

Love & Mourning for the Hemlocks: Painter Lowell Hayes

By Nan K. Chase - Post Date: 02.01.2011

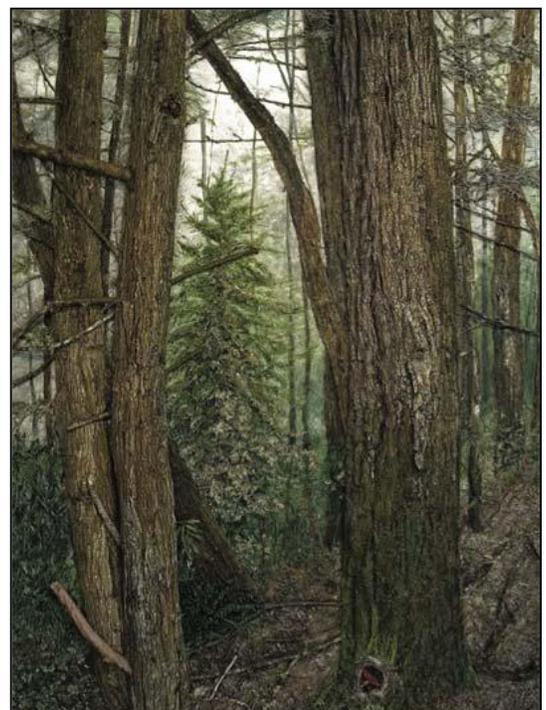


Anyone would stop and listen to a cry of “Help! Help!” or “Danger! Danger!” *The Hemlocks! The Hemlocks!*—the title of a new exhibition of paintings by Lowell Hayes—carries with it the same urgency, the same sense of crisis, in this case concerning the fate of America’s Eastern hemlock trees. Under siege by an insect called the hemlock woolly adelgid, the stately giants of our forests are dying.

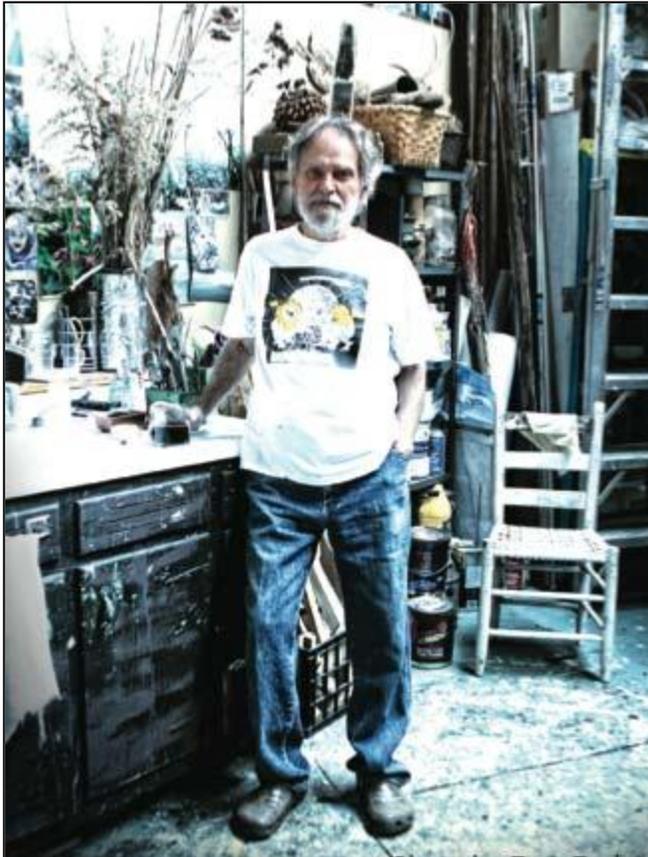
Eleven of Hayes’s massive “built” canvases celebrating the hemlock’s beauty and mourning its demise will be displayed through March 19 at the Turchin Center for the Visual Arts, on the Appalachian State University campus in Boone.

For nearly four decades, Appalachian native son Lowell Hayes has been painting in bas-relief the landscape of his heritage: the subtle and ever-changing colors of the woods throughout the four seasons, the soft light, the rich textures. With his latest, and largest, group of paintings, Lowell has emerged from several years of quiet work in his remote mountain studio with his most evocative and focused work yet.

Each piece is large (one of them is 9 by 19 feet), and all bear his trademark style of layering acrylic and other paints with natural specimens from the woods, including stones, bark, limbs, and lichen. Together, the paintings give viewers the sensation of standing in a grove of mature hemlock trees, as if within a magnificent, silent cathedral. Though nothing moves, the air is alive with fragrance, with shifting light, and with the sounds of creeks and rivers tumbling over boulders.



“I grew up in the Eastern woods,” says Lowell, a native of Butler, Tennessee, one of the hamlets now submerged beneath a lake dammed by the TVA. “The hemlock was essentially a member of the family. The hemlocks are so absolutely basic to the visual sense of the Eastern woods. Pines are spiky and dramatic, spruces are conical and regular. The hemlock, by contrast, has long sweeping branches with little tiny needles that give you a backdrop for the hardwoods and the wildflowers.”



Lowell, who’s lived in Watauga County for nearly 40 years, says he began hearing about the hemlock woolly adelgid a decade or so ago, then started seeing infestations while hiking, and finally found them in his own yard near the headwaters of the Watauga River.

An arborist helped him get early treatment for some of his larger hemlocks, an expensive inoculation that has since become more convenient. But forestry experts predict the adelgid infestation that reached the Eastern United States in the 1960s will, in the end, destroy forever the dark hemlock forests. At their largest, the trees can grow to 200 feet and live 500 years.

Lowell, now in his mid-70s, has had his work in a touring exhibition by the National Museum of American Art, and more recent pieces hang in the University of North Carolina medical complex and at the Tennessee State Museum.

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts (turchincenter.org) is located at 423 W. King Street in Boone, and is open every day but Sunday and Monday. Admission is free. Other works by Lowell Harris can be seen at Pura Vida Gallery, 39 Biltmore Avenue in Asheville. Nan K. Chase is the author of Asheville: a History and coauthor, with Chris McCurry, of Bark House Style: Sustainable Designs from Nature.