

Learning the Klamath Knot... and Creating a Bureau of Reclamation

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Figure 1. In creating her Bureau of Reclamation, visual artist Becky Evans collects materials from the dried bed of Summer Lake in Lake County, Oregon (2013).

In the early summer of 2010 I discovered a glimpse of Eden. I was on a journey following the great Klamath River from one of its sources to the Pacific Ocean. I began at an upper tributary called Spring Creek. Walking toward the creek's edge I found myself surrounded by gold summer light, turquoise pools of water, and a garden of wildflowers and butterflies. The water in Spring Creek is cold and pure. The constant temperature of 38-40 degrees Fahrenheit, the striking clarity, and the steady water level lead to speculation that the water flows underground from Crater Lake. Looking into the sandy bottom, I saw a collection of unfamiliar, smooth dark rocks. They ranged in size from pebbles to baseballs. Picking one up, I found the rock was slippery, soft, and pliable. Something alive! I later learned that this cold pure water is home to a wonderful, rare species of algae called Mare's Eggs (*Nostoc pruniforme*).

This was one of many remarkable places I discovered while I was "learning the Klamath Knot." The Klamath Knot lies within the mythical State of Jefferson, a unique part of northwestern California and southern Oregon. It is called a knot for good reason. It is a

confounding tangle of geology that makes a home for rare plants and the greatest diversity of conifer species in the world, an interlacement of complex land forms, extremes in weather and politics, and an impenetrable puzzle of competing interests: recreation, agriculture, mining, fishing, logging, dams, and water diversion.

I am an artist and I call the Klamath Knot my home. Living at its western edge, in the shadows of ancient redwoods and near Humboldt Bay, I think of my homeland as a place not defined by county lines and state boundaries, but by its watersheds.

My work could be described as landscape based, working in the plein air tradition. All of my work begins on location. But my idea of working “en plein air” goes beyond the familiar painter’s easel facing a lovely view. My creative process involves walking, waiting, looking, painting, mapping, collecting, and gathering (see Figure 1, previous page). I draw inspiration and insight from the natural environments I explore. This leads me to questions, the questions lead to research, and the answers (or further questions) inform my art.

Each site presents itself in a different way, so the finished work is always created and discovered from this long engagement with time and place, and then with paint or paper or sticks or mud.

Recently, my work has dealt with reclamation and renewal. I have altered over 25 US Geological Survey topographical maps. Taking out the roads, towns, and signs of development on the maps, I reclaim the land, the rivers, and the lakes. One of these maps resulted from seeing firsthand the bloom of toxic algae in the Klamath River behind Copco Dam in the high heat of summer (see Figure 2). The toxic algae led to the devastating fish kill of 2002 and continues to seriously harm the river. I decided I would not wait any longer for the Klamath Restoration Agreements to be implemented. I painted out the dam, reestablished the river’s natural course, and brought the salmon back to the spawning creeks.



Figure 2. “Taking Down Copco Dam,” USGS map, acrylic, graphite, wasp nest; 28 x 20 inches (2013).

Another reclamation project involved collecting sands from over 30 watersheds in the Klamath Knot. I created Klamath Watershed Preserves by placing the sands in Mason jars and using a traditional canning kettle to seal the jars. Those same black, white, green, and ochre sands were used to create an 8-by-8-foot compass to help guide us to be better citizens of our homeland (see Figure 3).

I also made drawings out of the charcoal left from forest fires in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness after I witnessed the astonishing renewal and abundance of growth below the ghost trees... young pines, azaleas, kalmiopsis, bear grass, ripe berries (see Figures 4 and 5, next page).

My Bureau of Reclamation has now widened beyond northern California and eastern Oregon to areas of Nevada and the eastern Sierra. I have continued to work on USGS maps to return diverted water and recreate historic water levels to Summer Lake in Oregon, Pyramid Lake in Nevada, Mono Lake and Owens Lake in eastern California (see Figures 6 and 7, page 178). My work has also included offerings to these damaged bodies of water in the form of vases and bowls made up of the lake's mud, sands, and stones. And I created a Prayer Rug for Climate Change from the puzzle pieces of a dried lakebed. These and other projects are not just about the land, but *of* the land.

I see narratives in the lines of waterways over the Earth's topography. There is language in the pattern of residue and shaped chaos at the high water mark. There are signs and portents in places of extraordinary natural beauty and extraordinary natural disaster. The marks and debris left at the river's edge, the charred wood after forest fires, the lines made by receding lakes all create a form of writing. As I explore my homeland, I find that each day tells a new or familiar, yet eternal story. My work is my translation of what I read there.

Recommended reading: The Klamath Knot by David Rains Wallace (University of California Press, 2003).



Figure 3. Artist Becky Evans creates a compass from sands preserved from the Klamath Knot watershed (2010).



Figure 4. “After the Fires, K'Ldik-kyoh, Kalmiopsis Wilderness,” acrylic, charcoal, chalk, ashes, mica on vellum; 48 x 36 inches (2010).



Figure 5. “After the Fires, tL'oh-tel, Kalmiopsis Wilderness,” charcoal, graphite, mica on vellum; 47 x 36 inches (2010).



Figure 6. “Reclamation—Owens Lake from Lone Pine,” USGS map, colored pencil, watercolor, under beeswax; 20 x 50 inches (2013).

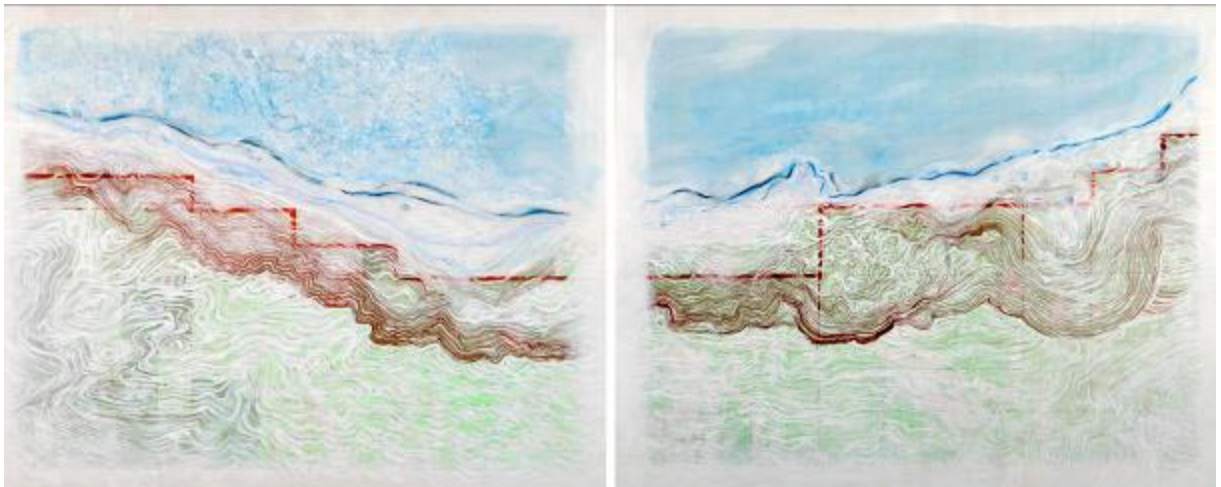


Figure 7. “Reclamation—Summer Lake, West,” USGS maps, colored pencil, watercolor, under beeswax; 20 x 50 inches (2013).