



Artists as Archeologists of Wildfire

Debris from catastrophic fires has become an artistic medium to raise environmental consciousness.

Robert Louis Chianese

So many fires are raging in the western part of the United States at any one time that it's difficult to keep in memory their names, locations, intensities, areas consumed, firefighters mustered, houses and structures burned, and, sadly, lives lost. Each new fire in California contends for the title of the biggest yet. We seem to run out of hyperbole in describing them and communicating their horrors.

These fires and their effects are memorialized, as disasters often are, through rescued mementos displayed as art and apocalyptic imagery in visual and sculptural form. Scorched salvaged objects serve as cultural artifacts of the lands and communities damaged in fires. They don't have to be ancient to hold profound significance to those who have lost just about everything. Galleries easily fill with fire-seared detritus in metal, wood, and glass, making their own grim statement just by being put on a wall. This sad assortment often gets a mood lift from photographic images of rescue, regrowth, and regeneration from the fire's aftermath.

However, a new kind of art is emerging from the flames—art that uses fire debris in its making. This work differs from mementos, relics, or objects of mourning left in the fire's wake because it is the construction of a piece from the very burned elements generated by sparks, flames, and smoke. Artists act as fieldwork archeologists, collecting, dredging up, and bringing back the actual stuff of fire for use as their creative material. This change shifts viewer consciousness in a profound way about the meaning of destruction by wildfire. It prompts reconsideration about the transformational power of heat and fire, and gives emotional substance to both

the forging of art by extreme forces and the painful realities of global warming.

In a strange way, this art humanizes fire: It takes the threatening blaze and its aftermath and modifies them, puts a human signature on them, grasps them with creative energy, and brings them into the studio and gallery to be observed, contemplated, and reflected upon. Fire in many cultures signifies creative energy itself. Fire's fury may be an artist's familiar companion, a muse. It can then reveal a frightening beauty, the power of nature modified by our aesthetic imagination.

Such art is still a memento of loss, but it becomes a reminder of our need to control fire in the way that artists control their media. We revisit our need to prevent it, encapsulated in a stunning image or object, which may prompt us, more than a public service bulletin, to change our ways. Thus, fire debris art, and narratives generated by it, can lead to a new understanding of the realities of drought and global warming, and expose the contributions of the human hand and mind to both its creation and control.

Charcoal Disorder

Artist Hiroko Yoshimoto mixed salvaged charcoal and ash from the 2008 Montecito Tea Fire in Santa Barbara, California, with other media to produce the 3-meter-tall watercolor titled *Coming Back #2*, capturing the burnt hues and texture of trees raked by fire. The sensuous black tonalities from the charred trunks and branches give a tortured feel and funereal look to the jumbled disorder of trees—scorched, barren, and twisted into an almost anthropomorphic pose. We take in this large work through proprioceptive sensations, sub-

consciously bending our own bodies in response to the image's twists and turns.

But there is also an evocation of former vegetal energy in the curves of the thick trees, as if the fire has exposed some pattern of growth or some genetic molecule of arboreal life—broken and arrested but still evident. The greening of the ground around them points to the regenerative power that fire can bring to forests, coating the forest floor with a delicate living mat that literally rises from the ashes. Fragile sprouts emerge from cracks in the bark as a sign that some forest trees not only can survive fire but may also depend on it for renewal. As Yoshimoto said in an interview with the *Ventura County Star*, "I will be satisfied if my art can generate in the viewing public a sense of awe and respect of the destructive powers of wildfires, and at the same time if it can make them realize, as a metaphor of life arising from death, the indestructible force of regeneration of nature that sprouts green buds out of the ashes."

Yoshimoto's tangled trees suggest our own entangled engagement with forests, a disastrous one at times, and make us aware of our complicit role in wildfires. We also contain the potential for regeneration of both forests and ourselves, particularly if we learn to curb our appetites for fossil-fuel burning. This work was one in a 12-part series, and other works in the series convey the dread intensity of fire and the bone-like detritus pile of fallen branches—an all too human metaphor. In this work, the artist felt the need to give the forest and us prospects of renewal.

After the Tea Fire, things got worse. The Camp Fire in Northern Butte County, ignited by a faulty electric transmission line on November 8, 2018,



Hiroko Yoshimoto's *Coming Back #2* is an example of art created using fire debris. The artist collected charcoal from a burn site of the Montecito Tea Fire in Santa Barbara, California, and used it to create this large watercolor on paper (measuring 1×3 meters). This work was part of her "Rising from the Ashes Series Exhibit," at Ventura College in November 2009. (All images courtesy of the author, with permission of the artists indicated for each work.)

would rage for 17 days until it killed 85 people, covered 620 square kilometers, and destroyed 18,804 structures in the city of Paradise. How to depict this deadliest and most destructive conflagration in California's history? Would artists even want to commemorate its fury, or hint at the potentially beneficial effects of wildfires?

Stephanie Taylor makes a strong statement about this fire's grim reality in her large *Wildfire Wind* drawing, measuring 3.5 meters across (see page 348). She retrieved charcoal from just one destroyed home and smudged it on plastic media, creating ominous backgrounds of hash marks and swirls, and then drew onto

it a ghostly tangle of trunks, branches, and limbs of fire-transformed trees, once again signaling the ecological impact of climate change. The white flecks on the branches suggest wounds, as this forest primeval becomes twisted rubble, a trap. The scale and flowing motion of the trees draw us in so that we are mesmerized witnesses before this dark scene, unable to extricate ourselves from this tortured maze of a forest. It's almost cartoonish in its exaggerated, carnivalesque contortions, a fun house of horror, a bit too threatening to imagine what its victims may have seen or felt or encountered if they had had a chance to flee the actual fire.

Taylor turned the drawing sideways and dripped white paint across it, suggesting the unnatural winds that drove the fire, called Diablo winds in the north. These broken streaks could also represent the power lines that initially sparked the fire—our thoughtlessness streaked across the drawing. Such a narrative is only hinted at by her title, but few people who suffered the effects of these fragmented power lines, whose breakage was exacerbated by the high winds, would miss it.

The retrieved charcoal forces us to rub our sensibilities into the work, feel it, struggle our way into it, as this fire-debris artist brings the basic medium of burnt wood into the gallery and makes it display the unpleasant hyperreality of climate change. Whatever narrative that viewers concoct, it will likely struggle to match the threatening power of this image.



Stephanie Taylor's *Wildfire Wind* (2018) is 2×3.5 meters and uses charcoal from one home burned in the Paradise Camp Fire, applied to Graftix Dura-Lar, a nonwoven plastic drafting material.

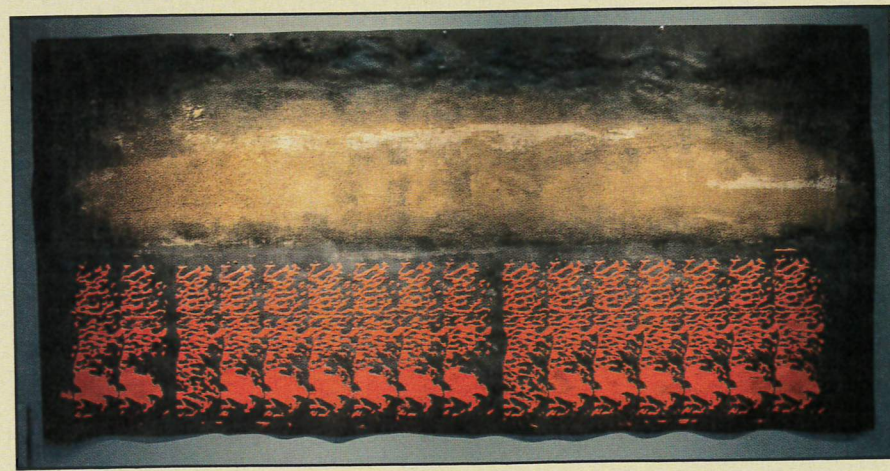
Ash, Visualized

Abstract imagery can convey the horrors of destructive fire, but also suggest its subtle unconventional beauty. Amiko Matsuo collected ash debris from the 2013 Spring Fire near California State University Channel Islands, where she taught at the time, applied it to a large canvas, and added a border made of Phos-Chek, a chemical fire retardant that is often sprayed on wildfires and colored red for ease of tracking. Here the fire retardant becomes a medium for expressing the threat and power of fire and also serves as a symbolic barricade. The red substance seems to block the advance of the black and brown smoke of the distant flames,

as if the painting itself is afire but at the same time shielding us from danger.

This abstract rendering of active wildfire forces us to make sense of what is a curiously beautiful design that she labels as a "landscape," while the red shimmering foreground could entrance or even overwhelm the viewer, as fire often can, and suggests how tenuously we are protected from flames. The red panel scored with repeating patterns of black markings might also suggest Asian brushwork or wood lacquer art, bringing together the fierce energies of nature's fire with the cultural inheritance of sedate and sophisticated art. The work suggests how we might tame such wildfires in

Amiko Matsuo made *Landscape: Ash and Phos-Chek* (2018), approximately 1×2.5 meters in size, by applying ash from the Spring Fire and a red fire retardant onto paper.



actuality and in our imaginations—with the application of Phos-Chek and the transfiguration of fire into art.

Matsuo extends this aesthetic transfiguration of material by fire in a work entitled *Bat Cone Ash*. With her artistic partner and colleague Brad Monsma, Matsuo coiled locally sourced clay into the shape of traffic cones, glazed them, drew traditional Asian designs on them with ash from local fires, and then fired the cones in a controlled outdoor burn.

This process evokes the artist as fiery creator, here making fire serve the ends of culture. These ideas are ancient, with the Greek god Hephaestus working at the forge, or Agni the Vedic fire god who performs transformational rites of passage for the purposes of weddings, cremations, and expanding human consciousness. More recently than these ancient gods, poet William Blake enacts fiery creation itself in his famous poem "The Tyger" (1794) in which the artist recapitulates the act of creation even as he questions its source:

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
In the forests of the night,
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In what distant deeps or skies
Burnt the fire of thine eyes?
On what wings dare he aspire?
What the hand, dare seize the
fire? . . .

What the hammer? what the chain?
In what furnace was thy brain? . . .

Blake's speaker interrogates an absent creator without diminishing the terrors of the awful process or its product. Wildfire holds its terrors for its human victims and vulnerable nature, while at the same time providing practical energy for making things and inspiring art. Nature and culture come together in many of these artists who plunder fire debris for sources of their artistic media.

Conceptual artist Christine Atkinson goes a step further and turns wildfire into an arresting sculpture. She mixes salt and epoxy with field-collected debris and forges a square block, placing its stark geometries in front of us on a polished wood table, as if it were a laboratory specimen of her excavations. Her complete remolding of natural fire materials might suggest the formation of coal, or scruffy gemstone, or the Earth's core or its layers. As a seemingly unearthed quarried solid, it evokes a time capsule of earlier, ancient fires or the tragic accumulations of recent conflagrations.

There's a gouge or two in her *Fragmentation, variation II*, a fault line of sorts, reminding us that this cubed remnant can crack, break apart, and become even more fragmented, as it does in the third variation of her series of wildfire solids. Thus fire detritus is hardly solid at all, but fragile and easily crumbled—an insubstantial ground cover that blanks out living things. This ash is what the forest, trees, leaves, and roots become through our reckless alchemy. Atkinson's cube confronts our refusal to look at what climate change has wrought.

Fire has always been considered a source of spiritual transformation, but here the deadened solidified materials of fire suggest the coldness of space, emptiness, a blank otherness, without reference to the living natural world that makes up its substance. We stare and wonder what to say. Who or what is transformed? Metamorphosis here has led to something inert, lifeless, a chunk of frozen soot. The work almost checks our urge to locate it in a world we think we know. Our narrative impulse has no place to start or end. Such a reaction may do more to force recognition of the dangerous pointlessness of our environmental violations.

Fire, Exposed

In a complete shift of media, photographer Luther Gerlach employs early



Amiko Matsuo and Brad Monsma's *Bat Cone Ash* (2016) is shown here in the remnants of the controlled outdoor burn used to fire the clay. The artists coiled locally sourced clay into the shape of traffic cones, glazed them, drew traditional Asian designs on them using ash from local fires, and then fired them in the outdoor burn.

photographic methods to capture the harrowing aftermath of contemporary wildfires. He takes a large wooden camera and portable darkroom into the field, in this case the woods burned from the 2017 Thomas Fire near his home in Southern California. He coats a



Christine Atkinson's *Fragmentation, variation II* (2020) is a 14-centimeter cube made from wildfire debris mixed with salt and epoxy.

glass plate with wet collodion, a syrupy light-sensitive medium, and creates a negative, which takes about 10 minutes of exposure. He prints it and then sprinkles fire-debris ash and sulfur-laden water from a nearby warm spring directly on the print (see page 350). By some uncanny process, this treatment produces preternatural effects, resulting in shadowy afterimages of mysterious

forms, here appropriately called "ghost trees." The remnants of once-living trees seem to give off smoky emanations of their former lives, as if the fire has released them.

That substances from fire-damaged woods can generate gloomy, mysterious imagery gives new resonance to the alchemical power of fire and water, as if we have been missing the magical powers that fire debris contains within itself. The emanations suggest something otherworldly, alien, perhaps from the lower depths, from where the underground sulfurous waters might also be said to flow.

This different view of fire effects provokes new reflections on its impacts, and these strange images also project a stunning kind of beauty. The shadowy sepia scrim floating over the trunks and delicate branches suggests a hidden, earlier world we get only a glimpse of, as if the artist pulls back the curtain ever so slightly from the covert reality of fire. The technologically sophisticated but antique photographic process produces fantasy reflections that can only puzzle us about what else we are missing and what kind of ephemeral, dark beauty we are being asked to contemplate.

Fire-debris art seems to be able to take so many extravagant forms dependent on the imagination and ingenuity of the artist. Kim Abeles takes this art form to a new level. Over the years,



Luther Gerlach's *Ghost Trees*, from his series *Poignant Portfolio no. 6* (2018), uses a historical wet-plate process with a wooden field camera, modified with fire-debris ash and sulfur-laden water.

she has made stencils that allow smog and air pollution particulates to filter through and leave gray images on various backgrounds. Her *Smog Collectors* series includes commemorative ceramic plates with images made from smog particulates depicting the visages of various U.S. presidents and other global leaders, whose speeches and policies have affected, positively or negatively, the quality of the planet's air.

In recent "smog paintings," Abeles stenciled images of the deck chairs from the *RMS Titanic* and set them on the roof of her mother's house in Pasadena during the dark days of the 2020 Bobcat Fire. It burned for nearly a month in the Angeles National Forest north of Los Angeles, clouding skies and sifting ash over a huge area that had not seen such air pollution since the worst days before modern emissions controls. The *Titanic* chairs make the point about our global ship about to be sunk not by an iceberg but by the warming of the whole planet beset with wildfires, while for Abeles most actions to combat climate change must seem aspirational.

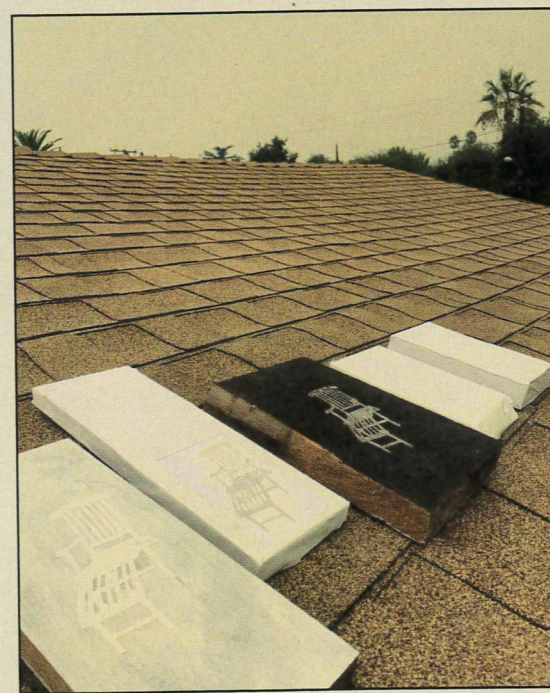
Abeles's conceptual art is direct, makes its environmental statement

unsparingly, and through its elaborate multidisciplinary processes, turns the fires themselves into artists of international protest.

A Reawakening

Fire-debris art reveals human ingenuity in transforming the wreckage of fire into profound sources of understanding. As archeologists of fire, these artists become field-workers, collecting and bringing back specimens, making us look at them in different contexts, using them in new ways, and experimenting with their textures, colors, and substances. Science and environmentalism can explain, illustrate, and document the sources and consequences of anthropogenic global warming, but what these intriguing works of art bring to the discussion are images and objects that call on our need to interpret them on our own, in the private world of our troubled consciousness and emotional awareness.

Kim Abeles's *Titanic Deck Chairs* are shown in the process of collecting ash and other particulates on a Pasadena, California, rooftop during the Bobcat Fire, on September 6, 2020. Her *Smog Collectors* series uses airborne particulates filtered through stencils to form images.



These artists make new forms of both beauty and terror from the waste of catastrophe. They leave records of extreme occurrence, an encounter with the uncanny, and put their own personal mark on it, using the human hand to leave a sign on gallery walls of something magically experienced. They can serve as modern cave paintings or pictographs.

These works place us front and center in our human-caused fiery obliterations, exposing us, we might say, as slow-acting arsonists. Our all too apparent transformations of the planet's environment get both mirrored and ameliorated by these artists of wild-fire rubble, soot, dust, and ash. They significantly suggest the transformation we must perform on ourselves and the planet if we are to curb these conflagrations and give the planet a chance to recover from and adjust to what we have wrought. We must, like them, become environmental activists and artists of transformation, working our damages into new forms of insight and ecological health.

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