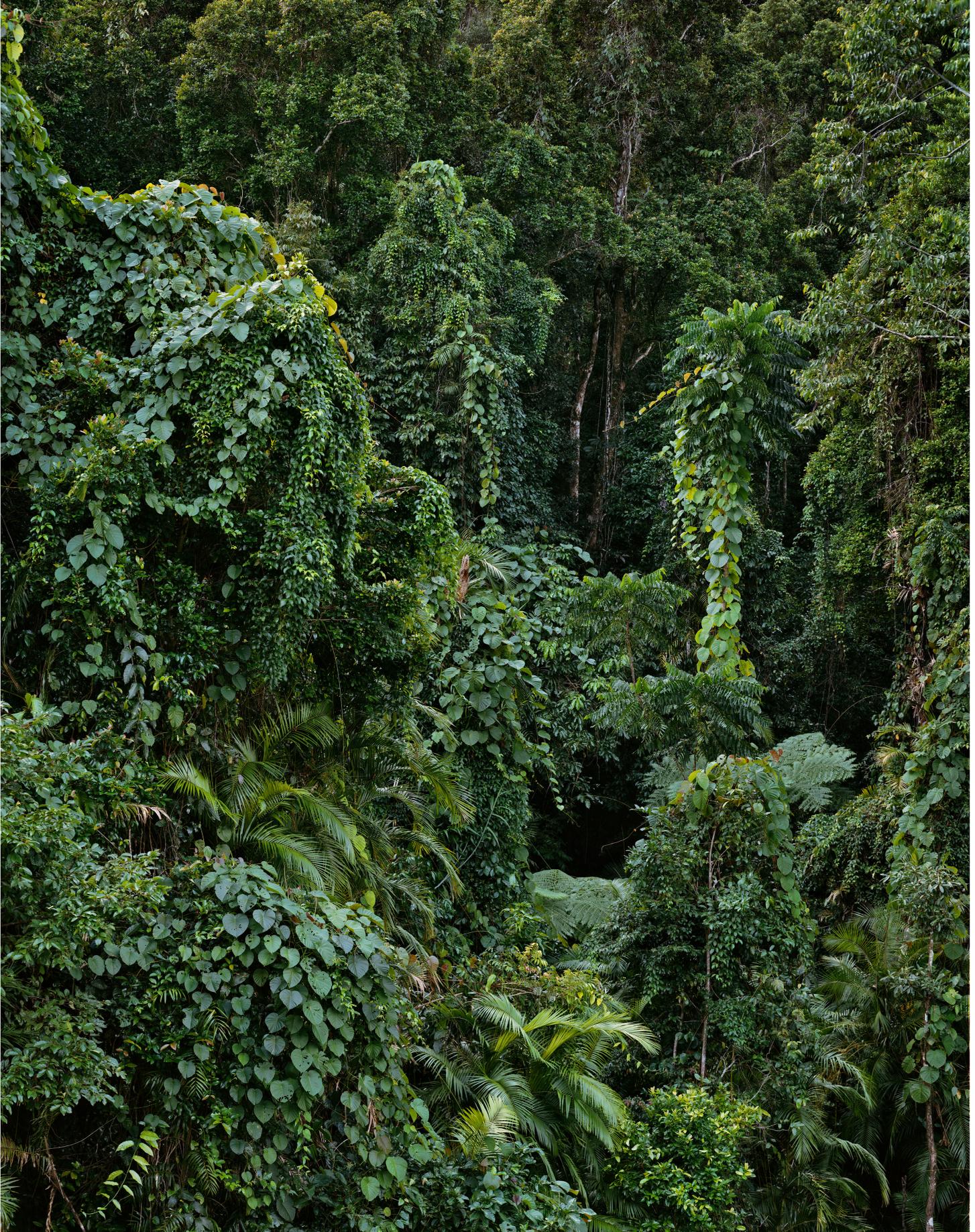


Matthew Stanton  
Deep North (2014–2019)





*Merremia peltata*, *Calamus australis*



*Tristaniopsis exiliiflora*



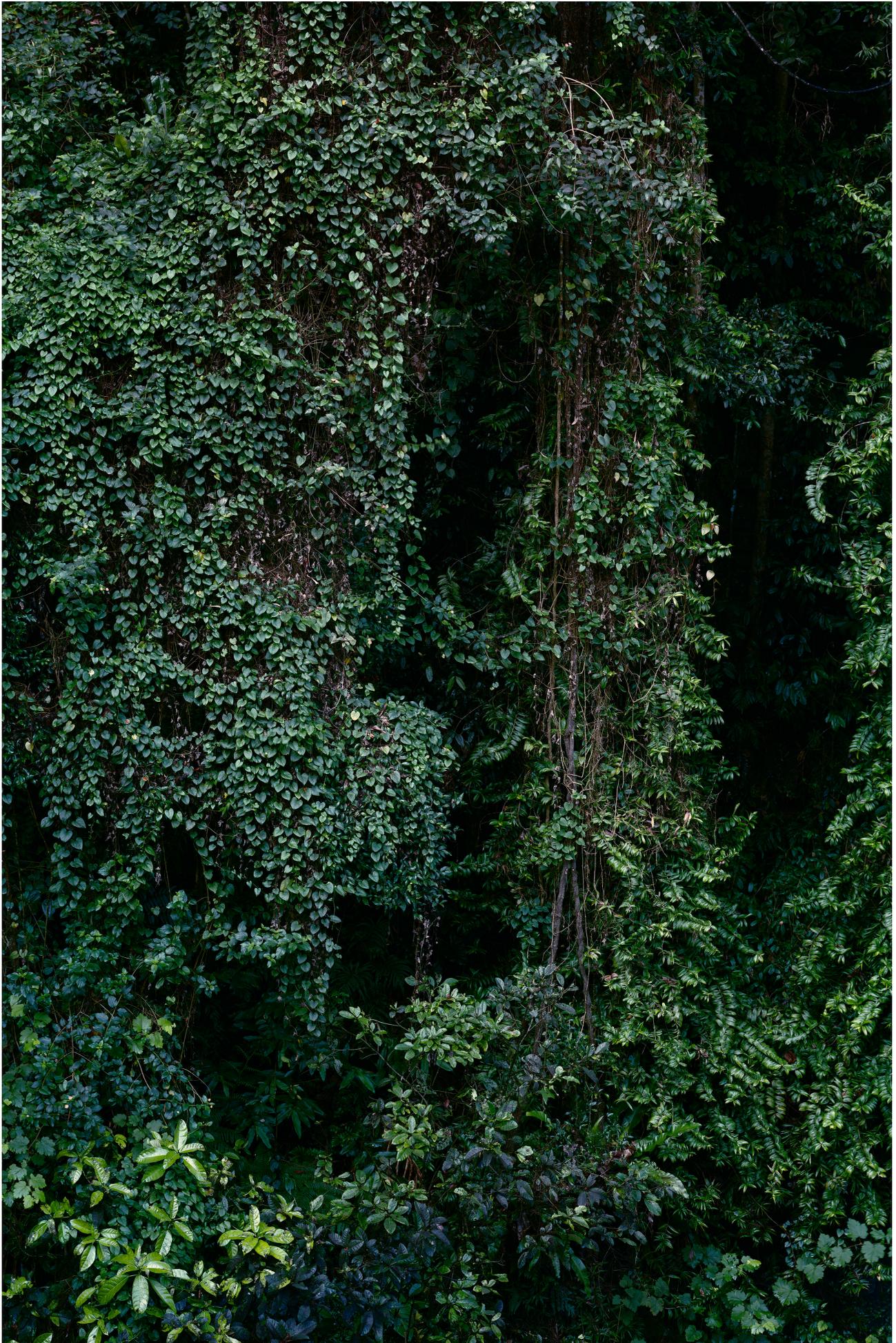
*Freycinettia scandens*, *Alpinia molesta*, *Diploglottis smithii*



*Syngonium podophyllum*



*Bougainvillea glabra*



*Freycinetia scandens*, *Piper mestonii*



*Corymbia clarksoniana*, *Planchonea careya*,  
*Themeda triandra*, *Imperata cylindrica*, *Eriachne pallescens*



*Smilax australis*, *Scleria laevis*, *Acacia flavescens*,  
*Acacia crassicarpa*, *Alphitonia excelsa*, *Corymbia clarksoniana*



*Doodia aspera*, *Nephrolepis cordifolia*,  
*Adiantum aethopicus*, *Tristaniopsis exiliiflora*

# Egology and Idography

The *Deep North* series swings between surface and process. Dense views, impenetrable supra-surfaces of barely differentiated biomass-and-media. Under the camera's detached, almost administrative peering into these zones, the images coagulate as cross sections of many invisible subjects entangled in bio-psycho mimesis.

An elemental theme appears in many of the works that sag with green life; the water *draws*. The bioactivity of the rainforest is drawn earthward in pursuit of each rivulet, rivers carving corridors of natural and psychic fecundity. There is granular method in photosynthesis. Erosion is more expressive of a negative freedom. The tautological surface in *Mulgrave River* is water's wit, eternally expired since the first raindrop in a puddle. *Room (After Tarkovsky)* is sodden when it enters and brittle when it leaves. It flows dark and humming around sheets of photographic material, carrying the agents that bring the latent image to inscribe itself in its host.

Photography has its way of overlaying the quality of clear and singular thought upon the world, imposing the causal, determinate gaze equally indifferently. Facticity chafes at the informe, it goads and corrals it into semblance with the known, with the kind of violence that is inflicted upon something when it's named, a repression of any phantom of the contingent thing-in-particular. By the same turn the repressed also returns in photography, holding Western philosophy's historical figure of Mind hostage against itself and bankrupting the phantom financier that endorses the symbolic exchange value which unifies name and thing.

Over the past 6 years, *Deep North* has passed through developmental stages precipitated by this dynamic, and it remains a key spasm that motivates these works to produce different results. Some works appear to surrender to the burden of fact and drown the viewer in endlessly particular iterations of natural forms. Others appear to harness Mind; they open up with clear and simple ideas and revere the delicacy of the ecological balance. They might all switch places.

I shift between readings of ecology in *Deep North*. The content of ecological science is an important influence for the artist, as both the brother and son of ecologists. But I suspect for the viewer it functions not only as subject but also methodology. Attempting to trace a transcendent theme skips too many important exceptions. Trying to connect to them morally presupposes too much knowledge, far too much to be gazing in for as long as the work beckons. Every node in the series is saturated in dialectic with the others; with the living web in front of the lens and the sprawl of art activity behind it.

Contemporary art creates beholding. We are no longer taken on an adventure and decide whether or not it is art and dole out our opinion thus. I think it's safe to say that we're accustomed to accepting that a work is art first, and then we go on the adventure afterwards.

The case for photography's accountability as art keeps step with contemporary model. All theory and commotion generated prior becomes fodder for the next adventure. So allow me to appropriate a gross and trite generalization.

'Artists using photography' appropriate photography and related processes as a readymade support for the development of cerebrally/internally

weighted experiences, leveraging photography's generic and non-gestural functions. For the sake of argument, 'Art photographers' are somewhat less detached, and appropriate the medium's historical projects as the support upon which endless episodes of the Particular and Contingent iterate.

These spectres are lead through *Deep North's* psycho-ecological dialectic, and lose themselves in instructive ways.

Stanton is an 'Art photographer.' He's exploiting the medium's ability to cue very precise visual tropes that evoke associations throughout the history of pictures, including painting and cinema. His works bear the complex moods of long moments of looking without thinking, reflecting the typical state of the patient documentarian. Many of his compositions feel like a level of experiential stasis reminiscent of being deep within these places, where turning a few degrees to the left or the right delivers no novel information of consequence.

Printing at large scale seems to free up the compositional forces acting across the picture plane otherwise diminished in small images; the draw, if any, is nominally central but not urgently. The clarity and simplicity of this picture type is a device that contrasts heavily with the particular, the contingent, the uncanny, the image that reaches out to the psyche from within a balanced shape reminiscent of something utterly expected.

Stanton's ongoing interest in the films of Tarkovsky (*Stalker* in our case) has been simmering in the background of his sojourns in the far north landscape. There are some comparisons to be made between Stanton's project and the events of the film. The main protagonist carefully guides his companions, imploring them to perform a specifically demanding journey through the Zone if they are to survive the traps that await them there. According to *Stalker*, the straight and easy path is the most perilous, and he demands they take the longer and more complicated journey, extolling the virtues of pliancy as they perform this seemingly open-ended journey.

The act of journeying to the landscape of his childhood with a camera in sporadic episodes has parallels to the *Stalker* guiding the fulfilment-seekers in the forbidden Zone. Stanton similarly roams the landscape erratically with a cumbersome and cranky companion of an 8x10 camera, which requires guidance with yielding patience. The decision to pursue this method deliberately is rewarded by a certain level of attention in the act of capture, though it's impossible to say if there are some planes of awareness that translate better than others.

To capture fast moving or fleeting subjects is nearly impossible, as the whole operation takes considerable time to setup, and the cost of multiple attempts stacks up quickly. It also presents a paradoxical challenge to experimentation - photography's most innocent and tender domain - that isn't generally an issue with other methods, all for practical reasons.

The stakes of success and failure seem higher. It reproduces part of the initial magic of first picking up a camera, to believe against the odds that the picture is made from the inside out. This difficult and laborious process results in an open-ended, aimless way of finding subjects for pictures that leans as much on the response to the external as the internal, in anticipation of that impossible rendering of the relation between

light and matter, the drama of light touching the thing mythologized on the dark side of the shutter in a Genesis-tic sublimation.

Stanton appropriates the Stalker, as a photographer. As Žižek notes, the demarcation of the Zone in *Stalker* is constitutive of the fantasy within it; it is where special things occur because it is prohibited, not the other way around. For Stanton, the limits are practical but also psychological, and by going beyond he enters a zone where pictures behold him, compelling a reaction to make a picture after it.

So let's say Stanton is also an artist using photography. Let's say he's interested in sending a message, an experience with an address. *Deep North's* psycho-ecological dialectic proposes that any dynamic system seeks equilibrium, and can be understood thusly. If it can be understood, then it can be formulated, commodified and appropriated artistically.

So Stanton appropriates a moment in the dynamic system of photography as it is at the moment his work is exhibited. In detail, he is appropriating the medium for its transparent product, but also for the role it plays in obscuring everything else it depends on to exist but that is not actually it.

Part of the work is his performance within the technical and social system of photography in Australia, within and alongside particular cultural traditions that shape his practice, which also affect his life independently of his activity as a photographer. The subjects, the prints, and the gallery are all functions of the art-world system and are artistically indistinct. The experience is not and relates comparatively to all other experiences prior and post.

To us, the observers, this is a function of the world tending toward equilibrium. This is a picture of Stanton as a producer, a la W. Benjamin, an agent amidst a system of other agents, the whole sloshing around in and out of balance but ultimately determined by a system. It depends heavily on identity as an absolute for leverage, and insists on an interconnected system of agency and accountability. It's a utopian aesthetics, and as such comes with no date inscribed.

I suspect it's an aesthetics of deep time, deep enough to trace the connection between all of the world's minutiae irrespective of events, beyond the sphere of need. Many of the *Deep North* works depict photography's own eventfulness, approaching the event's minimum condition of temporal punctuation. Their visual impact suggests the experience of an encounter, but this notion is inadequate, grounded as encounters are in the unexpected, in the history of novelty. There is no such novelty in these meetings, and the familiarity he has for these places is uncertain, but greater than zero. A dark paradox churns away behind the image, like having *deja vu* on a stranger's behalf, having that swelling mystic familiarity with being and time whilst the interiority upon which the experience is grafted is wholly other. The picture is detained by the thing-photograph, pacing in its purgatory.

*Cultural Burning, No. 1* and *Cultural Burning, No. 2*, arguably the most complicated and delicate works in the series, depict the Yidinji people using fire to shape and maintain the ecology of their country. This practice perpetuates the specific biome these Eucalypts require for their

entire lifecycle, for the seedlings to have adequate sunlight to the fire itself that germinates new seeds. The grass is fuel for its own survival as the cold burn eliminates other sun-capture competitor species. It's a hopeful counterpoint to the fragility of many other works, and feels most akin to Stanton wishing. The practice of initiating a fire event to sustain an ecological dynamic feels like synthetic fulfillment in the inner dialectic of *Deep North*, and a proper place for the species given to marking time.

Henry Murphy,  
2019.

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