

Galleries: Pristine canvas meets destruction in Peter Kephart's 'firepaintings'

November 15, 2012

More than **13 years** ago



"A Lawnmowers Path to Paradise" by Peter Kephart on view at Zenith Gallery.



By Mark Jenkins

Some artists complete their work by damaging it. Peter Kephart begins with destruction, then partially remedies it. But some of the most striking pieces in his current Zenith Gallery show, Fire, Water, Earth and Wind: The Unforgettable Firepaintings of Peter Kephart, are the least remedied.

The West Virginia artist doesn't literally paint with fire, but he does use the heat from glowing embers to scorch and sometimes burn the cotton-rag paper to which he later adds pastel and watercolor. Before he brings the paper close to the warmth, he sprays it with water to prevent it from bursting into flame, and adds dots and squiggles of starch to preserve areas of whiteness. Sometimes, he draws charcoal lines with the hot end of a glowing stick, or uses gunpowder to blow small holes in the paper. Since he enlists such mercurial forces, Kephart must work quickly — and trust his intuition.

The resulting patterns inspire the finished works, which often take the form of landscapes. Charcoal daubs become trees, and a patch of blue sky turns a browned expanse into an autumn field. Kephart can add so much color to a picture that, disappointingly, its fire origins are obscured. But usually when the artist adds hues — including by placing colored paper behind burned-through areas — they complement the seared areas and voids.

Still, many of the show's highlights are unpainted firepaintings, crafted only with heat, water, starch and charcoal marks. The complex and robust "Beyond the Burning Land" suggests the work of a pyrotechnic Franz Kline. No less arresting, although simpler, is "Firewater," which features a burned-off corner and dots and circles of intense white. These are nothing more than bits of blank paper that went uncharred; surrounded by regions of tan, brown and black, the absences appear exceptionally luminous. The rare spots that survived the fire unscathed are what burn the brightest.

Jenkins is a freelance writer.

Fire, Water, Earth and Wind: The Unforgettable Firepaintings of Peter Kephart

on view through Nov. 27 at Zenith Gallery, Chevy Chase Pavilion, 5355 Wisconsin Ave. NW; 202-783-2963; www.zenithgallery.com.