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I drove two days along the Emigrant Trail from California to arrive at Montello Foundation Retreat for my artist residency. Scarcity and adaptation defined my focus.

In my current work, I use the delicate visual language that European colonial botanists used in their exploratory trips around the globe, often accompanied by military, resulting in exploitation and violence. I'm stealing these visual weapons from my ancestors to instead inspire curiosity, call for communion with our earth-bound neighbors, and offer respite and healing.

Ways to Stay Tender in a Harsh World: Great Basin Desert Notes, watercolor on paper, 6.5 x 6.5 in, 2024



Past That Hill, tunnel book: etchings, paint, tea, cut paper and birch wood, 6 x 3 x 4 in, 2022

One of the first things I noticed at Montello were the island ecosystems under most of the sagebrush. I was painfully conscious of every step my dog and I took off-trail, knowing that cryptogamic soil crusts in the desert can take decades to recover from disturbance.

Dark, crusty, cushion-like mounds under the sagebrush engrossed me. They supported small clumps of grasses and small flowering plants like shaggy daisies and desert paintbrush, accompanied by various lichen; white folded papery forms and hardened clumps of sand sugared with black specks.

I apologetically broke off a few small clumps to bring back to the studio and under magnification, saw stalks of dark purplish-black nested spiky forms, almost like leaves. I let a few water droplets fall on them and yes! Star mosses! They opened immediately and erupted into green, able to immediately resume metabolic activities even after 70 years of desiccation.

A few days later, after a surprise rainstorm, I found the entire expanse of sagebrush ocean lit up with abundant, soft, bright green moss! A million islands of life, here all along.

In May, the Great Basin is a cold desert with incredible winds and thirsty air. My face was often sun- and wind-burnt, and in my vulnerability, I felt an affinity for the evolutionary adaptations to live with spines in lieu of vulnerable leaves, eating light with a fattened stem.

The tiny hairs that cover almost all the leaves and stems in the Great Basin most entranced me. They stop the incredible winds from skimming moisture from their surface, and insulate them from extreme temperatures and UV rays. Smallest, silkiest, most stalwart guardians out here.

I am told, creeping around the desert, to be resilient, to be tender, to be patient.