The Hemlocks! The Hemlocks! Grief and Celebration
An exhibition of works by Lowell Hayes

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts
Appalachian State University, Boone NC
December 3, 2010 – March 19, 2011
Why Hemlocks? Why Art about Trees?

Ever since people have made art they have made art in response to what they have experienced as emotionally important; the sacred, the frightening the beautiful. Even in the brief recent period when we have made so-called non-objective art, art about art itself, we are still making art about what we consider important, and strong feelings may be involved. Indeed art which explores line, form, color, texture and other components of art is important and edifying. And I love it. But for me as an art maker work which is more integrated with our whole existential reality is more motivating and satisfying.

If we care about anything, even about our own selfish existence, we have to care about our biosphere, about the possibility of living. I read somewhere that the great Mexican muralist Alfaro Siqueiros said that art should “elevate and intensify our life experiences.” It is surely worthy work for art to do that for our emotional connection with our biome and our biosphere.

The eastern hemlock is a protagonist in the very serious drama of life’s struggle to survive on Earth.

Dedication:

This group of works and this exhibition are gratefully dedicated to each and every person who has contributed to the effort to control the hemlock woolly adelgid, raise public awareness and conserve the eastern hemlock and the Carolina hemlock.

For background information on the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Infestation visit these links:

Production & Evaluation of Hemlock Resistance

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Action Team.
Saving Our Hemlocks from Hemlock Woolly Adelgid
http://savorshemlocks.org/

Hemlock Woolly Adelgid Initiative: Protecting the Hemlock Resource in the East

USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry: December 17, 2011.
News Release: Glimmer of Hope for Northeast Hemlocks

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Artist Statement

This work is about Hemlock trees and what they might mean to us. The Hemlocks are in crisis because years ago a small aphid-like insect, the Hemlock Woolly Adelgid (HWA), invaded the Eastern Forest where it has no natural predators. According to the USDA Forest Service, half the range of eastern Hemlock is now infested, and the entire eastern Hemlock range is at risk. The Forest Service estimates that in New Jersey and Virginia, Hemlock mortality in heavily infested stands is at 90 plus percent.*

The loss of the Hemlock parallels the devastation of the American chestnut, which, early last century, changed the ecology and economy of this whole continental region. Other hardwoods soon filled in, but none bore the beautiful flowers, fine durable lumber or the plenteous foodstuff of the chestnuts.

Losing the Hemlocks threatens to break the interconnected ecological chain in this part of the world. The forest will be a bit dryer and less shady; not as much moss, fewer ferns, the streams will be warmer, and all stream life will have to adapt or disappear. Aesthetically, there is no replacement for the softest, most graceful of evergreen foliage. Visually, no other evergreen so flatters the hardwoods. Pines are dramatic; spruces are rather formal. The special ambiance of a Hemlock grove, or of a woods of Hemlocks and hardwoods, may vanish.

In the universities and in the government agencies that manage our forest resources, as well as in the private community of arborists and landscape professionals, there is a growing cadre of scientists and foresters who are working with the Hemlock crisis. They know that there are no easy or cheap solutions. How do you deal with a problem as big as the range of the Hemlock? Progress has been slow, money scarce and action late, while the public is mostly unaware and/or indifferent. But there is progress; the dedicated cadre is still growing, some trees have been saved, new methods of treatment and control are being developed, and more people are becoming aware and caring. This exhibition is gratefully dedicated to all who have contributed and worked on solutions. Our panel on March 17 will deal with controlling the HWA and caring for Hemlocks.

We are so alienated from the natural planet. We’ve worked at changing it, converting it into a habitat more “suitable” to our economic and social requirements. In fact, we’ve treated the very biosphere as a disposable resource. We’ve settled, extracted, built, chemicalized, converted to waste, killed, poisoned, dug, mined and blasted, feared and conquered until what little is left in a natural state has to be museumed and can only be visited—if and when we can find the time.

Still, there remains an emotional response to natural beauty and grandeur. That response may be fear or it may be a wistful attraction. It is often a need to “have it” or to “live here” (with house and a lifestyle that will change or destroy that which attracts us.) Or, the response could be love. Love does not seek to change the beloved, but to know it better, delighting in it more. Love wants to sustain and protect. Love suffers and grieves with the suffering and loss of the beloved.

This work is all about loving the natural world, about its beauty, its tragedy, and our existential dependence on it. We would not, cannot even, be without it. We cannot abuse it without impoverishing and threatening ourselves. We cannot respect ourselves if we cannot respect the natural world. Estranged from it, we cannot understand ourselves; we cannot know anything that is really true or valuable; we cannot experience life in its fullness. If the work I make should somehow enhance someone’s experience (aesthetic, emotional, spiritual) with natural phenomena, then it is worth it.


Catalog of the Exhibition

with Introduction by Hank Foreman
and Artwork Photography by Andrew Miller

Snow Frozen On
2008, Catalog number 1, Page number 8

Backlighted Grove
2007, Catalog number 2, Page number 11

Old Growth Imagined
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Romancing Heaton’s Branch
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Three in Sky
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Downpour in the Smokys
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Hemlock with Red Lichen
2009, Catalog 7, Page number 18

Virgin Cumberland
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Family Group
2010, Catalog number 9, Page number 22

Portents: Site Specific Installation for Mayer Gallery
2010, Catalog number 10, Page number 24

Among Hemlocks
2006, Catalog number 11, Page number 25

Laurel Creek Gorge
1984, Catalog number 12, Page number 26
Snow Frozen On
2008
acrylic and natural materials on canvas
118" h x 84" w x 3" d

Snow Frozen On (detail)
Introduction

In June of 2010, I found myself nestled in the Cascade Mountains as part of a cohort of visual arts professionals really digging deep to explore our core values, skills, and experiences as they relate to making a meaningful difference through our work with the visual arts. Early each morning I would rise up and walk the dappled trails finding a new spot to sit and study the lines of the moss covered trees, to discern the rocks half hidden by the trail mud, and to watch the thick amoebic swirls of life on the soft breeze. Living in Boone, this was a place I knew… the forest. However, the subtle and more overt differences combined to make the experience completely and shockingly new. Yet I felt safe, at home, disconnected with everything superfluous and connected with all that mattered. This was my gift from the trees.

During these encounters with the trees I often thought of Lowell and his upcoming exhibition: the way his eyes twinkle when he describes the color of a rock face, the fragileness of a fern, or, with wonder and not grudge, the root that almost brought him down. There in the alien woods I understood even more the importance of this new work. These pieces, employing a guerilla assemblage technique developed over decades, are documentary at their very core.

Do they present scenes of environmental beauty and illustrate the great American landscape? Certainly they do, but this is not the story of the hemlocks. Do these works call attention to the devastation of our vast evergreen covered hills? Without a doubt they do, but even this is not the story of the hemlocks. The reality that is laid out so clearly in this documentary is as honest as the dense and textured surfaces of these epic works. Part reliquary, part mnemonic, these works conjure in us the emotions, the homecoming, and the quiet and simultaneous emptying and filling fostered by our time in the trees.

It is inevitable to get lost in the sheer mastery of the assemblage technique and the exquisite passages of paint that combine to form a new space that extends before and beyond the surface. The works create a sense of monumental awe and yet the experience is intimate as your eye runs over each texture, each pattern. This is seeing the forest because of the trees: seeing it in a way that revels in each detail yet pulls you deeper into the environment of the piece.

The journey through this series is as varied and pioneering as hiking along the Blue Ridge Mountains. Scenes open before you and envelope you. This exhibition is in part about grief: grief of this diminished species and grief of our diminished connection to the osmotic experience of the forest. The duality of this exhibition is revealed in the celebration of the remaining wondrous hemlocks, of the hope for survival offered through education, and of the hope offered to us if we accept our gift from the trees.

Hank Foreman, Director and Chief Curator, Turchin Center for the Visual Arts
February 2011

Backlighted Grove
2007
acrylic on unstretched canvas
84” h x 60” w
Old Growth Imagined
2010
acrylic and natural materials on unstretched canvas
9’ h x 19’ w
Old Growth Imagined (detail)

Romancing Heaton’s Branch
2005
acrylic, natural materials and paper on panel
96” h x 48” w x 3”d
Three in the Sky
2006
acrylic and natural materials on canvas
44" h x 38" w x 1 ½" d

Downpour in the Smokys
2010
acrylic on unstretched canvas
84" h x 40" w
Hemlock with Red Lichen

2009
acrylic and natural materials on canvas
84" h x 40" w x 9" d

Hemlock with Red Lichen (viewed from below)

Photo Credit: Frederica Georgia
Virgin Cumberland
2010
acrylic and natural materials on canvas
40” h x 68” w x 3” d
Family Group
2010
acrylic and natural materials on board
138” h x 96” w x 6 1/2” d

Family Group (detail)
Interior View of Portents:
Site Specific Installation for the Mayer Gallery (detail)
2010
acrylic and natural materials on wire
18’ h x 20’ w x 6” d

Among Hemlocks
2006
acrylic and natural materials on unstretched canvas
47” h x 64” w x 5” d
Going, Going, Gone?
Can We Save Our Hemlocks From the Woolly Adelgid?

Anyone who has driven through the High Country in the past five years has witnessed the devastation. Our mountains and forests, once an unbroken sea of lush green, now have grey ghosts jutting from the canopy. Those grey ghosts are what’s left of the hemlock trees—one of the most important part of the wilderness ecosystem on the East Coast—which are being destroyed by the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA), a tiny invasive pest that is killing trees thousands of times its size and sweeping down the East Coast from Maine to Florida like a giant destructive wave. The High Country now sits at the crest of that wave and the clock is ticking for a solution. Luckily, we have an ace in the hole—a battalion of tree huggers.

Over the past five years, I have written 48 stories on the HWA, detailing its arrival, devastation and treatment methods, and chasing down every scientist, entomologist and expert who was willing to troubleshoot solutions so that homeowners, conservationists and naturalists could try to fight this seemingly-impossible battle.

As far as fighting the HWA, my research found that biocontrols, specifically using predatory beetles to bracket and feed on the two annual generations of the HWA, will work if implemented on a wide scale. In the meantime, and on a micro scale, chemical treatments—both intravenous and topical—will save smaller stands of trees quickly, acting as “life support,” as one expert described, until biocontrols can take hold.

Locally, proof of biocontrols working can be seen at Banner Elk’s Hemlock Hill and atop Grandfather Mountain, where stands of old-growth hemlocks are thriving even though the HWA is widespread.

I am not an expert, scientist or entomologist—I am a journalist (and perhaps a bit of a tree hugger, too) who feels honored to have been welcomed into the inner circle of experts who have fought diligently and constantly over the past decade to save our trees. These experts need our support, and we owe it to our ecosystem—and ecosystem that plays a far greater role in our regional economy and way of life than in most locales.

Here’s a look back at the research and the differing viewpoints I encountered along the way.

-Sam Calhoun
You don’t have to look very far to see the devastation.

Whether on a hike, taking a drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway or in your own backyard, the dead limbs hanging from the High Country’s Eastern and Carolina Hemlocks are becoming more and more prevalent as the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA)—a tiny insect that is killing trees thousands of times its size—sweeps down the East Coast.

If you think it looks bad down here, travel 200 miles to the north in Virginia where almost all of the once-abundant hemlocks are dead. The situation only deteriorates as you travel further up the coast.

Our region will look like our neighbors to the north in a very short amount of time if nothing is done and we will lose the hemlocks altogether—similar to how we lost the chestnut trees during a blight in the early 20th century.

Heavy infestations of the HWA—which most likely was introduced into the eastern United States through Asian nursery stock—can kill trees in as little as four years. The dieback of major limbs can occur within two years. One-half the range of hemlocks in the eastern United States is infested with the HWA, affecting 16 states from northeastern Georgia to southeastern Maine.

It’s easy to spot trees infested with the HWA. As the HWA matures—this is done quickly, as the insect produces two generations each year—it produces increasing amounts of protective white woolly wax. Infested branches become covered with circular, fluffy white blobs that usually collect near the base of the needles.

Of course, if you don’t want to look that close, the dead limbs are a dead giveaway.

But there is hope in sight. Chemical treatments—both intravenous and topical—are available in local stores and from tree care companies, and local and national scientists and entomologists are working with predatory beetles in hopes of bracketing the HWA. Bracketing is the process of releasing various kinds of beetles at different times of the year into HWA-stricken areas so that they will feed on the HWA year round. This initiative is led in the High Country by local entomologist Dr. Richard McDonald.

Visitors & readers can start to learn even more about the High Country’s fight against the HWA by searching “hemlock” by clicking to www.highcountrypress.com.

The Turchin Center has worked with Sam Calhoun, the High Country Press and the artist, Lowell Hayes to prepare a packet of more detailed research. This packet can be found here in the gallery or on the website.

For the past seven years, local entomologist Dr. Richard McDonald has conducted experimental releases of Laricobius nigrinus predatory beetles on Hemlock Hill in Banner Elk to fight the hemlock woolly adelgid (HWA). His experiments are proving that the beetles can be established in the area and that they are reproducing, as well as feeding on the HWA.

Pictured above McDonald and Michael Montgomery, of the USDA Forest Service, use an upside-down umbrella to catch the beetles from a hemlock after shaking the tree. Other images include a close-up shot of a hemlock branch infested with the HWA.

Photo Credits: Sam Calhoun, High Country Press and Michael Montgomery, USDA Forest Service.
Fifteen years after the hemlock woolly adelgid spread into the High Country, biocontrols are showing signs of success in a battle where every hemlock in the High Country and on the East Coast could be a casualty. Hemlock Hill in Banner Elk, pictured here, is one of the main testing grounds for bracketing the HWA with predatory beetles.

Local entomologist Dr. Richard McDonald, pictured at left, regularly hikes through Hemlock Hill searching for signs of biocontrols taking hold—and usually is surprised at how well nature will bring about balance if given a little prod.

The HWA is a tiny reddish-purple, aphid-like insect 1 to 2 mm long and about 1/32-inch thick. As it matures, it produces increasing amounts of a protective white woolly wax. Infested branches become covered with circular, fluffy white blobs that usually collect near the base of the needles.

A tree IV is an intravenous tool that works like a human IV but has multiple injection ports that feed chemicals from a reservoir into the infested tree at several locations along the trunk. The reservoir is usually filled with a concentrate of ArborJet, a treatment with imidacloprid as its active ingredient. Imidacloprid is available at Lowe’s Home Improvement and Southern States.

For larger trees, local companies such as Appalachian Tree Care solely use tree IVs because they are the “most reliable and most environmentally responsible.”
Disclaimer: This map depicts counties with established HWA populations that are confirmed and reported by respective state forest health officials. The coarse nature of the map does not provide information below the county level and users should not assume that highlighted infested counties are entirely infested.

Map Produced by:
USDA Forest Service 11/1999

Map Produced by:
USDA Forest Service 5/26/2009

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USDA Forest Service
http://na.fs.fed.us/fhp/hwa/maps/distribution.shtml
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