

## “The Meaning of Wood” Curator Statement

There are probably as many paintings, photographs and sculptures of trees as there are trees. But many trees meet fates not so frequently portrayed: harvested and shipped to other markets, conserved for biological benefit and recreation, subjected to forest fires or windstorms and so lost to the use of humans and other species, milled and turned into functional products, and so forth.

*The Meaning of Wood* provokes thinking beyond individual tree portraits into the process and significance of trees becoming wood. It is a paradox of our language that “woods” means a living forest and “wood” means the material of products and commerce. Our language is permeated by tree metaphors – a problem has its “roots,” software programs have “branches,” railroads have “trunk” lines, we ourselves are “stiff as boards” or we “slept like logs.”

This is not an inconsequential topic: global forests are carbon sinks,<sup>i</sup> rich nations pay poor ones to retain forests for carbon sequestration, and counties in Washington still depend on timber sales to fund education and public safety. Our region has deep roots<sup>ii</sup> in many of these activities. Hosting such an exhibit invites discussion of the community’s history, economic health and values.

This invitational exhibit includes artists from all across western Washington and northern Oregon. It offers diverse media: painting, photography, printmaking, assemblages, fashion, sculpture, even a game. It ranges from the days of the spotted owl protests<sup>iii</sup> to contemporary times and presents an array of social viewpoints.

Curating the exhibit has reminded me how much we treasure both “wood” and “woods.” As a society we attempt to derive both commercial and spiritual value from forests simultaneously. We can debate and disagree about what the highest and best uses of the resource are: experiences of nature? Biodiversity bank? Houses? Furniture? Objects of beauty and contemplation? Valuable export category? Or pallets and toilet paper tubes?

Our human nature responds to the rich sensory qualities of wood. Even dead, wood reminds us of life. We will never want to be without it around us.

--Suze Woolf

---

<sup>i</sup> Mature trees are approximately 45% carbon. A burned tree is only about 2-3% carbon and has surrendered its carbon into the atmosphere.

<sup>ii</sup> See what I mean about those tree metaphors?

<sup>iii</sup> The Endangered Species Act was passed by Congress in 1973. The first timber buffers were proposed in 1986. After several lawsuits, set-asides in old growth forests were upheld in 1994. In 1995 it was ruled applicable to private land. However, studies showed that logging jobs had declined by half before the original listing, and a Forest Service study claimed that only 400 jobs have been lost in Washington due to the Northwest Forest Plan. Despite the ban, the spotted owl population continues to decline.