

Burn is Beautiful

Fires of Change observes the forest for the trees

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Sculpture by Bryan David Griffith

Glaring heat and crackling descend upon the landscape overnight as the community rises to greet the smoky dawn. Days later, charred leaves still slip from the sky—remains of the burnt Ponderosa pine forest blanketing Oak Creek Canyon—and reality sinks. What will grow in the flames' wake remains a story unfolding by the second.

Living through wildfire is equally terrifying and exhilarating, as residents of Sedona and Flagstaff experienced in recent years during the human-ignited Slide and Schultz fires, and countless times in the past. And though this summer was wetter than recent years, fire is a very real—and necessary—trait of the Southwest landscape.

The culmination of more than a year of backbreaking field and studio work, a group of 11 artists from around the Southwest have brought the forest to the Coconino Center for the Arts with *Fires of Change*. Acting as the artistic component of the annual Flagstaff Festival of Science, the partnership between the Flagstaff Arts Council, the Southwest Fire Science Consortium at NAU and the Landscape Conservation Initiative, set these artists on a mission to challenge their practices and examine what constitutes beauty. Spoken in a uniquely artistic language, this work is designed to shift conversations in an effort to help the public understand the effects of fire's grip historically and in the future.

On the ground

The impetus for *Fires of Change* sparked before 2014's Slide Fire, and even before the Yarnell Hill Fire of 2013, which was a turning point for bringing this project to fruition. Between *Beyond the Border*, a provocative exhibition at CCA in 2012, and *Fires of Change* curator Shawn Skabelund's 2013 Viola Award-winning solo exhibition *Virga: The Hunt for Water* coupled with climate change debates and Flagstaff's geographic location, organizers and the public demanded to focus the fire-based conversation. Kathleen Brennan, Julie Cornick, David Chorlton, Bryan David Griffith, Craig Goodworth, Saskia Jorda, Helen Padilla, Bonnie Peterson, Katharina Roth and Steven Yazzie burned to moderate the exchange through their work.

One year ago, *Fires of Change* began with a week of fire science "boot camp" split between the Grand Canyon, Flagstaff and the Slide Fire burn site. The convoy of white vans coursing through Kaibab National Forest surrounding Grand Canyon's North Rim would return not only full of artists, but teeming with facts and developing viewpoints obtained

during their three-day stay. While hiking old burn sites and noting the remnants of fire's movement, the artists learned alongside preeminent National Park Service fire ecologists who decide action plans in the heat of prescribed and wild blazes. They even learned from the wildland firefighters themselves who spend months on the rim, waiting for the first smoke column.

On the spot, they pondered climate change, burned trees, miles of red tape between an active burn site and Washington D.C.-based lawmakers, and the dichotomous relationship encumbering cities like Flagstaff and a forest parched to return to health. Padilla and Griffith, both Flagstaff-based multimedia artists, immediately turned their attention to our culture, one that has historically shunned fire.

"We see ourselves as saving life by preventing these disasters like fire; that we're doing a good thing. But if you look at it from a more ecological point of view, which I'm doing with this work, is that those two forces are not opposed, they're part of one in the same continuity. It's not possible to have one without the other. There is no light without darkness, life without death. There is no forest without fire," Griffith says.

For nearly 100 years, official policy between the National Park Service and Forest Service had been to squelch any fire, regardless of the ignition source—human or natural. That pure-suppression policy led to the forests we see today—more than 100 trees per acre where there should be as few as 10 in some areas and an abundance of "litter," including the carpet of needles on the forest floor. With this new forest and soaring temperatures relating to climate change, the propensity for uncontrollable megafires skyrockets. But the tide is changing.

Griffith adds, "My role was for people to question presumptions about fire, and what it means to live in a fire-prone landscape."

Burn is beautiful

At the threshold of the gallery, the scent of fresh pine pitch invites curiosity. The source, one will find, is a large-scale sculpture Griffith developed to challenge not only his artistic vision, but nature's cyclical force and humans' preconceptions of beauty. With help from the Flagstaff Fire Department's wildland team selecting straight logs, and careful nudging on Skabelund's part for the artist not to run free with ambition, Griffith logged hundreds of hours assembling a circle of burnt snags and freshly sliced logs arranged in height order. *Broken Equilibrium* juxtaposes life and death, the manageable and non-, the artist says, and forces onlookers to reexamine their relationship with nature as they ponder scientific and moral obligations.

"One of the things I discovered out on our workshop, like a lot of the artists, was that fire itself—which I previously saw as disconcerting at best and ugly at worst—had an aesthetically beautiful quality," he says. "I'm not talking about the potential for regrowth, I'm talking about the actual burned, charred landscape itself. The power of that has a stark beauty. It's kind of like listening to the music of a foreign culture. At first it's kind of off-putting, but you spend enough time with it you start to see that beauty."

A masterful display of technicality and vision, the result positions a forest within the gallery—one Griffith hopes will convey the idea that "burn is beautiful." But, just in case Griffith's large-scale marriage of literal and figurative elements didn't work, he also provided two sculptures and a two-dimensional work.

Griffith points to a painting reminiscent of his ethereal photography. In application, he coated the canvas in beeswax like gesso and held each panel over an open flame—effectively painting with smoke. He recalls the difficult process of warming the wax enough to accept the carbon without melting it was difficult, but patience and practice rendered *Severance*. The work is placed adjacent to Cornick's dozen panels—burns sketched with charcoal from the actual area, including the Yarnell site close to her Prescott home.

"As far as I'm concerned, it all works. The intimacy of each piece is there," notes Skabelund, who is also an instructor at NAU, of the exhibition's flow. "What I taught for 20 years is art is all about simplifying; getting it down to the basic, powerful, strong concept. Perfect form."

The curator also explains the flow of the exhibition is a confidence booster for artists like Griffith who managed to execute such large-scale ideas.

Charred reflections

At the exhibition's official opening at the beginning of the month, the public mingled among visiting artists, peers and even those who expended more than energy battling the blazes contained within each piece. Even the scientists on hand, some who'd taught—and learned beside—these artists were surprised and pleased to see these lessons reformed into complementary works of art.

One artist literally formed these lessons into the foundation of her home. Having acquired this information from reliable sources, and with the added enlightenment of constructing and designing a custom home in the forest largely using salvaged materials, Padilla was forced to reevaluate her habits as an artist and as a human being.

Red Flag's unfurled rolls are made of bailing wire and all the red fabrics Flagstaff Goodwill stores had to offer. Tying the piece together is a hunk of gold-leafed Ponderosa pine salvaged from the exact spot her home's patio now lay. This multi-pronged commentary of inclusivity, Padilla says, is an example of what the public will learn in the future from artists around the world.

Directly behind, *Bang Mirror* was another boot camp takeaway that profoundly impacted this artist—and one with which many others seemed to respond. At the North Rim, one local water tanker truck and a handful of firefighters on assignment through the fire season demonstrated what to do in the event they were overrun by flame.

Padilla remembers watching hours of YouTube videos later on, and each firefighter relayed the same information—they all hoped to never have to deploy. Her piece was made from 966 tiny fortune teller-shaped pieces of real fire shelter the local Flagstaff wildland firefighters had donated to her cause.

"I wanted this to be a mirror you do not see yourself in," Padilla notes, "but one that looks back at you."

Padilla and her fellow artists express each piece is meant as an evaluation, and one not only related to forest health, but personal health. "And regardless of time and place along life's warbled timeline, the question remains: Where do you fit in the bigger picture?"