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I was humbled after a week of witnessing the full range of "personalities" the Nevada backcountry had to show me-from the impressive wind to the absolute silence, to the rainstorms soon nowhere to be found in an endless blue sky. She moved through her wild cycles despite my audience, and I moved through my own perhaps for the first time without judgement or interruption. I found my nervous system immediately relaxed and that this expression of unyielding generosity is what many of us in modernity have begun seeking (and failing to find) in each other. Art, nature and religion have historically been our paths towards feelings of interconnectedness and peace, but many people have been failed by the latter, or

Building the World III, gathered ephemera, handmade paper, water, plaster, wood, variable, 2023





The Word Changer, carved plaster block, 9 x 11 in, 2021

born without access to the former two. Nature is one of our most precious and accessible mirrors, and what I believe to be the closest we have to experiencing the divine both within and without ourselves. She is also by no accident disappearing faster than we can keep up.

On my many long walks through the sage brush I thought about how the skills needed to survive in our cities with compassion, somehow echo what is needed to and appreciate the gift of such rugged and subtly beautiful terrain. Feelings of connectedness, gratitude or even witnessing transcendent beauty are of course easier before a beautiful vista or on a mountaintop, but really have nothing to do with what it is we are looking at but rather how we are looking at them. As an artist, I realize this is one of my greatest tools if not my only responsibility. I am eager to take this energy into my practice, creating more accessible windows from which we might view the sublime, and effectively realize it in ourselves.



Jennifer Down Fitzroy, Australia jenniferdown.com

Acquittal report: Montello Foundation

I arrived at Montello in Spring 2025. At that time, I had two fiction manuscripts under contract with my long-time publisher—a novel and a short story collection—both long overdue for submission. For the past two years I had been preoccupied with caring for my father, who is living with esophageal cancer. Any writing-work had been undertaken in weird slivers of time at my childhood kitchen table, in the day oncology unit while my father received treatment, and in my phone's Notes app.

On my first evening, I walked to the top of a nearby hill and I took a picture: the dusty ground covered in sagebrush, sloping down to the house and my rental car. They were dwarfed by the environment—the enormity of the desert sky, the hills and valleys and dry wash, and, in the far distance, snow-capped mountains.

I had suspected it would take me some time to begin to think like a writer



again, and this proved true. But the beautiful cabin with its clean geometry, blond timber and sweeping views was the ideal place to do just that. When I sat down to work at the simple desk in the spare, light-filled studio, I tried to type without thinking too much. With no internet, I couldn't stop to research, or to look up synonyms, or to procrastinate. Every time I hit a troublesome passage—something I needed to Google, or a phrase I couldn't put my finger on-I typed XXXX, marked it in red, and ploughed on. That is a liberating way to work for a person like me who gets snagged on detail, and who is prone to working each sentence over and over as she goes.



My writing is concerned with the intersections of class, geography, gender, and memory. As both a reader and writer, I've always been invested in the minutiae of place, setting, climate, culture, and so on. I want to give a sense of fullness and realism; a time- and labor-intensive ambition. Many (though not all) of my stories grow from time spent in the locations in which they are set. For me, one of the greatest joys of writing is the earliest phase: the thinking, observation and dreaming that happens before any words make it to the page. There is such pleasure in tuning into the frequency of a new place—its climate, its sounds, its idiom, its myths, its patterns. Its ugliness, too: extractive industries, shadows, shame.

In my two weeks at Montello, I worked on my novel, but I also completed a new short story. The latter sprung from many cold nights gazing at up the starry sky, stupefied by its scale and brilliance.

On sunny mornings I drank my coffee sitting the porch watching rabbits darting between the sagebrush. I worked for a few hours until I grew hungry or wanted to take a walk, then returned to my desk. Every evening, I brought my laptop from the studio to the living quarters. I poured a glass of wine in the same glass tumbler, which I drank while I lost track of time building a small fire in the wood heater. Then I prepared dinner while the light left the sky through the wide windows. Even when I was not seated and typing, I was writing: the whole time, I had the sense of swimming in my work for the first time in months. The time and space was nothing short of a gift: it allowed crucial respite from day-to-day responsibilities and provided the silence and solitude I needed re-engage with my creative practice.



Hope Ginsburg Richmond, VA hopeginsburg.com

The belief that awe and curiosity inspired by nature motivate action on its behalf is fundamental to my work. Integrating video, performance, and social engagement, my practice is transdisciplinary and project-based. Drawing inspiration from the interconnectedness of ecological systems, I foreground collaboration and participation.

I arrived in the desert with the ocean on my mind. Specifically, an underwater habitat that allows human "aquanauts" to survive for days at a time on the seabed. The video that needed editing, M.O. Aquarius Reef Base, is the newest artwork in an ongoing, collaborative project called Meditation Ocean, which is part underwater meditation retreat, part video installation, and part platform for environmental programming. It was quickly obvious that the Great Basin would command full attention.





Meditation Ocean Constellation, M.O. Aquarius Reef Base, Still from two-channel video with ambient scores and nine audio interviews, 2025.

For the first week, my partner and *Meditation Ocean* collaborator Joshua Quarles was with me, and diligently started a two-channel audio composition for the "Aquarius" video. He set up sound equipment in the studio and a binaural mic in the sage, while I unpacked the tripod, borrowed camera body, and lenses that I'd brought for an alternate, more site-responsive plan. Then, on our second full day, wham! Wildfire. We spotted smoke rising over the range to the southeast and instantly realized we'd need to evacuate. Thus began a set of correspondences with distant but ever-present neighbors—Phil and Ros Behenna, Lupe and Tony Cox, and the even farther-afield Stefan Hagen—from New York City, vigilantly monitoring reports. When the winds carried the flames in the opposite direction, we returned to the refuge of the house, thrilled to be back, grateful for the continued support of a new community.

Week two was solitary. I felt awe; aware of every thought that moved across my mind, fragrances shifting in the rain, dusk beetles, and a bit like I'd landed on the moon. I was also gripped by documenting the pink perimeter line ringing the distant burn area. Parallels between Aquarius Reef Base, engineered for human survival in an extreme environment, and the retreat's equally intentional design emerged. With my remaining time, I filmed all the ways the house serves as a habitat, making the experience of this "sagebrush ocean" possible. As I write, we're wrapping up M.O. Aquarius Reef Base for exhibition next month, and the Montello footage is burning a hole in my pocket.

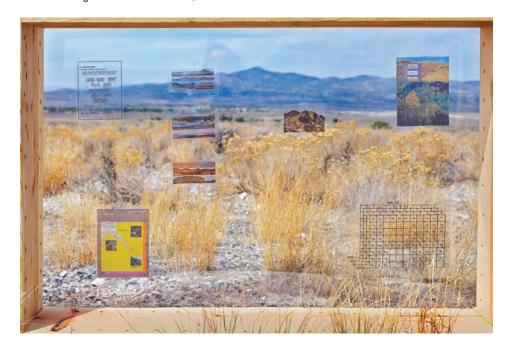


Aaron Hegert Lubbock,TX aaronhegert.com

For some years now my work has been focused on how images guide our understanding of landscape, and through landscape, nature itself. My process is critical and research based, but also has a speculative trajectory- I want to know where our understandings of landscape come from so I can better contribute to new understandings for the future.

For the past 5 years I have been specifically focused on making experimental works in response to how the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) uses photography, visibility, and images as crucial parts of its land management policies. These projects investigate a little known, but highly significant, land management policy called the

Work in Progress at Montello Retreat, 2025





Visible Landscapes, video still, 2023

Visual Resource Management System (VRM). The VRM System is used by the BLM to determine, and reinforce, the "scenic or visual" qualities of America's public lands. The VRM's quantification system both borrows from and upholds a vision of the American West that draws heavily on 19th and early 20th century American landscape painting and photography, and I am especially interested in the tension within the system between the understanding of the American West as a space of wild, unsullied nature, and as an abundant resource, empty and available for use—a tension that evokes the legacy of Manifest Destiny American colonialism more broadly.

The Montello Foundation retreat was a perfect place to ask these kinds of questions because it is located in a landscape that defies expectations. Viewed from a distance, or on a map, my expectation was to find a vast and mostly empty wilderness, but on the ground I discovered a landscape of contact zones and contradictions, where the surface is divided into a checkerboard of ranch lands, wilderness areas, and Bureau of Land Management land. This seemed like a more honest version of the American landscape, a place of natural beauty and solitude, but also a place where natural processes and capitalist processes are entangled, and the expected image of the landscape is frequently punctured by encounters with other realities- agriculture, extraction, wildfire.

The retreat itself feels like an inherently experimental space. Free from schedules and my usual responsibilities, I was able to lay the foundations for a new body of work without any pressure to succeed. I spent the cool mornings and evenings traveling around the valley by bicycle, shooting photographs and making psychogeographic maps, and took refuge from the midday heat in the studio, where I worked on still-life photos and made artists books out of BLM management plans.

Elizabeth Hénaff Seth Wenger

Glendale, NY elizabeth-henaff.net



Elizabeth Hénaff and Seth Wenger are multimedia artists. Elizabeth works in microbiology, art/science intersection, fabrication, and installation. Seth's past work includes sound design, fabrication, moving image, installation and performance.

Our two previous collaborations were as part of Collective Scope. *Precipitate* (2023, Open Source Gallery, Brooklyn, NY) and *Channel* (2024, BioBAT Art Space,





Brooklyn, NY) were centered around the microscopic life that inhabits contaminated environments and include sculpture, live-growing contaminated sediment, large-scale photographic prints, projection design and timelapse footage.

We came to Montello with the goal of editing timelapse footage collected of live sludge growth during *Channel*: one image a minute taken over the course of 12 months.

What ended up happening is that we spent a lot of time observing the desert, and not much time in front of the computer. The timelapse footage concept we came with became a prompt to consider the sagebrush ocean at all of its scales. How can we pay attention to the very small (lichen growing on the sage trunks, soil crusts) or the very large (topographies and banks of clouds travelling overhead)? What requests attention to be slowed down, or sped up? How is it that closely engaging with scale so dramatically changes our ability to observe new things? One most spectacular observation was that the black desiccated moss mounds found underneath many of the juniper and sage turn myriad shades of bright green in just about five seconds after exposure to water!

Time in Montello was expansive. No cell phone distractions frees up time to read, cook, follow or escape the sun around the porch. The folks we met in nearby towns on the way in, or on our only excursion to the hot springs nearby, were kind and welcoming. What a pleasure to spend quiet time in this vast and compelling part of the country.



Stefan Maria Marb Munich, Germany

butoh-marb.de

It is so beautiful, vast and peaceful here (first diary entry on September,6)

My arrival in Montello felt like the proverbial slamming on the brakes of my usual life, and at the same time, a gift in the form of an infinitely wide space.

The first day: early in the morning, a little rabbit came onto the deck and gently drank the dew from the previous night. I watched it in awe and fascination. This little animal was so delicate and sensitive. Then I danced naked in the studio, searching, seeking but also driven, wildly and loudly, by my inner liberated spirits. Afterwards, I was drawn out of the studio onto the deck, where I continued dancing, feeling the wind on my bare skin and experiencing an irrepressible freedom under the vast sky! At lunchtime, I cooked myself a simple meal; the preparation of which was 'orchestrated' by countless desert flies. I spent the afternoon back in the studio, writing my planned book "Butoh - Between Worlds." In the evening, I enjoyed a wonderful sunset in all its colors and shades. I spent the following days in a similar way!

Actually, why was I here?

In 2010, I spent a few days here on this land with the director of the Montello Foundation and two other artists; at that time, we were still sleeping in a tent, and the house that is now complete was only in the planning stages. During those days, we





Montello Diptych I (detail), 2025, Photo: Stefan Hagen

danced several sessions at different locations, which were documented with photos and videos. Now, 15 years later, I felt the desire to once again, alone and with more time, engage in dance with the harsh nature of the cold desert highland. The goal was to explore how my Butoh dance might change in this environment over such a long period of time, *Create a new and unknown Butohbody* – that was my wish.

To trace these changes, I created a video logbook that contained a dance from each day, filmed indoors and outdoors. Afterwards, I watched the individual videos, and YES, significant changes in the dance sessions could be seen based on the set timeline. This was certainly also due to the ever-present nature, which is - thanks to the clever architecture of the house/studio - visually integrated into the rooms. Even when I danced inside the studio, my eyes were simultaneously taking in the outside nature. My physical antennae immediately registered any new weather phenomena, and I once interrupted my flow because, after a long dry spell, it began to rain continuously for three hours. Over time, this pattering rain became a physically perceptible event, which in turn influenced my repertoire of movements. However, the successive changes in the documented sessions were also related to the conscious decision to stay in solitude. By temporarily retreating to this region, where all distractions and civilization are far away, silence and an intense perception of nature came to the fore. Here, the physical and spiritual were able to move closer together in my own perception, and I automatically experienced a natural spirituality that connected me directly to the space, the animals and the plants here. The earth was so close that my bare feet could touch it constantly, allowing the rest of my body to connect with it organically.

We are nature.



Kelsey Miller Portsmouth, RI kelseyvbmiller.com

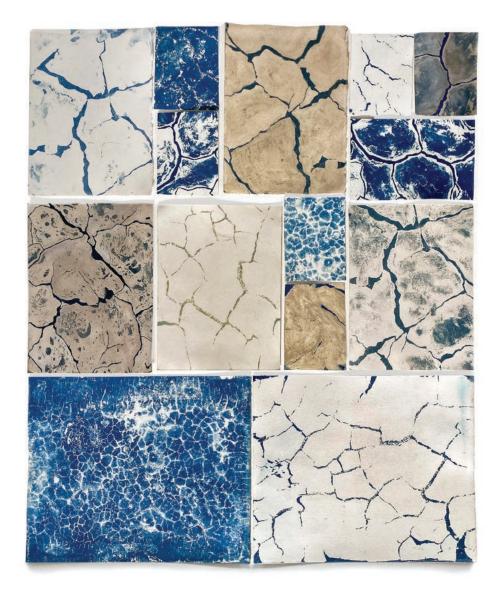
Born and raised on the Caribbean island of Antigua, I am a lifelong explorer of earth, sea, and open space. My studio practice is a translation of my observations—calling attention to aspects of landscape and place. The work is rooted in my profound interest in and connection to the natural environment. I am guided by everyday cycles—the rapid pace of weather, the slow build of archives and observations—toward an iterative practice of recording, responding and altering.

Spending two weeks alone without seeing another human can only be described as a transformative experience. I have never been as clear-minded as I was during my time in the desert, immersed in nature, untethered from my cellphone. Every action was a decision based on what compelled me at that very moment. How remarkable to have the gift of timelessness and the ability to be so fully present; I tried every idea that came to me without judgement. In hours of wandering, I became familiar with the ground—the tracks that came and went each day, the multitude of brilliant flowers that bloomed despite the arid ground from which they came—punctuating the sage brown desert landscape with vibrant colors. I noticed such minutiae as a glint of juniper sap as reflective as a diamond and a thread of spider silk bridging together two blades of grass. I tasted wild garlic and ate pine nuts from the piñon pine.

I did not go with a specific project in mind, but rather with the intention of responding to the surroundings and gathering as much visual information as possible.

Mud Moons, desert earth, 12 x 40 in, 2025





Earth, cyanotypes painted with gouache and mud, 20 x 24 in, 2025

I spent each day following my impulses—walking, collecting sticks, bones and plants; reading, eating, writing and making. The resulting work ranges from cyanotypes to watercolor painting, black & white photography to mud sculptures. Clock time hardly existed. I ate when I was hungry and slept when I was tired.

On my way home from Montello, I texted Stefan and wrote "Back to the real world." to which he responded: "Time at the house in Montello is the real world and the rest is some kind of alternate reality." In every day since leaving, I have tried my best to keep a part of me rooted in that true place of a clear mind and boundless creativity.



Ruben Olguin Bernalillo, NM rubenolguinarts.net

Montello truly is a desert rose, blooming inspiration and solace. This retreat was at an important time in my career, transitioning from an early-career to a mid-career artist. This retreat was to give me time that I don't usually have to really focus and develop a series or the premise of a series of work I would be utilizing moving forward. Arriving at Montello was quite splendid moving through the cliffs and mountains

Shrine, pottery, clay, branches, string, $30 \times 19 \times 20$ in, 2025





through the grassland and to the retreat. This experience was important to leave all my requirements behind, disconnect from the internet, family, friends, and professional responsibilities and just focusing on Art. I made more progress on my next solo exhibition in 2 weeks than I had in the last 2 years. While there I collected a ton of images, video, 360 video, I brought my drone and did some landscape mapping which I will incorporate into a VR experience. I spent time collecting from the landscape and considering the implications of being an artist that harvests from nature. This inspired me to write a guide for artists who harvest nature, which I will publish in my next exhibition catalog. While there I made dozens of ceramics that I fired on site, created a series and new design of "seed pots". I also made a series of prints creating ink and pigment from the landscape. I felt like I was standing in the shadows of the artists, writers, musicians, and poets that came before me. I felt like I had an obligation to be productive and live up to their example. I am truly grateful for being given the opportunity to connect back with nature and integrate into my work and studies.



Sasha Petrenko Bellingham, WA sashapetrenko.org

I am a media artist, a sculptor, a musician and a teacher. I make experiences. Image stills in this essay are static representations of work that is time based and open ended. I kept a journal and wrote several times a day during my residency at Montello. Selected excerpts follow.

Montello Day 2 - Arrived late last night. The road up to the cabin was at points almost impassible. It took me and my Prius 2 hours to cover 20 miles.. I could hardly believe my eyes when I saw the cabin. What a rush!

Montello Day 3 - I picked out Marcia Bjornerud's book Timefullnes to help me relax at night. Critters were announcing themselves and wondering who was the new one in the cabin. The desert comes alive after sunset. Dr Bjornerud's words aligned with a curiosity I had about time, how it seems to happen all at once. I began waking up to see the sunrise.

Montello Day 4 - It is bliss being here. The absolute peace and quiet, the isolation, its a little scary but it wakes me up and makes me feel alive.

Montello Day 5 - It's 5am. Couldn't sleep. Maybe it's whiskey, though I didn't have much last night. Maybe it's just this place, the desert. Ghost winds. Dust devils. Restless lost souls rattling the cabin walls then gone like a dream. Was it a dream?

Montello Day 6 - Late afternoon, it's hot, but just right in the shade. I filled a basin





Lessons from the Forest, part 3, digital video, 5min, 2018

with water and washed my clothes by hand. Looking out across the desert, it felt like time went backwards. As I was any other woman in last 200 years. Am I that different from them, our hopes, our day dreams? Maybe they didn't play electric, but they were likely scrappy, bold, confident, self doubting, dreamers.

Day 7 Montello - Desert Song (play as a shuffle) E, DD, DE - A, AA, EG - A, AA, EG - C, CC, DD

Danced on the deck at dusk. It remains warm. Stay around the cabin II-6. Without shade, there's nothing to protect you from the harshness. The desert does not care. It exists. Learn to live in it. The roads are turning into sand pits. Rock dissolve in time. Geology is history. The past is present and the present is future. This place shows it. Time happens all at once.

Day 8 Montello - I put water in a basin and put it out on Binky's trail hoping it might lure the pack rats and nocturnal squirrels off the cabin at night. A hummingbird flew by more than once today and I swear it looked at me as if to say, finally!

Day 9 Montello - Today I witnessed the sunrise and the sunset. As usual, I rode my bike to the hill to find cell service (8.4 miles round trip). Dropping the bike to walk I/4 mile up hill, I heard the wind rustle as if standing in an evergreen forest. That's when I noticed a mature pinyon pine to my right. The closer I came to its needles, the louder the sound. The pinyon localized and amplified the wind like a shotgun mic through a loudspeaker. Wind through the pines reminds me of the ocean along the dunes. Looking across the desert, I imagine the ocean that once was.

Day 10 Montello - Leaving today, before 8AM. My stay was made short by family matters. I brought my amp and guitar up to the viewing pad and played to the sun as it rose above the range. The way the sunrise paints the sky, pours light across the valley, sometimes, even the birds stay silent. God? Universe? Us. We are gods.

Now the road lays ahead. My stay, though abbreviated, has been vital to my creative research.

I am still reflecting on my time at Montello. Time to listen, to dream, feel alive and vulnerable. Despite the challenges (do not attempt the drive in a Prius. Be sure the composting toilet is oriented properly) in the desert I felt a deep sense of time and belonging. You have to work to survive here. Be smart. Conserve water, energy, be wary of the sun. Share resources.



Tony de los Reyes Los Angeles, CA tonydelosreyes.com

My work centers on small ecosystems along the US-Mexico border as they adapt to and ignore the pressures surrounding them. On-site photographs of inconspicuous plots of earth containing desert varieties of geologic and vegetal matter are given prominence, and the border itself is minimized, purposefully obscured or out of focus. Through the process of painting, these documentations are transformed into personal reactions emphasizing the spectacular collision between the slow, earthly evolutions of "deep time" and their immediate, political penumbra.

Sonic Sculpture, East of Jacumba, 2025, photo-documentation of field recording sculpture; steel and recording device. Image: 22×30 in, sculpture: $108 \times 29 \times 30$ in, 2025





12 "Postcards" in the Montello studio, 2025

For my Montello residency I worked on new small, oil on steel paintings based on these photographs, starting as as loose abstractions, then silkscreened with translucent glazes of opposite hues. Completing them at Montello, with its intensely luminous vacuum of human activity, helped me see these works as interpreters bringing broken, "alien" lands into a greater sphere of comprehension.

In addition to the paintings, I am currently working on modular, sonic sculptures that act as both receivers and transmitters of field recordings within these same landscapes. Their minimal forms, mirroring the aesthetic of the border wall architecture, make 4 to 6-hour durational recordings; they are later installed in exhibition spaces, adjacent to the paintings, performing their sonic "memories." The Montello residency reminded me that my work reestablishes the sublime's capacity to engage our splintered selves with an incomprehensible, yet holistic healing through a heightened consideration of the natural world.



Shawn Skabelund Flagstaff, AZ shawnskabelund.com

As a place-based installation artist, I collaborate with a place to learn how the historical interaction between the wild and the human has determined its cultural makeup, revealing its complex issues, ecologies and cultural histories. My art explores the "unsettling of America" through Manifest Destiny, and the impact and marks that European Americans have made on the land. The landscapes I work in become my studio, not as subject matter to draw or paint, but to observe and look, discovering materials that I can collect to create new landscape portraits.

Artemisia tridentata. This is the only scientific plant name I remember from the Forestry Summer Camp I enrolled in as an undergraduate at Utah State University, beginning my minor in Forestry as a Studio Art major.

The home studio at Montello is surrounded by a sea of sagebrush (Artemisia tridentata). I arrived during autumn's rainy season. The smell of sage emanated across





the range as I drove out of Twelve Mile Canyon and dropped down into the basin. My first two days at Montello were clear and beautiful, but then the clouds moved in, and it rained for the next twenty-four hours, hitting the steel sheet metal roof above. The storm moved on, and the morning sunrise sparkled across the basin. The twisted blackened wet trunks of *Artemisia* intensified the plant's grey green foliage, its smell redolent from the morning sun. The aroma settled into the basin for the duration of my stay as the clay soil dried out.

The morning after I my arrival, I took a walk to find Stefan Hagen's land art circle. I walked its one-kilometer trail and, then walked it again, counting the wooden stakes marking its circumference. It was approximately twelve feet between the 256 paired stakes. Four cardinal markers had also been set, with a large limestone rock opposite the trail. I was impressed by the tenacity of accomplishing this work and, as I circled the trail, my own installation opened.

During my preparatory Zoom visit, Stefan had suggested I stop and collect some of the slate rock felled along the talus slope as Juniper Airport Road passes through the canyon. Knowing that a multi-day storm was headed my way, I knew I had a one-day window for collecting slate before the road would become impassable. Thus, my week was set. I would create an installation inside the studio reflecting Stefan's circle created years earlier.

The following morning, I retraced the road I had come in on two days earlier. I collected 256 pieces of slate for the circle I placed on the floor of the studio. I marked the four cardinal points with coyote prints painted in gold.



Frederic Stritter

Vienna, Austria stritter.audio

During the first few days, I was completely absorbed by the beauty of the environment – listening into the distance, to the wind passing through the sagebrush, to the crackling of the wooden house, especially in the mornings and evenings when the temperature shifted. But what struck me most was the absence of sound. I watched the clouds move across the vast horizon, mesmerized by the changing colors. Sometimes, when everything became still—no wind, no sound, the clouds motionless—I felt as if time itself was on hold.

Soon, I began recording these impressions, allowing myself to slow down and to reflect deeply on my practice.

Sitting in the Desert

Inspired by Alvin Lucier's I Am Sitting in a Room, I played a recording of the Montello studio repeatedly within the space. With each playback, the resonant frequencies of the room and the sounds of the wind and house merged together.





Very low frequency Recording
On October 10th, I witnessed several thunderstorms behind Nine Mile Mountain
around 10 p.m. Although not my most precise recording, I captured a video.

My main focus during the residency was *Panakroama* – the Acoustic Horizon, a work exploring the delicate line between the audible and the silent. This ongoing project, to be released in 2026, builds on recordings made both in Montello and in the Limestone Alps (Kalkalpen) of Austria. It is an intensive exploration of the concept of the acoustic horizon and its musical interpretation.

At night, I often went outside to make Very Low Frequency (VLF) recordings using a receiver developed by Steve McGreevy. VLF refers to the range of electromagnetic waves where natural radio signals from the Earth – such as those produced by lightning or by interactions between the solar wind and the magnetosphere—can be detected. The Earth is struck by lightning about one hundred times per second. In Europe, it is very difficult to find suitable conditions for such recordings; even in Scandinavia, where I have tried, the quality is completely different from what I experienced here – especially at night.

Daily life followed the rhythm of temperature, wind, and light. It was a revelation to realize how meaningful it was to keep electric light off after dark, dissolving the boundary between the interior and the surrounding landscape.

I greatly appreciated the library, and experienced heat, rain, and even snow. By the end of my stay, I truly did not want to leave.

The video of VLF and Sitting in the Desert are at montellofoundation.org/audio.htm

On July 8th at 12:55 PM, a fire was born on a hillside. On the hillside, the piñon and the juniper trees were healthy so were the sagebrush and the mosses and grasses. Though, the grasses had stopped growing weeks prior and had little moisture. On the ground were many pine needles and cones from the previous years, very dried out.

At 1:05 PM, the spark found enough fuel that someone watching the video feed of a camera 20 miles away noticed the smoke, and a heat spot was detected by a satellite scanning the land. Planes were dispatched; a team of firefighters were assembled, and a coordinated effort began.

On July 18, the perimeter of the fire was finally contained. 12,800 acres of forest, sagebrush and meadows had been in this perimeter. Twenty square miles were now smoldering; the perimeter was lifeless.

This hillside is only 5 miles from the Montello Foundation retreat. The wind was in our favor and the fire was contained, before it was able to reach the residency house, but the devastation of wild fires will be on our minds for a long time.

At the end of September, what was left of the forest and meadows was bleak. Branches, twisted by the wind over the years into shapes, had been holding life, in the form of needles and leaves. Without these lives, these twisted branches talked of pain and defeat and not the force they once had.

Even though it seemed that the fire was a termination - the end - life found a way to exist. On this hillside, leaves are growing. Nature has seen fires before. A hillside a few miles away has seen a fire some thirty years ago. Growth is there, but the trees take much longer to mature. A forest of Juniper and Piñon trees is not a forest until a hundred years or longer. Invasive species are much faster—cheatgrass flourishes as regrowth begins. Cheatgrass doesn't hold much moisture, so it stands ready to fuel the next spark, into another rage of destruction.

Dr. Elizabeth Hénaff is focusing on the biological soil crust. That thin layer on the top, so important but also so fragile. It nurtures seeds and protects them from being washed away. Will it recover in the burn area and make further life possible? We can hope.

Stefan Hagen, Founder





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Irrariate and In My Danger by Melissa Mohammadi at the Montello Waypoint

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