

Drawing fire: Flagstaff Arts Council organizes in-depth artistic study of wildland blazes



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As monsoon clouds build dark formations over Flagstaff, it may become easier to sidestep just how parched the forests of northern Arizona have become.

Less than one week ago, Arizona residents and people all over the world paused in remembrance of the 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots who lost their lives to a startling wildfire ignited by a lightning strike.

In these instances, it may seem plausible to seek answers to looming questions. And one question has surfaced among art promoters in Flagstaff: What if we could make sense of the effects of Yarnell and the more recent Slide fire through art?

To help the community understand and interpret wildfire — both human- and nature-caused — the Flagstaff Arts Council and the Southwest Fire Science Consortium have teamed up on a project with intent to harness knowledge through creative means.

With the topic of fire fresh on local palates and minds, over the next year the “Fires of Change” project will pair 10 artists from Flagstaff and around the Southwest with fire managers and scientists in an effort to exchange ideas and learn from each other in understanding fire patterns relating to climate change and the influence of burns.

“We’re hoping to create a synergy among them, and help the artists come up with some ideas for their art,” said the Consortium’s program coordinator, Barbara Satink-Wolfson.

Beginning in September, artists will convene in Flagstaff for one week and embark on a series of workshops to help them gain insight and inspiration for their work. They will then have one year to create original pieces that are creative expressions of fire science.

What it is to burn

A two-day trip to the Grand Canyon's North Rim will get artists on the ground. Firefighters and land managers will facilitate studies of fires like the recent lightning-caused Galahad fire, which was allowed to burn for overall forest health.

"It's because of the program, because they both do a lot of prescribed fire, and they've burned a lot of area over the years that they're able to let it go," Satink-Wolfson said. "That's one really good example of what fire could be, and what it should be naturally."

She noted less than 1 percent of prescribed burns turn into wildfires, but inaccurate representation skews the figures. From Consortium's perspective, one hope for the project is to highlight the positive aspects of prescribed burns through education.

"Specifically around here, fire is a natural part of the ecosystem and has been historically," Satink-Wolfson said. "By taking it out, we've made conditions ripe for severe wildfires where we have complete forest replacement. Prescribed fire helps get us back on track, helps prevent the larger fires. It helps prevent the high-severity fires."

Once back in Flagstaff, the artists will suit up in flame-retardant gear and head into an active prescribed burn through the Nature Conservancy's Fire Learning Network operation called TREX, short for training exchange.

"We're hoping to get to see some actual fire on the ground. We'll have the PIOs take the small group of artists out to see some of the actual ignitions. That's given conditions are good, given lots of ducks that have to go into a row before we can do that, but that's our hope," Satink-Wolfson said.

Interpreting with art

With funding from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Coconino Center for the Arts, 2014 Viola Award in Visual Art winner Shawn Skabelund is curator for this exhibition.

His solo project "Virga: The Hunt for Water" touched upon forest themes through large-scale installations, notably his charred wood work "Standing at the Fire's Edge."

A former hotshot firefighter, Skabelund has special credence to speak on the issue of fire suppression and climate change, and with his perspective, visitors should expect sizable tools for making sense of these issues.

Executive Director of Flagstaff Arts Council John Tannous noted "Fires of Change" has been in the works for nearly two years, even before Yarnell.

"Most of the artists that applied to be a part of this show, they mentioned the Yarnell fire," Tannous said. "People need to come together to process these things, to

understand, to mourn, to integrate what has happened into their lives and make sense of things. I don't think there's anybody better than artists to do that."

The Center for the Arts' successful "Beyond the Border" exhibit in 2012 alerted the art world of the public's thirst for more creative interpretations of hot-button subjects central to understanding multifaceted lifeways in the Southwest.

Tannous said he puts absolute faith in the creative and emotional light artists shine on issues of climate change and wildfire, and in one year the community should finally have big pieces to the puzzle of understanding what's happening to our world.

"It's not our objective to create things that will change people's minds or spurn them to action," Tannous said of the project and forthcoming exhibit. "More than anything, we want to educate, we want to inspire, we want to give people the tools to better understand the world around them through art."