

Peter Kephart

Review in The Washington Post, January 2015

Museums

In the galleries: Using heat to create several kinds of artworks

January 9, 2015

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Peter Kephart, "Thermal Breakdown." Firepainting on watercolor paper.



By Mark Jenkins

Peter Kephart has a singular technique, yet it yields several kinds of artworks. The West Virginia artist begins by roasting moistened cotton-rag paper over hot embers; he sometimes likes the results so much that he stops there. “Setting the World on Fire, One Painting at a Time,” at Zenith Gallery, includes several small works from the “Dominican Sunset” series that are merely charred. In other pieces, Kephart uses the scorched surface as the basis for elaborate paintings — often landscapes but occasionally abstractions.

The distinction isn’t always clear: The heat-swirled curves of “Abstract Natural #2” suggest a female torso. A few pictures, so painted that the burns that inspired them are barely discernible, include such realistic touches as a beached rowboat or a cloud-speckled blue sky. After it’s burned, the paper leaves jagged edges or outright voids, and Kephart highlights the absences with backing sheets, often red, whose color shows through.

Kephart’s innovation suggests various paths, and he explores many of them. What most often draws the eye, though, are the areas that remained white because the artist splashed them with a starchy paste before charring the paper. They are only the places where nothing happened, yet they glow like stars.

Peter Kephart: Setting the World on Fire, One Painting at a Time and Transformative Roots and Ritual Objects: The Art of Anne Bouie On view through Jan. 31 at Zenith Gallery, 1429 Iris St. NW. 202-783-2963. www.zenithgallery.com.