

*The earth belongs to the living.*  
—Thomas Jefferson

“Notes on the State of Virginia” is a series of place-based assemblages on US Geological Survey topographic maps. It’s a personal, contemporary take on Thomas Jefferson’s book of the same title. And while some pieces explore land he described, most others focus on places I found ecologically or cultural interesting. From the western Appalachians to the Atlantic coast, I traveled the Commonwealth as the groundwork for this series.

Just as I explored actual terrain, I explored materials in the studio. Each assemblage combines science with art, high-tech materials with natural ones. In *Bridge*, I painted over the map with minerals collected at Natural Bridge; on top of this earthy base, I constructed the bridge with swallow genome sequences (inspired by a bird I witnessed swooping below the stone arch). In *Jefferson’s Secret* I arranged Google Earth images, Jefferson’s handwritten text printed on clear Mylar, and my painting of Monticello garden plants (within a silhouette created by Raphaelle Peale in 1804). My own notes, paintings, and drawings are layered with collected plants and insect specimens in *Field Notes* and *Daily Observations*.

This series poses questions, such as: Do the topographic map’s intricate contour lines represent our desire to understand nature or our wish to control it? Does science connect us to or distance us from the living world? How, when plants and animals have staged their lives for millennia in a place, do we define who truly “owns” the land? And might global environmental awareness begin with awareness of *local* ecology?

It’s fitting that I myself respond to questions, for Thomas Jefferson did just that in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785): answered questions. His book was a response to the queries of an 18<sup>th</sup>-century French diplomat to the U.S., François Barbé-Marbois, and a zoologist, Comte de Buffon, both of whom doubted Virginia was up to the excellence of Europe. Jefferson’s detailed account of the state’s vigorous animals and diverse plants set them straight back then.

But now: two hundred thirty years later, in my own “Notes on the State of Virginia,” I’m asking my own questions. Yet it’s with Jefferson’s thought in mind — “the earth belongs to the living” — that I’ve explored Virginia and mapped my inner responses along the way.

—Suzanne Stryk