

According to scientists, the higher water content of aspen creates a more humid and fire-resistant environment in the trees' understory. Due to economic factors however, aspens have historically been viewed as disposable competitors in forests where timber sales are paramount. The eradication of species like aspen was meant to make room for the more commercially valuable conifers. With many of us living in the shadows of forests, and increasingly hot and dry summers, Atkin's work seeks to question how the resiliency of aspens and their potential to act as natural fireguards can translate into a shift of their perceived value.

Kathy Atkins grew up in rural communities and came to Salmon Arm at a young age. Atkins' relationship with art began as a result of her parents' passion for living on remote ranches. While they may be gone now, their love of wild places acts as both her inheritance and the inspiration for work. Atkins studied Design Fundamentals at SFU and has utilizes Design Principles in her own teaching practice. Working primarily in oils, Atkins has also recently branched out to include mixed media in her depictions of Shuswap landscapes.

4. Patricia L. Smith

Mid-Day Dark

mixed media, \$4500

Despite the acknowledgement of climate change by scientists and progressives alike, heat-domes and lightning strikes continually spark fires and fill the summer skies with thick wafts of smoke. During this time we attempt to survive, air conditioners breaking, asthmatics wheezing for breath, trees exploding and hectares of Earth-Anchors ruined.

In the summer of 2021 Patti's family braved the Shuswap River. Along with their Northern Grandsons, they skimmed across the sandy shallows. While the air nearest to the surface of the water was comparatively clear, the view outwards expanded into an oppressive hot breeze that

was thick with black ash from distant burns. It spelled doom. The smoke came swiftly, condensing until even the streetlights that had come on in mid-day were obscured by the haze. Memories turned to the Fire Storm of 1998, when Salmon Arm residents hurriedly rescued their most precious belongings in panic induced escapes at dawn. Suddenly a home became a ghost town and military trucks rolled alone through the grey-curtained streets. What mattered is that the children were safe, stuff is replaceable. Thankfully, the violent winds that were predicted overnight did not arise, and a collective bullet was dodged.

Patricia L. Smith studied visual arts at Okanagan College in Kelowna and continued on to earn a B.Ed in arts education from UBC and a BFA from TRU. Patricia, known as Patti by her friends, has lived and exhibited in Salmon Arm for over thirty years, raising her sons and teaching in public schools. Smith has taken and taught many workshops, seminars, and in-services, loving the mix between the academic and atelier worlds. She considers herself fortunate to live, work and play in the culturally rich Shuswap area within the unceded Secwépemc Territory, where the opportunity to collaborate with artists of all descents is vast. She works in both 2D and 3D media, choosing materials based on what is best suited to the piece's concept.

5. Lyn Richards

What Have You Done With My Unicorn?

mixed media

Five years ago, Lyn Richards woke with a vision of tall trees with light gathering in their crowns, then running down through branches, boles, and roots to fan out through a web below her feet to other trees: an image evoked by Suzanne Simard's discovery that trees share nutrients through the fungal web in the forest soil - life sustained through collaboration and mutual support.

Forests ravaged by wildfire always shock Richards: black trees, heat-bleached leaves, eerily pale soil. But where saws fell fire-weakened trees, fresh wood is revealed beneath the charred bark. Beyond grief and destruction, wildfires can show enduring values at our core. Richards still shivers when she recalls the ranchers' trucks hauling horse trailers into her community as folks evacuated Pinantan Lake in 2003, remembering their compassion and courage to save someone else's horses. Fire does not take everything from us however, and just as wildfires can be slowed by groves of aspen and forests can help mitigate climate change, by meeting one another in care and generosity we can ease a wildfire's damage to our hearts.

After a career as a clinical psychologist, Lyn Richards completed a BFA in Kamloops, BC where she resides. Her drawings, paintings, photographs and installation work address social justice and environmental concerns. In the past few years her visual art practice has focused on large scale installations of knitted and felted trees activated by programmed light which seek to evoke resource-sharing in forest ecosystems. She has also written reviews of visual art exhibitions in Kamloops. Richard's work can be found on social media under the name lynrichards5.

6. Carol Schlosar

K42078

acrylic on canvas, \$2800

K42078, the Two Mile Road Fire of 2021, brought sudden immersion into the irrefutable consequences of climate change. In a few hours, more than a thousand people evacuated as they faced the previously unimagined possibility of permanent displacement from the community they loved. Referencing a quilt in the classic Fool's Puzzle pattern, the painted forest and handwritten lists share each square in a delicate balance. Quilts are both history and art, and by their nature, allude to women as narrators of loss, reclamation and restoration. This painting speaks to the evacuation, the loss of environmental innocence and the choices sixteen women made when challenged with what was important and irreplaceable.

Carol Schlosar is a painter, sculptor and print-maker who works and lives in Sicamous, BC. In addition to teaching music full-time, she recently graduated with her BFA from Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, receiving the TRU Medal in Fine Arts.

7. Manuela Koller

The Cycle of Life Continues Every Day, Under our Feet

acrylic, ink pen, ash and coffee \$600

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8. Myrna Button

Smouldering

mixed media

Myrna experienced the unbelievable power of the Fly Hills wildfire when it swept through her property during the same time it threatened the City of Salmon Arm in 1998. Later when she returned, she was confronted with the acres of debris and destruction that took her future home/studio (now renamed Firestorm Studio) and left the dense black evidence of its fury. Button marveled at how fickle the fire was, considering that which was untouched and that which

was destroyed. She also noted that amongst the debris was a hidden promise —the embers— ready to come alive and rage once again. The collection of materials in *Smouldering* includes pieces of melted metal from what was once the building materials of her future home.

Myrna Button was born and raised on a ranch in Southwest Saskatchewan. She moved to the Western Arctic in her early twenties where she lived until 2013. Button began spending time at her property in the Salmon Valley in the early 90's, and in 1998 she witnessed firsthand the devastating wildfire that swept through the entire area. Button has found that experiences like wildfires are engraved into one's mindset and that they ultimately become expressed and processed through artistic endeavours.

9. Vanessa Skotnitsky

The Climb

photograph, \$500

This piece was created on location at Mara Lake in the summer of 2021. A wildfire had been growing in that area for several weeks and Vanessa's family were among the many who became evacuated. When the evacuation notice was lifted, Vanessa went to the lake to take this image in the smoke created from the fire. It represents how she felt during the evacuation, as though she wanted to find a way to climb out of the smoke. Even on the water, there was no escaping the thick and oppressive blanket of smoke and ash that covered most of the province that remarkable summer.

A Shuswap-based artist, Vanessa Skotnitsky received her first digital camera in 2008. After completing a diploma in social services in 2010, she became a stay-at-home mom. During this time, she was able to expand her skills in photography and photoshop through online resources. Her work eventually evolved towards the magical and whimsical, and her images are frequently sought out by publishers for book covers.

10. Lisa Figueroa

Souls Going to Heaven

acrylic on canvas, \$4900

On July 21, 2021, Figueroa spoke to her neighbour, saying "the fire really picked up overnight...It's burning towards the south and the winds are pushing it towards Swansea Point". As the fire slowed down and sped up over the following weeks, she watched from the westside of the Sicamous Channel and wondered when the fire would die out.

The view across Mara Lake that greeted her as she walked her yard and traveled between home and her Salmon Arm studio was one of overwhelming devastation. What astonished Lisa however, was that once the air started to clear up and the first snow covered the Mara and Owlhead mountains, plumes of smoke could still be seen spewing up from the ground. This occurrence of

“Flare Ups” continued into the fall and winter, and it seemed as if the fire wouldn't give up. The tenacity of the flames that burrowed into the ground and occasionally leached out into the atmosphere was perhaps that which lingered the longest with Figueroa, acting as inspiration for *Souls Going to Heaven*.

This piece is dedicated to the memory of Figueroa's neighbour Carmen Gisi.

Creation relaxes Lisa's mind. When in new natural environments, Lisa moves slowly, taking time to adjust to nature's rhythms. She allows herself to experience both real and imaginary sensations, letting them intermingle until they form a hybrid of place and time. Capturing this ephemeral sensation on canvas is the goal. The attribute of movement is felt in Lisa's work and is expressed through colour, design and suggested pathways. Lisa researches the many nature-scapes she paints by exploring the many eco-systems that exist in Western Canada through long walks, hikes, and drives.

11. Maria Thomas

To What End

digital print, \$150 unframed

As a familiar exchange featuring two generations, this piece aims to highlight the transience of normality, our solution to insanity, and how it's possible to drown without water.

Maria Thomas is a professional artist who specializes in digital and 3D art. Born in Kamloops, she was raised in the Secwepemc territory and graduated from Salmon Arm Secondary and has since made a living creating art.

12. Lucy Grainger

The New Normal

photography

Lucy Grainger intended to spend her university years fighting fire on the Rapattack crew to pay for school, but came to find that the wildfire community has a way of making it hard to leave. From May to September, the base near the Salmon Arm airport welcomes a small family of people who spend most of their waking hours together and around the province fighting wildfires. After three of the most destructive fire seasons in BC history, it has become increasingly clear just how taxing the long summers are on wildfire fighters. Wanting to highlight the changes that she saw in her co-workers, Grainger conducted interviews and took photographs of the same firefighters fresh at the beginning of the summer and less fresh at the end.

During the most stressful parts of a summer, people often ask each other the short but unexpectedly loaded question: “How are you feeling?” Wanting to go deeper, Grainger gave her co-workers five more specific prompts: “What has gone well during the season and what has

gone poorly? Tell me about a mistake you made recently and how you dealt with it. When did you feel appreciated or supported by your crew or when do you wish you had felt more supported? What do you wish you did more of or less of? Tell me about a recent moment of vulnerability?" Their responses to these questions are recorded below the images. While these portraits are from the comparatively slow fire season of 2019, after the experience of her own fatigue from last year, Grainger wonders how the devastating season of 2021 would have looked on her friends' faces.

Full interviews with Rapattack Crew

Elena: Before

I think I would do less of getting caught up in the intensity of our work place people demographic. Because some people are super motivated to do crazy running things or be really intense athletically. And I like that on my own terms or challenging myself, but I would do less comparing. Or I should do less comparing because a lot of those things aren't necessarily stuff that I am interested in. It just seems attractive because of the challenge and so I get wrapped up in thinking that I should shoot for the same thing. But I can just come up with my own challenges that are more personalised to me.

Elena: After

I'm just going to come back, do it again, and then maybe I can see after that if I want to apply as a crew leader. I don't really have an obsession with crew leading and I like being a lead hand and I think I don't want to add a bunch of stress to my life yet. I am happy to just take on being good at what I know.

It was nice because everyone was super attentive and respectful, but it felt weird because usually I am used to just toughing things out and not throwing them out into the open. So, that was vulnerable in a good way, I guess. And I always appreciate that in other people, when they show vulnerability. It causes me to trust them a lot more. And it also just makes you human.

Elora: Before

I'm holding on to some resentment towards those who have been holding on to opportunities rather than opening them up for other people to experience. The wildfire program's commitment to seniority can be a bit of a curse.

I forget to include important players in the decisions I make. I don't want people to think they are an afterthought but it's hard to convince them otherwise once I've forgotten about them. I apologized, probably with too much of an excuse and not enough compassion.

Elora: After

I was asked about what I see for myself in the next few years of my career. I have a few ideas but there's also another side of me that is grappling with how these ideas and this career will fit if/when I decide to have a family. I was embarrassed about not having a clear answer to this question because I identify as being a career-oriented person. There was a lot going on in my head and nothing very coherent coming out to answer his question. I hate being misunderstood.

I gave a contractor the go-ahead to dig a small hole for a grounding plate in an archeological site that was previously disturbed by an excavator. Turns out, digging a hole was the wrong decision and I hadn't taken the time to get enough information before making the decision. I followed up with the appropriate people, apologised for being so short-sighted and that was that. A week later I used the experience for a character-building story in an interview. It's easy for me to make a professional mistake, analyze it, learn from it and move on. It's the interpersonal mistakes with close colleagues that are harder to let go of.

Leila: Before

Did more of? Like fire related? We could go along the route of talking to people more, that's just like a general life thing. Whereas, I wish I was less scared of pumps, and less scared of messing up. So that I'd spend more time actually working with pumps. Because I'm always scared to volunteer to do pumps even if it would help me improve. If you can't get the pump started, nobody is getting water and I don't want to be that person.

It's a lot of sitting around and not just even waiting for a particular thing. It's just having things change on you all the time and so you're like expecting one thing and then it changes. It's the hurry up and wait for 14 different things that never actually end up happening. It's way more exhausting than it seems like it should be, because you're not doing anything, but you get to the end of the day and you've gone through four different plans and not done any of them and you're gassed.

Leila: After

I am considering applying for CL next year but have been really going back and forth about it. A few times this summer I had discussions with various current CLs about why I don't want to, in particular, why it scares me. I'm not really one to talk about my feelings and have a hard time admitting weaknesses, so having an open discussion about being scared of the responsibility for essentially the lives of a crew terrifies me. I want to believe that I would be able to handle myself in an emergency situation, but truthfully, I've never been in any sort of situation even close to an emergency. I don't know how I would react.

Lisa: Before

I wish I had more confidence in my decisions and second guessed myself less. I often let other people influence my decisions, which sometimes can be helpful but often it is not. I wish I had more confidence in my knowledge and experience. I also often overthink decisions even after I've made them which ends up being a waste of time and energy.

Lisa: After

It was a much-needed slower season after two very busy ones. It was a really good season for learning and mentoring as the fires we did get were less stressful and I felt like we had time to breathe.

I felt appreciated by my crew when we did our year end debrief. As a pair, they had met before our meeting to come up with feedback for me. Throughout the season, we had all made an effort to be open with each other and to give each other feedback in a timely matter. We also took the time to acknowledge mistakes. It made for a supportive, team atmosphere that I really valued.

Lucy: Before

I wish I took more time to learn the things I don't fully understand. I feel like I have been firefighting for long enough now that I should know how it works. But there are still simple things that trip me up.

Lucy: After

I almost missed my best friend's wedding this summer. I had accepted that I wouldn't be there. And then when I was there, it was amazing and it was also a painfully clear example of the many experiences you miss out on during a busy summer.

When I was working in Alaska this year, I very verbally and clearly articulated "no" and it was continually ignored. I had felt practiced in saying no and having that be respected. It was worrying that for someone else or even for myself a few years ago, I would have just given up and accepted that my no would be ignored. In the end, I held my ground, but it was scary to see myself revert to being passive. I was trying not to hurt his feelings, trying not to make him angry. The whole thing didn't make me angry until a couple of days later. I felt like since I was a crew leader and in a position of power, I should be past that. I should be able to say no and have someone listen to and respect that the first time.

Nicholas: Before

I lost the keys to the IA (initial attack) truck last week and that just reminded me of it, I haven't done anything about it, I was supposed to go back and look for them.

Mike and I had a pretty heart felt conversation about how we are both feeling related to his accident. We definitely both opened up, not that we haven't both done that before but, I think that can be especially hard once you've moved on from something, at least temporarily, to go back and be like "oh actually I'm still not fine from something like that." Because you feel like you should be over it.

Nicholas: After

Caleb always prints off pictures and puts them in frames at the end of the year, so he did a couple cute ones. He got a little magnet one for my bathroom locker of us up in Alaska. It's one of those dinky little Alaska tourism frames. And he gave me another full sized one for my cabin. That always makes me feel good and appreciated. I've got three years of framed Kilo photos from Caleb.

I could have smoked fewer cigarettes. That probably would have been best for everyone. I never found the keys to the IA truck, Larry-O, but another set of keys materialized! Which was really weird. Somehow, we have two sets of keys.

Lucy Grainger was raised on Secwepemc territory in Salmon Arm, BC where she has returned for the past nine summers to fight wildfires. She graduated from Quest University Canada in 2018 where she specialized in visual representation in children's literature. After her first year on the line, she was surprised to find that her camera was not full of the wildfire and landscape shots she had anticipated. She had instead captured the quiet moments with her crew in between lightning busts and long days. The beauty and the grit of the people that she encountered is what continues to motivate and pique her curiosity.
