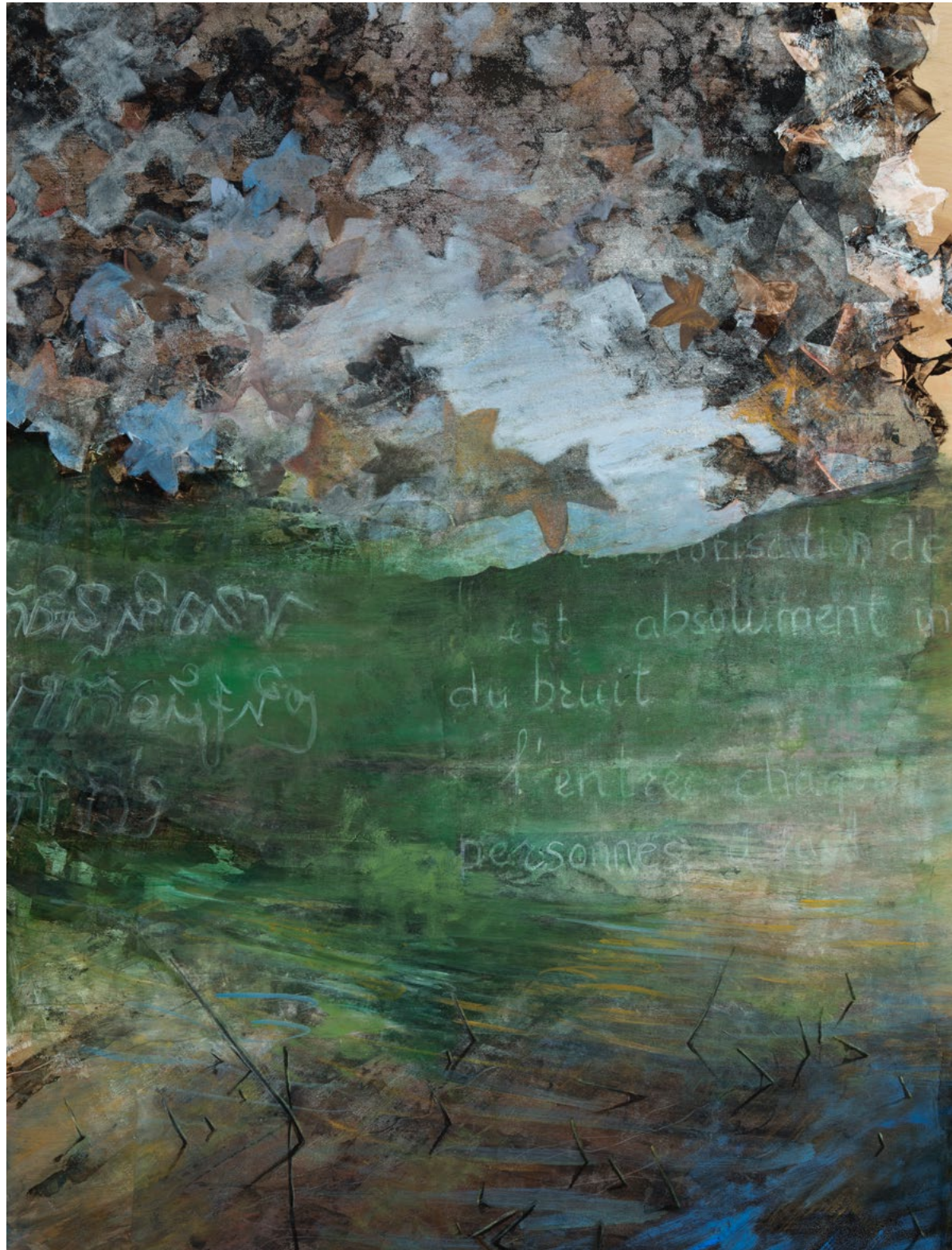


ROBYNN SMITH

Lessons, 2017
Mixed media on wood, 48 x 36 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

JERRY MARTIEN

Song of the Redwood Tree

Language and the Loss
of Our Forests

Santa Rosa. July, late Anthropocene. Except for a few remnant oak, the only shade I find is a parking lot under a half-acre array of solar panels. Along the Redwood Highway, at the edge of the city's sprawling suburbs, the only redwoods are sickly freeway trees and enormous sculptures in a roadside culture park. History watching the traffic go by.

Stunned by the transition from coastal fog to inland heat, I wander among them like a visitor from another planet. Placed at intervals along a paved walkway, huge old-growth stumps and root wads, cantilevered and stacked, solitary and in clusters, salvaged remnants of a watershed I had traveled this morning. Washed down from logged-over hills, shaped by water and time, and now again by sculptor Bruce Johnson.

At once sacred and playful, *Root 101* is a tribute to redwood: the wood itself, the trees they once were, and the forest they still belong to. Their grain smoothed and polished and stained, trimmed with rivulets of copper sheathing, they stand as a palpable memory of the ancient woods and the great cycle of life that sustained them. A life we think we've forgotten, though beneath the drone of traffic we still hear its cry of separation. The history isn't over. Not for a long time.

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When I began this journey, I didn't know it would be a pilgrimage to loss. I intended to stop and view *Root 101*, then head over to the coast to visit another of Johnson's redwood creations—*Poetry House*. Maybe I'd write a poem about it. But I wasn't prepared for the knot of feelings evoked by Johnson's work and my own history with redwoods—as an ardent tree hugger as well as a carpenter (a wood butcher)—and most entangling, a writer about them. The poem brought up decades of witness and complicity, which eventually devolved into a redwood rant. By the next summer, another scorcher, I'd decided it might be more helpful to tell this story instead. Then I heard that *Root 101* had been in the path of the wildfire that destroyed thousands of homes in Santa Rosa. A forest fire burning in a forest we'd forgotten we lived with.

But even the ashes aren't an ending. Up and down the Redwood Highway, as constant as the logging and lumber trucks, the story goes on. Around the same time as my