

Fire Painting Artist Burns His Art

Artist Pete Kephart scorches paper covered with paint, water and other materials over the embers of a bonfire to create luminous, surreal images.

By Deborah Block, Voice of America | Published June 29, 2016 | Levels, West Virginia



WATCH THE VIDEO REPORT (2 min 35 sec)

This story was published as a broadcast video with a companion text article. The full text is reproduced below; scan the code or follow the link to watch Kephart at work.

Video: <https://www.voanews.com/a/3398282.html>

Text story: [voanews.com/a/fire-painting-artist-burns-art/3397727.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/fire-painting-artist-burns-art/3397727.html)

Also on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7JYmsDqK22I>

Artist Pete Kephart likes to burn his art.

“My mom always said, ‘Don’t play with fire,’” Kaphart [sic] says, and then laughs. “I never learned.”

For the past 12 years at his home in the mountains of Levels, West Virginia, Kephart has been a fire painter, using fire, water, earth, wind and paint to create abstract images on paper with a feeling of motion and excitement.

He begins by building a huge bonfire. When it burns to cinders, Kephart places a plywood-backed sheet of white paper over it, scorching the paper for less than 30 seconds. Unlike common wood pulp paper, this paper is made from cotton, which is stronger and burns more slowly.

The timing is crucial, says Kephart.

“One second can make a huge difference between a fantastic, beautiful painting, and something that just burns to ash,” he says.

As the bonfire spits nearby, Kephart begins painting on paper laid out on top of tables, using water mixed with soap. He brushes lines and circles.

“If I paint a circle on a sheet of paper with just water, and I set it on fire, I’ll get a white circle on a brown sheet of paper,” he says.

Kephart explains how his technique works: “The places where I’m not applying any water, or water-based materials, will begin to burn very quickly, while at the same time, much of the water will still be present in the surface of the paper, and that’s what gives me the amazing contrast.”

The artist sweeps different patterns on other pieces of paper, using deep sky blue, grass green and sunny yellow paints, as well as some mud and ash. As he sprinkles a cinnamon-colored dried earth pigment,

he lets the light wind help create the design.

“The interaction of the elements that I’ve applied to the paper’s surface and the fire itself create entirely new effects,” he says.

Every painting a ‘surprise’

As Kephart removes the paintings from the embers, each reveals a luminous, surreal image. The paper painted only with water suggests a sunset with clouds over the sea. The colors on the other papers have become intertwined.

“Every painting is a surprise,” says Kephart, who as far as he knows is the only artist using this technique.

He discovered it by accident as he was burning used art paper. “Some raindrops fell on a sheet of paper, so when I set the paper on fire, the raindrops preserved these white, bright spots on this brown sheet of paper that had burned.”

Some of his paintings remain the way they are. Others — his “unfinished paintings” — he fills in using pastels in his studio. Some become intricate and colorful nature scenes.

Kephart points out one of the unfinished paintings he plans to add to: “I’m seeing a sun with a mountain range in the distance, and a river or stream running down from the center.”

The fire paintings sell at the Zenith Gallery in Washington, D.C., for between \$1,000 and \$7,500 to “people from all walks of life,” Kephart [sic] says.

The striking paintings show that even destruction can be beautiful.

HOW TO CITE THIS SOURCE

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