

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present another collaborative residency/exhibition with St. Mary's Art and Retreat Center in Virginia City, Nevada. Following a residency during May - June 2013, CCAI artist Barbara Holmes produced the Marker exhibition, in the gallery from June 1 – August 25, 2013.

In conjunction with the exhibition, CCAI commissioned Scott Oliver to write the following essay. For essay research, Scott traveled to northern Nevada to visit Virginia City, the Sierra, and to watch Ms. Holmes' art making processes.

We are most grateful to photographers Gerald Holmes and Frances Melhop-Deming for their contributions photographing Ms. Holmes' printmaking processes during the residency. We appreciate the Nevada State Railroad Museum for giving permission to use the circa 1876 photograph of the Carson City lumberyard on the exhibition flier.

Thank you very much to those mentioned above and to St. Mary's Art Center for co-sponsoring the Marker residency and exhibition.

This Side of Oblivion: Reflections on *Marker*

Barbara Holmes' is what you might call a project-based artist. Craft and aesthetics are important to her. Repetition, repurposed materials, and a blurring of the distinction between art and design run throughout her work. However, her practice is defined more by curiosity than by form, medium or technique.

I first encountered her work at a gallery in the Mission District of San Francisco—a collection of hybrid objects made by stacking sections of hollow core doors. The forms resemble architecture or monumental sculpture, but are internally illuminated so also serve as ambient light fixtures. More recently, during her Recology residency—a unique program that hosts artists at the solid waste transfer station in San Francisco—Holmes constructed a series of intricate geometries out of recycled lath and lattice (an approach that has since blossomed into room-sized installations). "The International Color Reference Series," an ongoing body of work wherein Holmes pairs house paint color chips with found objects, also began at Recology. She designs and builds furniture from time to time too. *Marker* is typical of Holmes' practice in that there is no typical.

Before my recent visit to the St. Mary's Art Center in Virginia City, Nevada, to see Holmes in action, the Comstock evoked something of a caricature in my mind. I did not think of the trees in the forests of the

nearby Sierra, nor any of the other natural resources that were necessary for such large-scale mining. Like the more profound ignorance we have of the resources required by our contemporary lives, what is out of sight tends to be out of mind. Even in Virginia City, where the past of the former boomtown is palpable, there is scant evidence of the lumber industry—all of it is buried in the mines.

In the summer of 1859, nearly a decade after the Gold Rush to California, the publicity of the discovery of silver near Gold Hill, Nevada, (part of what would become known as the Comstock Lode) sparked another rush for riches. As surface diggings were quickly exhausted miners began to tunnel underground to reach ore bodies. As the mines grew in depth and breadth they proved more than traditional support structures could bear. Cave-ins were common. By 1860 the Comstock mines were becoming too unsafe to operate.¹

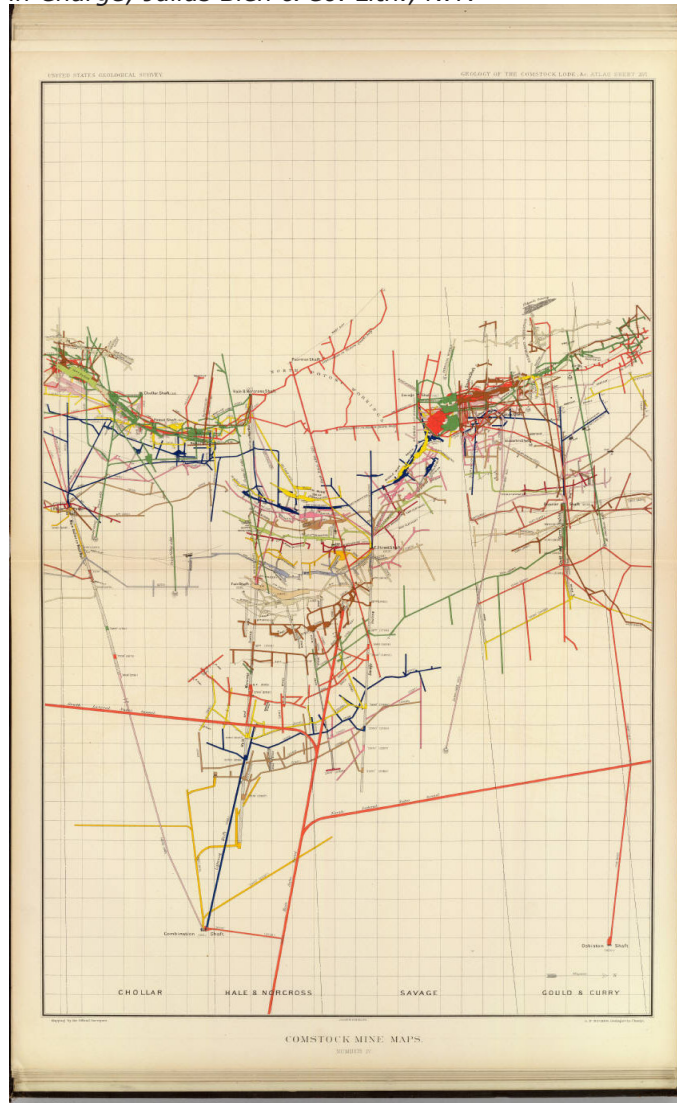
The solution, known as square-set timbering—a modular system of interlocking posts and beams that formed six-foot cubes—was stable, but required vast quantities of timber. Over

the next twenty years Comstock mines, a vein-like network of underground tunnels, some reaching over 3,000 feet in depth, would consume 600 million board feet of lumber. Another 2 million cords of firewood was burned as fuel for steam engines in the mills and mines.



Mining on the Comstock, a lithograph from 1877 depicting the square-set timbering method first developed in the Comstock mines, the various headframes and mills of mines, mining tools, cooling rooms, and shafts. Drawing by T.L. Dawes; Le Count Bros., Lith., San Francisco.

Comstock Mine Maps, Number IV, an 1882 map created by the United States Geological Survey as part of an atlas of the geology of the Comstock Lode. It shows the mineshafts and tunnels in color. The separate colors indicate each separate hundred feet of depth down to the 1500-foot level. The colors repeat between the 1500-foot and 3000-foot level. G.F. Becker, Geologist in Charge; Julius Bien & Co. Lith., N.Y.



Junction of the Virginia and Truckee Railroad at Summit Wood Branch, an 1876 photograph taken at Spooner Summit illustrates the clear-cutting described by De Quille in his contemporary account of the Comstock Lode, *The Big Bonanza*. Photograph by Carleton E. Watkins



You do not *need* to know any of this history to appreciate the intricate, black and white works on paper at the heart of Holmes' exhibition. But the relatively obscure history of the logging industry that supplied the Comstock is precisely what led her to make them. And as a viewer some background significantly enriches, and complicates, the experience of encountering these striking, though somewhat enigmatic images.

Holmes discovered early in her research for the residency that many well-preserved old-growth stumps still stand on the Sierra's eastern slope. So the history of early logging in the area isn't entirely absent from the landscape, you just need to know where to look. With a limited time frame Holmes decided to focus on the area around Spooner Lake, a millpond site dating back to the Comstock days. Stoic old-growth stumps hold fast in the still-recovering forest around the lake, but how to translate their quite stubbornness into an artwork?

William Wright, a.k.a. Dan De Quille, a Virginia City reporter, described the timber situation in 1876 this way:

*The Comstock Lode may truthfully be said to be the tomb of the forest of the Sierra. Millions upon millions of feet of lumber are annually buried in the mines, nevermore to be resurrected... The pine forests of the Sierra Nevada Mountains are drawn upon for everything in the shape of wood or lumber, and have been for many years. For a distance of 50 or 60 miles all the hills of the eastern slope of the Sierra have been to a great extent denuded of trees of every kind...*³

Holmes' idea was to make rubbings of the tops of the stumps. More simply said than done. She first tried making rubbings with wax crayons—something most of us learned how to do as children—but was dissatisfied with the results. Then she hit upon the ancient technique of Chinese rubbings, or *ta pian*. Thought to have begun shortly after the invention of paper in the 2nd century A.D., Chinese rubbings are considered by some to be the earliest form of printmaking, first used to copy stone inscriptions of classic Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist texts.⁴ The technique works on just about any hard surface and can capture incredible detail. It was also appropriate given the history of Chinese immigrants during the Comstock era (Virginia City had one of the largest Chinatowns in the West).⁵

Holmes adapted the tradition of Chinese rubbings to her own purposes—substituting mulberry paper for rice paper, tempera for inkstick, and omitting the wheat paste used to help adhere the paper to the surface of the object—but the process is similar, minus the iPhone: 1) Find suitable stump. 2) Record geo-coordinates with iPhone. 3) Cut paper to size. 4) Tack paper in place with pins (this is the one and only injury sustained by the stump). 5) Dampen paper thoroughly. 6) Mold paper to surface of stump with brush (Holmes does this with a Kiwi shoe polish brush, using plastic wrap as a buffer between the paper and the brush to prevent tearing). Keep paper damp during step 6. 7) Mix tempera pigment with water to proper consistency. 8) While paper is still damp saturate inkpad with “ink” and apply to surface of paper using quick tapping motion. (The Chinese term, *ta pian*, roughly translates to “tapping a sheet of paper,” so “rubbing” is a misnomer). 9) When pigment has been satisfactorily applied allow paper to dry further. 10) Remove paper from stump, lay flat, and allow to dry completely.



The process of making a rubbing is more involved than it sounds. The following series is numbered to follow the text above. Clockwise from upper left: 3) Cutting the paper to size. 4) Tacking the paper to the stump. 5) Wetting the paper with spray bottle. 6) Molding the paper to the surface of the stump. 7) Mixing tempera. 8) Applying tempera to paper. Photographs by Gerald Holmes.

The clipped instructions above do not do justice to the process. Each “rubbing” takes an hour and a half to two hours to make, and requires focused attention, let alone the hours of trial and error she spent in preparation for this project. As with any process each step builds on the last, but molding the paper to the stump is perhaps the most crucial and certainly the most time consuming. Add to this that even a gentle breeze can make the process difficult if not impossible (Holmes took to working in the early morning before the winds picked up.) and you have a better idea of the process. *Marker* is as much about understanding a process as it is about understanding a history. Holmes even made her own tools—a mixing palette and inkpad—for the project. The linkage of method and meaning give Holmes’ exhibition an archeological quality, yet there are no conclusions, only a set of unexpectedly beautiful images.

Holmes' kit of Chinese rubbing tools: spray bottle, shoe polish brush, plastic wrap, tempera pigment cake, and the hand-crafted inkpad and mixing palette she made for the project. Photographs by Gerald Holmes.



Part relief sculpture, part print, the rubbings have a presence that belies their ephemeral nature. And though they are loaded with meaning they are open to association. As tree stumps they have surprisingly unique characteristics. As markers they point in multiple directions. The title of the exhibition, making process, and historical context evoke grave-stones. But the images also suggest LPs, fingerprints, and the layout of ancient cities. A visitor to Holmes' studio during the residency pointed at one of the pieces and declared, "That looks exactly like Milan!" Another, slightly younger visitor, thought it looked like the Millennium Falcon. The images flip back and forth between abstraction and representation—between suggesting and recording, between poetry and prose.

Given the multiple identities of the rubbings—archeological documents/historical markers/memorials/artworks—just how Holmes' exhibition functions, or what it does presents something of a conundrum. Holmes has said, "I knew I wanted to memorialize and preserve an image of these trees." Yes, but rather obliquely. It is true the rubbings may be preserved and the location of the trees digitally recorded for posterity (two mediums that ironically have a good chance of outlasting the stumps themselves). But any artist working today must also contend with the idea of entropy—the tendency for closed systems to seek equilibrium—a state of undifferentiated matter—oblivion.

Ultimately the rubbings face the same fate as the stumps. However, we can witness a clear-cut forest renew itself as it progresses towards its own localized equilibrium. While Holmes' project uses an ancient technique to raise the issue of managing our limited natural resources, it also points to our limited capacity for comprehending large spans of time. For some reason we know all of this will cease to be, yet we continue to desire, create and preserve. For me *Marker* is about this tension within us between abstract knowledge and lived experience. Perhaps I am reading too much into the decaying, fragmented growth rings of the old stumps, but I see in them an awareness about Time—its monumentality *and* its mundanity—and where we place ourselves in relationship to it. Holmes' rubbings really capture only a moment in the lives (or deaths) of the trees they represent. And not for all time, but for right now. It makes me want to go into the forest and find more stumps for myself.

Scott Oliver
Fort Bragg, California
July 2013

Spooner Lake Stump no. 7, May 30, 2013 one of the completed rubbings Holmes' made for Marker. Mulberry paper, tempera pigment, 36" x 71"x .5"



Notes:

1. "Timber For The Comstock" by Thomas J. Straka. *Forest History Today*, Spring/Fall 2007.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. "Chinese Rubbings." The Field Museum website (www.fieldmuseum.org).
5. "On Silver Mountain" by Jessica Escobar. Fourth Ward School Museum website (www.fourthward-school.org).

Links:

Barbara Holmes
<http://barbaraholmes.com>

"Timber For The Comstock" by Thomas J. Straka (PDF)
http://www.foresthistory.org/publications/FHT/FHTSpringFall2007/FHT_2007_Comstock.pdf

"On Silver Mountain" by Jessica Escobar
<http://fourthwardschool.org/research-archives/teacher-resources/937-2/>

The Field Museum, Chinese Rubbings Collection
<http://archive.fieldmuseum.org/chineserubbings/introduction.asp>

David Rumsey Map Collection
http://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/view/search?sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort%2CPub_Date%2CPub_List_No%2CSeries_No&q=Comstock+Lode&search=Go

The Online Nevada Encyclopedia
http://www.onlinenevada.org/business_and_economy?tag=comstock%20business

"Comstock Lode," on Wikipedia
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comstock_Lode

In 2005, Mr. Oliver co-founded Shotgun Review, an online source for reviews of Bay Area contemporary art, with curator Joseph del Pesco. He was a frequent contributor to Shotgun Review and has written essays and conducted interviews for The Present Group, Southern Exposure, and Art Practical. Oliver holds a BFA in Graphic Design and an MFA in Wood/Furniture from California College of the Arts. His work has been included in numerous group exhibitions at venues throughout the Bay Area and nationally.



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