

At First, the Fire Seemed to Be Part of the Show

A manhole explosion on Lexington Avenue upstaged the Manhattan opening of Peter Kephart's "Painting With Fire" exhibition, and the artist turned the crowd into new visitors.

By Colin Moynihan, The New York Times | Published April 22, 2011 | New York, N.Y.



Utility workers repair the manhole on Lexington Avenue after the explosion, while a screen inside the gallery shows one of Kephart's fire paintings. Photo as published with the original post.



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Summary

On Thursday evening, April 21, 2011, Peter Kephart opened "Painting With Fire," an exhibition of 43 of his fire paintings at the Zenith Gallery, 179 Lexington Avenue at East 31st Street in Manhattan. About an hour into the reception, a manhole exploded in the street just outside the gallery window,

launching its cover into the air and setting a parked SUV's tire on fire.

Some arriving guests assumed the blast was a street performance staged by the artist, since the show was about fire and the gallery displayed a mock campfire inside. Others in the crowd left, fearing the windows would break. Con Edison crews later began repairs, and the reception resumed.

The article describes Kephart's process: he ignites gunpowder on cotton rag paper, holds the sheet over a bonfire in the woods, and then adds color to the singed patterns. Kephart told the Times his fascination with fire began at age 3, growing up in New Jersey, and that he sees fire as both destructive and renewing.

As firefighters packed up, Kephart went outside, handed out business cards and invited the onlookers in. "I had a captive audience," he told the Times.

KEY FACTS FROM THE ARTICLE

Exhibition	"Painting With Fire" — 43 fire paintings
Venue	Zenith Gallery, 179 Lexington Avenue at East 31st Street, New York, N.Y.
Opening	Thursday, April 21, 2011
Prices reported	\$750 to \$8,900

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