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Glove art reflects American spirit

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Artist Jaymes Dudding used leather gloves discarded by wildland firefighters, including the Granite Mountain Hotshots, to make this tribute to the 19 fallen Granite Mountain team members. It's Dudding's latest artwork made using found gloves. (Dean Hanson/Journal)

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By Leslie Linthicum / Of the Journal | 6 hours ago

JEMEZ SPRINGS – When you start finding old gloves by the curbs, on sidewalks, along grassy roadsides, and you start bending down to pick up those gloves and examine them and stuff them in your pocket or throw them in the back seat of your car, the law of synchronicity kicks in: Once you start finding gloves, gloves start finding you.



So it was for Jaymes Dudding, an art professor at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma in the town of Chickasha. Dudding found gloves all over town – lots of work gloves blown off the backs of oil field trucks, welding gloves, cotton gardening gloves and soft wool winter gloves.

He once found a glove that was still holding onto a bloodied finger bandage. And once he spotted a discarded glove, went to investigate and found that it was smoking. He still wonders decades later about the story of those gloves.

Dudding, a sculptor who specializes in ceramics, stashed the gloves away and kept finding more. It felt like they were waiting for something. But what would that something be?

And why gloves?

"I work with my hands, and hands are really important to me," Dudding told me the other day. "Laying there on the sidewalk, gloves just have a gesture. They take on the form of the hand that used them. It's like they're saying, 'Pick me up.' "

Dudding was rooming with another artist, and one day in 1994 they got to talking and his roommate revealed a secret and Dudding revealed one too.

"He was collecting wire and I didn't know it, and I was collecting gloves and he didn't know it," Dudding said.

They got out their stashes and started a creative conversation that resulted in an exhibit, "The Glove and Wire Show."

And so began an important sideline of Dudding's career as an artist. He's made about 50 sculptures using old gloves. After teaching in Chickasha for 28 years, Dudding moved back home to New Mexico.

He kept finding gloves, and this summer an important collection of gloves found him.

Dudding lives in Rio Rancho and teaches art at the Walatowa High Charter School at Jemez Pueblo and is a member of the Jemez Fine Art gallery, an artists cooperative in Jemez Springs.

On the last day of May, a downed power line sparked a fire up the road from the gallery near Thompson Ridge and it quickly became another one of New Mexico's raging summer wildfires. Wildland firefighting crews from around the West set up on the fire's perimeter and attacked it night and day. At one point in mid June, 20 Hotshot crews were on the fire.

Crews fighting forest fires wield pickaxes and shovels and chain saws. And they wear out their gloves fast, often chewing up a pair a day.

As the fire burned and used gloves got tossed into piles at the fire camp, the fire's information officer, Margo Whitt, made her way through Jemez Springs once a day to deliver updates. Inside the Jemez Fine Art gallery she spotted one of Dudding's sculptures, "The Hero's Journey." It's a ceramic bird riding on the back of centaur – all covered in a mosaic of used gloves.

Dudding told me people who know of his glove collecting often find gloves and save them for him. But as the Thompson Ridge Fire was winding down, Whitt delivered the biggest trove of gloves Dudding had ever received – eight trash bags containing hundreds of gloves, mostly leather, some stained in gas or soot, others worn through and all smelling strongly of wood smoke.

Dudding dumped the gloves at his house and started trying to decide what to do with them. A tragedy in Arizona made that decision for him.

The Thompson Ridge Fire started on May 31, and when it was finally mopped up weeks later it had burned through 24,000 acres, including large parts of the Valles Caldera National Preserve. Early in the fire's life, one particular crew of Hotshots had worked through the night to save historic cabins and old-growth trees in the Caldera. That crew – the Granite Mountain Hotshots from Prescott, Ariz. – added their used gloves to the discard pile.

The Granite Mountain team moved on to fight other fires. And on June 30, 19 of the team's members were overtaken by flames as they were battling the Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona. They deployed their fire shelters, but none of the 19 survived.

When Dudding learned of the tragedy, he said, "I knew I wanted to do a memorial to the firefighters that died. I knew I wanted a flag, and I wanted fire somehow involved."

The piece Dudding settled on is a large flag made completely out of the firefighters' gloves. They form the stripes, cleaner ones standing in for white and grimmer ones standing in the red. Where the stars would be, the brightest yellow gloves make a glowing flame against the backdrop of a bright quatrefoil.

Dudding displayed the flag at a fundraiser for the Placitas volunteer fire department, and the piece is now in a fitting place – the U.S. Forest Service's Jemez Ranger Station, just down the road from where the gloves were used. Dudding is looking into whether the flag might find a permanent home in Prescott.

Dudding has always thought of his glove sculptures as paying homage to hard work, and he told me the glove flag takes that tribute to another level.

"It has to do with the American spirit and what those men and women do to help other people," he said. "The work they do, it's a patriotic gesture."

UpFront is a daily front-page news and opinion column. Comment directly to Leslie at 823-3914 or llinthicum@abqjournal.com. Go to www.abqjournal.com/letters/new to submit a letter to the editor.



Artist Jaymes Dudding at the Jemez Fine Art gallery in Jemez Springs with a sculpture called "The Hero's Journey" made with discarded gloves. (Dean Hanson/Journal)



Dudding used more than 100 gloves collected during the Thompson Ridge Fire. He's been collecting gloves for decades. (Dean Hanson/Journal)



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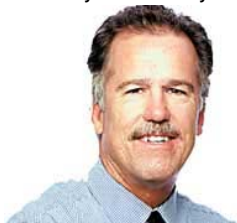


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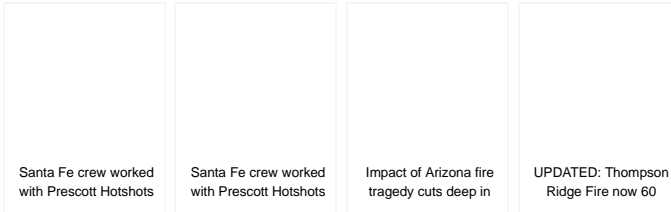
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