

Curator's Statement

I grew up in the small logging town of McCall, Idaho. Its economy, built within the watersheds of the Payette National Forest, centered on logging, tourism and work for the U.S. Forest Service. McCall also remains the site for the second largest smokejumper training base in the country. My childhood heroes were smokejumpers. I dreamed of becoming one someday. As a child, *The True Story of Smokey the Bear* was read and reread. I believed that only I could prevent forest fires. Forest fires destroyed forests. Fires needed to be suppressed in order for forests to be productive in the commodities they provide. As a college student, I spent a summer at Utah State University's Forestry Summer Camp and then went on to become a hotshot on the Uinta National Forest travelling the intermountain region fighting fires.

In 1988, I found myself surrounded by the Midwestern cornfields in graduate school at the University of Iowa. The news headlines that summer were of the huge wildfires that eventually devoured a third of the forests in Yellowstone National Park. After three months and over a million acres burned, early autumn snowfalls finally put the fires out. My Father, a hydrologist and a range management specialist for the U.S. Forest Service, was asked to come out of retirement to help organize the re-vegetation of specific sensitive areas within the park. I visited with my Dad about his experience working in Yellowstone. He summarized it by saying that the fires were the best thing that could have happened to those lodge-pole pine forests — after years of fire suppression, once mismanaged wounded forests now had the opportunity to be healthy and whole.

It was in graduate school that I began to see the error of my childhood thinking. In art school no less. While in Iowa, I participated in prairie burns and learned to appreciate the value of fire's beneficial role to ecology. By removing fire from the landscape, the landscapes we were trying to protect were being damaged. I saw the tragic consequences of decades of past fire suppression and exclusion on these landscapes and on others as well. Stamping out the flames from forest biota was akin to ridding other environments of wolves, raptors, coyotes and prairie dogs.

It was with this thinking that I was thrilled to be asked to curate *Fires of Change*. For this project, I selected artists whom I believed could bring a curiosity, an aesthetic, and more importantly, an imagination, about fire and its value to the landscapes we live in. Just as with my own work, I am excited to share the work these artists have specifically done for this exhibit with the public. I believe these artists have created art that will fuel the fires of change for the next generations to come. I want to personally thank each of them for participating in this project. I also want to thank Cari Kimball and Collin Haffey, the original creative minds behind this project, for pushing it forward from that one conversation we had over two years ago in order to make it happen.

~ Shawn Skabelund

