

JAMES RENWICK ALLIANCE FOR CRAFT

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Left: Wood pile burning, 2021. Photo courtesy of Scott Parady.
Right: Anagama woodfire with Scott Parady's "Large Bath" top shelf, 2021. Photo courtesy of Scott Parady.

CLIMATE COLLABORATION: THE EMERGENCE OF COBB MOUNTAIN ART & ECOLOGY PROJECT

By Nancy M. Servis, author, curator, educator, and historian specializing in Northern Californian ceramics

California has been in the midst of a climate crisis for years. Wildfires are a part of the state's ecology, and have been documented in newspaper reports since the late 19th century. According to the state agency CAL FIRE, which began tracking fires in earnest in 1932, eight of the state's 10 largest wildfires have occurred in the last five years. Moreover, two of the state's worst wildfires on record were in Northern California. The August Complex Fire in 2020 and the Dixie Fire in 2021 burned a combined total of 2 million acres, leaving ecological and economic devastation. Wildfires destroy everything in their path, denuding vegetation, killing wildlife, and wiping out homes and businesses. Charred soil and burnt timbers remain only to wash away during the annual spring rains, furthering erosion and the scope of the environmental tragedy. California has been at the forefront of climate change, experiencing its impact and forging solutions.

In 2000, sculptor and potter Scott Parady purchased 80 formerly-logged acres 100 miles north of San Francisco with a plan to develop a wood-firing program while applying sustainable land practices. Over the years, he established an ecologically sensitive settlement with active kilns, residents' housing, and a homestead. His resourceful environmental approach purposefully addressed the severe dryness in Northern California, which leads to more extensive burning as fires quickly consume tinder-dry vegetation. In the tradition of other Northern Californian artists

like J.B. Blunk (1926-2002) in nearby Inverness and Marguerite Wildenhain (1896-1985) near Guerneville, whose historic potteries and studios were sites of cultural influence, Parady constructed and renovated buildings while attending to the land acre by acre. Cobb Mountain Art & Ecology Project emerged, supporting ceramic artists while reinvigorating the climate-challenged region.

Parady has experienced firsthand the devastation wildfires cause. In 2015 the Valley Fire rapidly swept through a corner of his property, threatening his homestead and all he had built. Cobb Mountain Art & Ecology Project survived in part due to Parady's proactive measures, like establishing firebreaks and, as he describes, "burning ahead of the big burn" as a part of adapting to new climate realities. Whereas Blunk and Wildenhain could reliably develop their remote art practices in the 1940s-1980s without wildfire threats, similar art ventures today face an uncertain ecological future.

Parady collaborates with many organizations including the Forest Stewardship Committee, Lake County Prescribed Burn Association, and the Clearlake Environmental Research Center, which uses his property as an example of good resource stewardship. All of these organizations are important in developing informed responses to climate-induced fires and floods. He also consults with registered foresters, biologists, and Native Pomo leaders regarding their successful fire resiliency practices. He strives to nurture a



Scott Parady, "Tree Tumblers," 2015. Stoneware, 6 1/2 x 3 inches diameter (each). Photo courtesy of Scott Parady.

place, "where the ideas of the ancient past meet the intentions for the distant future," an idea borrowed from Robert Smithson, sculptor of "Spiral Jetty," 1970. Parady prepares the land by burning miles of firebreaks and extensively thinning trees. Reforestation of endangered native flora like the Indigenous Cobb Mountain Lupine also contribute to land regeneration and natural biodiversity.

This ecologically-centered mindset influences his work as a ceramic artist. Six kilns operate on the property, the largest being his well-protected anagama which he built with artists in residence. Drought-stressed trees killed by beetle infestation provide much of the wood fuel needed to stoke an eight-day firing. This stewardship of materials and land also reflects Parady's respect for traditional Japanese ceramics and wood kiln practices. In discussing his art practice, he has noted, "For me, [the work] has to reflect the experiences of the maker and the place that inspired it." Renderings of specific trees from Parady's property appear on his tumblers, illustrating this idea. Imperfect, leaning conifers and their weathered lifecycles are visually commemorated on clay. The wall sculpture, "Gravity Feed," 2021, conveys a resilient ecology through the wood-firing process and the deliberately charred and unexpected imperfections in the sculptural form. Both his wood-fired vessels and sculptures embody Parady's symbiotic process. The volatile tool of fire, for both forestry care and ceramic practice, has aligned his pursuit of creativity with sustainability.

As an insightful steward, thoughtful leader, and prolific artist, Parady engages with Northern California's changing climate and addresses environmental truths in his ceramic practice. He is an accomplished artist and steadfast environmentalist who also heads the ceramic department at California State University, Sacramento, where he shares his methodology with future generations of artists. His blended approach to art and ecology fosters biodiversity while sustaining artistic practice.