

Discovery Trail

A lacquered tree round adorned with an image of a salamander marks the beginning of the Discovery Trail located at the HJ Andrews Experimental Forest headquarters. Along the trail you will find no signs or kiosks designating an area or object as particularly “discover worthy.” There is an invitation at the trailhead to discover, but it does not dictate what that discovery should be, or when it should happen. The gesture of placing the marker at the trailhead, and no more, succinctly describes the nature of this complex place perfectly. It is an invitation to you, the visitor, to discover both your questions and your answers.

In 2012, as a stranger to this forest, I spent ten days at HJA in pursuit of an idea. Fred Swanson, a geomorphologist by training and an art-science connection-maker by passion, took me on a day-long tour of some of the sites. By the end of the day I was so overwhelmed that I could not effectively process my experience in the forest. I felt I had walked into a deep, dark abyss of the unknown, and I could not come up with any idea, neither a good one nor a bad one. I feared that my time there would be spent wandering around aimlessly with nothing to show. It ended up that my fears were unfounded. That does not mean that I did not wander around HJA aimlessly, because that is primarily just what I did. However, wandering around that complex landscape proved to be a very valuable experience that continues to serve me well.



Leah Wilson, *Beetle Drawing I*, Gouache on Paper, 30 in. x 22 ½ in.

My seemingly aimless wanderings are a means to develop a deep knowledge of the place without being limited by a defined or specific goal. The more I know of it, the more questions I can ask of it, and I like to think that the more I know of it, the more the forest will be willing to reveal itself to me.



Leah Wilson, *Piezometers at Watershed One*

One notable rainy day in October, I lugged my camera gear down a steep set of wooden stairs on a hillside to the gauging station at one of the creeks to find a graduate student systematically checking an array of piezometers that extended up the creek. We both gathered data – mine visual and his numeric – that we would be using to try to find answers to our respective questions. The specific questions and perspectives that we brought to that place directed what we constructed to explore possible answers.

During my wanderings I have often come across evidence of other questions scientists have asked of the forest. I have a particular fondness for two locations – one where the ground is wrapped, not unlike a Christo wrapped island, and another where you can find deliberately placed sticks arranged in a row inside small tents or laying directly on the ground without a tent. These discoveries of science in action always delight me. In appearance, they are akin to finding the work in progress of site-specific art installations. However their intention is not of art inquiry, but of science inquiry. Their forms resemble art enough for me to feel that what the scientists and I are engaged in at the forest are related. We are creating in the pursuit of a

deeper understanding, knowing that our work will lead to yet more questions - ones that we could not conceive of asking without first working through our respective processes of discovery.

An inevitable result of discovery is that it reveals not only a deeper understanding, but also an even greater recognition of our own ignorance. It may sound as if inquiry is a Sisyphean effort, but it is the discovery of new questions in the pursuit of understanding that is so intriguing. It is the driving force in both science and art. The process of making art is the act of bringing into the world physical manifestations of the pursuit of greater understanding, be it of materials, form, or concept. Once the artwork is completed, there is a fleeting sense of elation. But it is ephemeral and, when it soon dissipates, it is replaced by the desire to once again walk back into the unknown. In the unknown lies the exciting potential of all possibilities. This is the territory both artist and scientists inhabit.

For *Rot: The Afterlife of Trees*, my thinking began incoherently. Rot and decay are not subjects that would naturally attract my attention. It was only after I followed Dr. Mark Harmon for a short while at his log decomposition site that I could begin teasing out a nascent idea with which to work. I did not know enough at the onset to even understand what to look for. I listened to him enthusiastically describing white rot and other fungi found on wood. I had never heard someone talk about rot with such passion! It was infectious. I returned a week later to spend an extended weekend splashing up Lookout Creek and blazing my own trail through the dense forest searching logs for rot and fungus. My attention was focused on something novel to me. I now stopped at places where I would not have previously stopped, and was rewarded by finding some truly strange and beautiful forms.



Leah Wilson, *Wrapped Stump*

Experiences like this differentiate this forest for me from others. There are many people here who, like the Discovery Trail placard, encourage me to begin to discover again and again as they are doing. What a vibrant environment for an artist to wander aimlessly and make art in response to wondering what it would look like if...!

I hope that the Discovery Trail remains the way that it is now rather than conforming to the expected form discovery trails typically take. The path that conveniently provides the answers may be the easier and more comfortable path to travel, but it is also far less intellectually and emotionally satisfying. The freedom to be able to walk into the unknown and find no answers readily available encourages creativity. It is the path that scientists and artists alike choose to take. It is the reason that we can be found wandering in HJA.

Leah Wilson, 2015

Rot: The Afterlife of Trees

Exhibition Catalog, The Arts Center, Corvallis, Oregon