



MULTIMEDIA ARTIST LEIGH
YARDLEY LOOKS OUT OF THE
WINDOW OF HER STUDIO
REMEMBERING THE STORM OF
JULY 3, 2014, THAT DOWNED MANY
OF THE TREES ON HER PROPERTY.

BY KATHERINE RUSHWORTH
PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELLEN M. BLALOCK

A sense of place

ARTIST LEIGH YARDLEY CONNECTS HER AUDIENCE TO THE ENVIRONMENT

How do you know when an emerging artist has fully emerged? If you're Leigh Yardley, the answer to that question is a moving target.

"I had a teacher in grad school who told me you were an emerging artist for the first five years after you finished your MFA (master of fine arts)," Yardley says. She received her MFA from Lesley University in 2013, at the not-so-emerging age of 57.

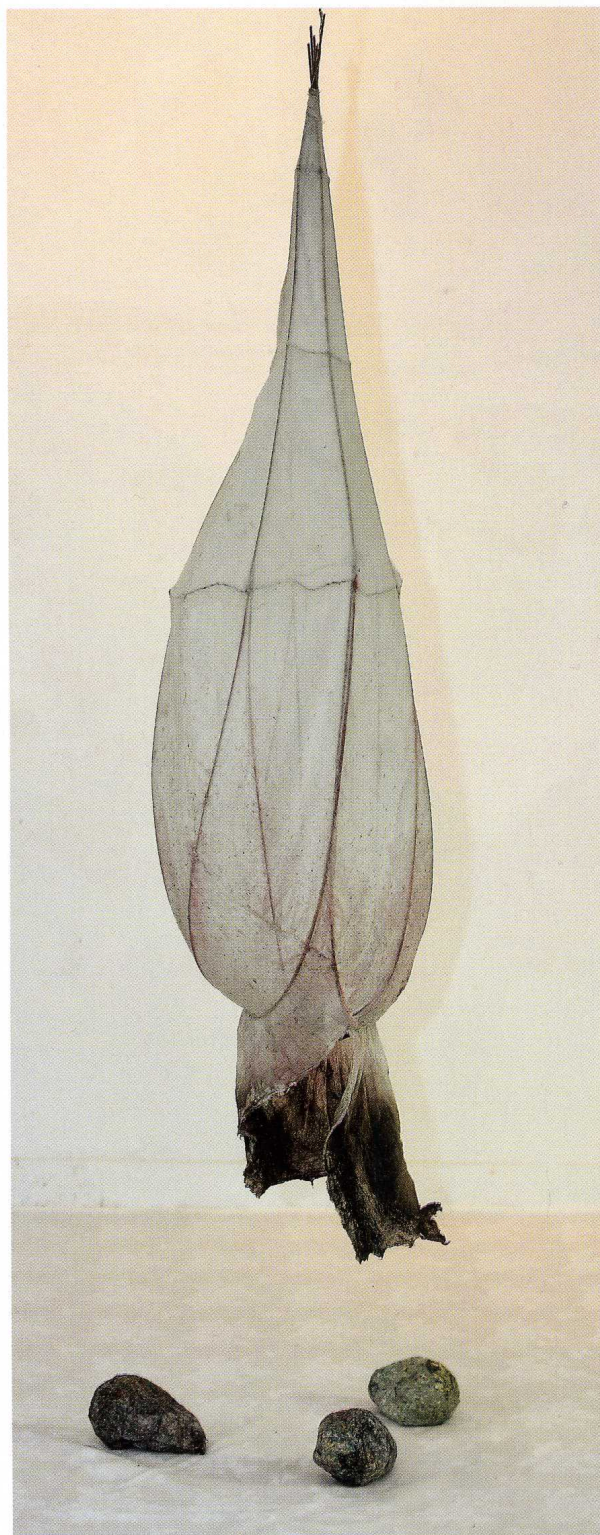
"Yeah, I'm a long, drawn-out emerging artist," Yardley, now 60, says with a laugh.

Yardley's path to where she is now, which is interacting with landscapes through her artwork, has taken a variety of twists and turns, but she's always had a clear view of where she was going.

She graduated from SUNY Oswego in 1977 with a degree in early childhood education/child development and worked in social services for 13 years. In late 1990, when her husband took a job at Fort Ticonderoga on Lake Champlain, she resigned from her day job and began to spend more time on creative pursuits. ➤



BELOW, "UNTITLED" WAS MADE IN 2015 OF CHEESECLOTH, BAMBOO STICKS, WIRE AND SILT FROM A LOCAL STREAM. RIGHT, ANOTHER "UNTITLED" WORK, ALSO OF CHEESECLOTH, FEATURES FLOWERS THAT YARDLEY ADDED WITH ACRYLIC PAINT.



In 1994, well into her 30s, she enrolled in a program at Skidmore College called University Without Walls. Two years later, she received her bachelor of science degree, which she says was essentially a bachelor of fine arts in painting. Yardley says the undergraduate experience helped her grow as an artist.

"I was able to think about ideas and then produce the paintings. I figured out I could do it and it gave me some confidence."

The subject matter and the ideas Yardley were drawn to early in her career are what she continues to embrace. "There's always a sense of landscape in the work," she explains. But Yardley says the work she did during her graduate studies changed how she approached the landscape as subject matter.

"I've always worked in layers," she says, "but I began to separate the layers with different materials. The layers go to the heart of the idea. The environment has layers of occupancy; our occupancy, past occupants and the changes that have taken place."

It's difficult to classify or categorize Yardley's current

work. It's part installation, part painting and sometimes steps into the third dimension. Her visual innuendo is of the natural world, but she does more than simply depict what she sees or feels. Yardley intervenes, mediates or interacts directly with the environment. She steps into it, deposits materials and then steps away to let nature takes its course. Time and the randomness of the elements are equal contributors to Yardley's process. When a piece is completed, it often bears not only her hand, but that of Mother Nature.

In July 2013, the wettest July on record, Yardley placed 50 yards of cloth in the vernal stream that developed in the flooded field behind her studio in southern Madison County and left it there until the stream dried. Seven weeks later, she removed the torn, stained and weathered cloth and brought it back to the

active piece that encourages the viewer to wander in and out of 15 suspended translucent skins made from the weather-worn cloth and painted panels.

Yardley says creating a sense of place for viewers goes to the heart of her work.

"I hope that they can connect to the place I am connected to," she says. "Installation gives them more of a sense of place because they are moving around within it. They are moving through the space and that gives them their own experience."

Mary Murray, curator of modern and contemporary art at Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, says Yardley is truly one with her environment.

"I see little space between her life and her art," Murray says. "Her practice is immersed in the space she lives."

Murray has included Yardley in an exhibition at the MWPPI featuring eight artists from Central New York whose work is of or about the earth. The show, titled "Elemental," opens at the end of February and runs through May 2. She says Yardley's choice of subject matter and her immersion in her process are impressive and appropriate for the show.

"Her process is the essence of documenting time passing through place," Murray says, "the rain, the varying level of water in a stream, the daylight and the change in temperature are all embedded in her materials of intervention, such as cheesecloth."

Yardley is also trying to get us to stop and really see the environment



studio, where it became an intrinsic element in the large scale, undulating wall piece titled "In the Time of Flood."

In the multifaceted installation titled "Interactions in Time and Substance," Yardley placed six different panels of cheesecloth in different ecosystems – in a game path across a stream, in a logging trail, on a fallen cherry tree, on a barbed wire fence and in a corn field. Back in the studio, she was painting her reactions to the devolution of the fabrics in their various environments and these painted panels were also placed outdoors for up to two weeks. The result is an installation-based, inter-

that surrounds us and of which we are a part.

"The work is asking, 'How am I a part of this place?'" she says. "How do I recognize and make myself be a part of it and not just a casual observer?"

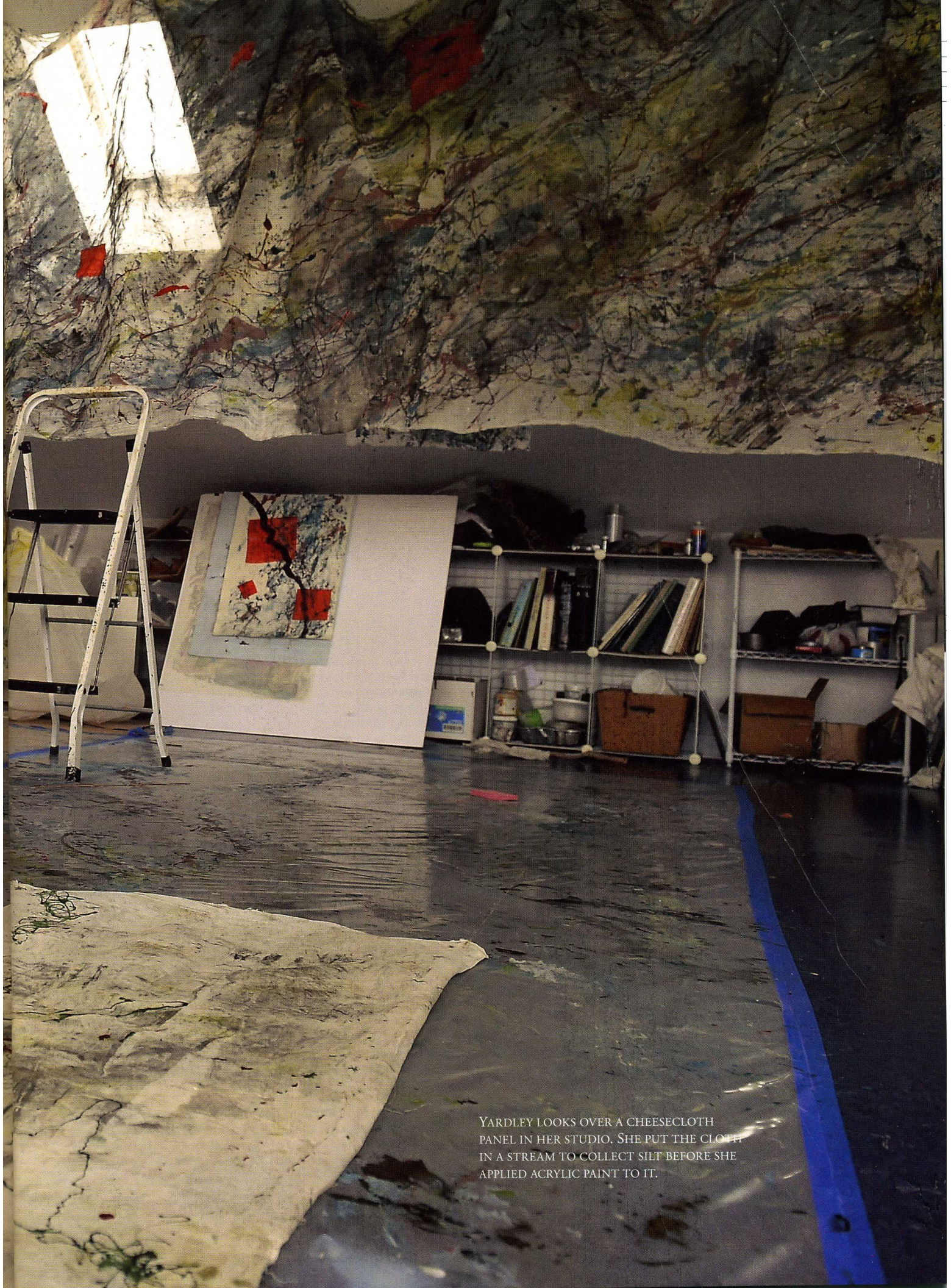
And those are the questions Yardley has been posing to herself and her viewers throughout her career.

"Yes," she says. "There's always been a through line in the work and that through line is my connection to place." ♦

KATHERINE RUSHWORTH IS A FREELANCE WRITER.

ABOVE, YARDLEY REPLACES CHEESECLOTH ON A SPRUCE TREE THAT HAD FALLEN ON HER PROPERTY. SHE ORIGINALLY PLACED THIS CHEESECLOTH OVER THE TREE ON JULY 15, 2014, AFTER IT WAS BLOWN DOWN IN A STORM. SHE REMOVED IT A YEAR LATER SO THE TREE COULD BE CLEARED. SHE EXPLAINS THAT WITH THE FABRIC SHE IS DRAWING A LINE IN THE SPACE AND IS MAKING A DECISIVE MARK ON THE TREE THAT WAS BLOWN OVER. SHE CALLS THIS INVOLVEMENT "INTERACTIONS IN THE LANDSCAPE."





YARDLEY LOOKS OVER A CHEESECLOTH
PANEL IN HER STUDIO. SHE PUT THE CLOTH
IN A STREAM TO COLLECT SILT BEFORE SHE
APPLIED ACRYLIC PAINT TO IT.