

Time of Fire exhibit merges the science of fire with creative bursts

by Erica Francich / For the News-Miner

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Photo by Jim Barker Painter Sarah DeGennaro works on a piece of fire-inspired art for the Art of Fire art exhibit.

FAIRBANKS — Fire can be mysterious, sometimes dangerous and destructive, but also beautiful and restorative. It often plays an important role in the natural evolution of ecosystems, sometimes maintaining the strength of the current environment and sometimes stimulating succession from one system to another. Given its power and complexity, fire is an understandable artistic muse.

Nine local artists were recently invited to embrace the inspiration of fire, but were asked to consider fire science and management in addition to fire itself. "In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire" is a project funded by the Joint Fire Science Program and developed by the Alaska Fire Science Consortium (AFSC) and the Bonanza Creek Long Term Ecological Research Station (BNZ LTER) that brought artists, scientists and members of the fire management community together to create a unique and educational art exhibit.

Artists spent time with scientists and members of many fire management organizations — the U.S. Forest Service, Alaska Division of Forestry, National Park Service, Alaska Fire Service and others — and each used the experience as information and inspiration for five to 10 pieces of art to be included in "In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire" art exhibit which opened Friday at the Bear Gallery, Centennial Center for the Arts, in Pioneer Park. The exhibit, hosted and sponsored by the Fairbanks Arts Association, runs through Sept. 3. Members of the fire management community were also invited to contribute art pieces based on their own experience and expertise, which will be on display in the Alaska Public Lands Information Center at the Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center through September.

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Photo by Jim Barker Yasunari Izaki sculpts with metal and wood. He said he enjoys the juxtaposition of wood, which can weather and has a sense of fragility, and metal, which conveys strength and permanence.

Exhibit curator Karin Franzen explained both scientists and artists approach their chosen subjects with a certain fervor that leads to an exceptional understanding of their chosen area of expertise.

“Artists are drawn to certain subjects and certain interpretations of those subjects. It is the same with scientists,” she said. “They are drawn to a certain subject, and they come to know it very intimately.”

She said the “The Art of Fire” project “looks at the same subject from two different viewpoints,” offering an experience that is “enlightening for both artist and scientist.”

The project brings together not just two perspectives on the subject but three: The management component unveils another layer of expertise and inspiration.

“The average person has no idea the type of coordination, equipment and expertise that goes into the operation of fighting fires, and the management system,” Franzen said.

Mary Beth Leigh, director of the “In a Time of Change” program and associate professor of microbiology at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, noted the importance of awareness — both of science and management — the program aims to facilitate.

“Our sense of place is strongly linked to our ecosystem, so it is important to understand the functionality of its parts, including the role of fire in our ecosystem,” she said. “It’s also important for society to make informed decisions about the landscape and manage it responsibly.”

In a Time of Change

This not the first time the marriage of art and science produced unique artistic expression in Fairbanks. BNZ LTER created the “In a Time of Change” network, modeling a program created by another LTER. The HG Andrews Experimental Forest LTER at Oregon State University created the Spring Creek Project that brought writers and scientists together to create science-inspired written work. As an artist and a scientist — a modern dancer and choreographer — Leigh was interested in developing a similar project in Alaska.

“I was really impressed with their work, and recognized the potential to reach a broader audience through art,” she said.

Working closely with fellow biologist and UAF professor Terry Chapin, Leigh developed the network, which expanded the focus to include performance art as well as writing. The network formed in 2007, aiming to integrate an exchange of perspectives from the arts, sciences and humanities regarding climate change in Interior Alaska.

“There’s a two-way exchange that goes on. Artists and scientists have different ways of perceiving what’s happening in an ecosystem, and they can be very complimentary,” Leigh



said. "The artists are extremely enthusiastic and appreciative of the opportunity to get into the field with the scientists, and the scientists are often challenged and encouraged by the artists' astute observations."

Despite the seeming disconnect, Leigh said artists and scientists are not in such distant camps.

"They are extremely intelligent, extremely creative and extremely curious people," she said.

Each project created through the network is meant to explore a new perspective on the connection between humans and the changing ecosystem in Alaska. The first show, held in 2008, was "In a Time of Change: A Performance by Writers, Artists and Scientists." It featured readings from a number of Alaskan writers, performances including an original modern dance piece performed by Leigh's dance company Deliquescent Designs, and presentations from local scientists. The second show, "In a Time of Change: Envisioning the Future" featured varied performance art, including dance and experimental theater, as well as visual art featuring work by 24 Alaskan artists. Performances and the art exhibit were held in September 2010.

The events were funded by the National Science Foundation through the U.S. LTER Network and BNZ LTER, and a variety of other contributions and grants. Leigh said there was strong support from art- and science-based organizations — Alaska EPSCoR, UAF, United States Forest Service, Fairbanks Arts Association, UAF Collaborative Arts Council, International Polar Year and the UAF Institute of Arctic Biology.

Recognizing the power of art to reach a broad audience, Sarah Trainor of AFSC approached Leigh about partnering to create a program that used visual art to engage the public in conversations about fire science and management. Just as changing ecosystems served as muse for previous events, this new project would use fire to inform and inspire artists.

"In a Time of Change: The Art of Fire" started to take shape in 2010, giving artists two years to interact with the fire science and management community and create fire-inspired art. What was different with this project, Leigh said, was the addition of the management component, which added yet another perspective to the artist-scientist dynamic.

"The managers are working at that interface of ecological and social systems. They are grappling with how society makes decisions regarding our ecosystems," she said.

Franzen said the management component offered a more historic view of fire — "what it has meant to people and landscapes throughout history."

Artwork in both the professional exhibit and the community art show is meant to include ecological, cultural and environmental issues as well as management aspects.

"One of the things we want people to be more aware of is the process involved, to see the science behind it as well as the pieces and parts that go into making fire and land management decisions," said AFSC Coordinator Jennifer Northway. "The managers need to have information available to make the best decisions possible, and it's all connected."

Field trips

"What better way to expose people to a world than bet getting them out in it to see it first hand?"

Northway said the field trips offered an important "behind-the-scenes look at what is happening when a fire occurs, and the many moving parts involved in managing it." The field trip component is a key part of the "In a Time of Change" program, and was a driving factor for some to get involved.

"The reason I was really excited about getting involved was the emphasis on the field trips. Having those different realms of experience and expertise brought together was a real draw for me as an artist," Franzen said.

Franzen, a professional visual artist, said the specialized expertise of the scientists added such value to the outdoors experiences.

"Most of us go through our lives and only see things superficially. This experience can open our eyes to surrounding habitats and help us become more observant," she said. "Creating art is intimately linked to observation."

AFSC and Bonanza Creek LTER coordinated four field trips for participating artists:

- Fire simulation: Artists joined Northway of AFSC and other state fire officers for a fire simulation event at Chena Lakes in May 2011. The Alaska Fire Service organized the day-long training event with various fire fighter groups and equipment, offering demonstration of smoke jumping, cargo and water drops and other elements of aerial fire suppression.
- Management facilities: Alaska Fire Service coordinated a tour of its facilities on Fort Wainwright in June 2011. Artists sat in on a fire weather briefing, visited the Alaska Interagency Joint Information Center to witness tracking of fire activity and processing of information requests, and received a tour of the Alaska Interagency Coordination Center, responsible for prediction services, resource coordination and suppression logistics.

"It was really interesting to see the multitude of government agencies working together to solve the problems associated with fire," fiber artist Ree Nancarrow said. "We learned a lot about what goes into trying to control a fire, what goes into deciding appropriate action."

- Denali: In July 2011 artists spent a day with fire ecologists in Denali National Park and Preserve. Alongside wildland fire and interpretive staff, artists explored, studied and interpreted the 2002 Horseshoe Lake Fire, learning how to analyze plant succession after a fire by measuring soil temperature depths, tree density and dominant species. Denali Assistant Fire Management Officer Charlie Reynar discussed the complexities of wildfire in Alaska, including vegetation and burn mosaics, climate change and its effects on fire, and park management strategies. Artists also had the chance to do field sketches based on their conversations and experiences at the park.

Franzen noted the power of experiencing nature with a scientist who is engaged with the surroundings and has spent time studying and understanding the ecosystem.

- LTER Research Station: In August 2011 artists accompanied scientists working with the BNZ LTER and UAF to the LTER station.

"These experiences are valuable for scientists too because artists sometimes ask questions scientists hadn't really thought of, challenging them to articulate their findings and helping them remember to make the connection to the big picture," Leigh said.

Artists learned about various ecological studies in progress, including the Rosie Creek fire study area where ecologists have studied 28 years of succession. They saw the difference between a burn area dominated by birch and one dominated by black spruce, and learned about fire history from a core sample of permafrost.

"The field trip element is always a really powerful part of the experience. It is structured for two-way exchange, allowing people to become immersed in the environment," Leigh said. "We wanted to offer information on the proactive fire management side and pair that with fire science, how fire effects vegetation, and allow that to be fodder for creative output."

The value of awareness

"People in Alaska experience fire first hand or second hand routinely. But really understanding the ecological and biological elements involved is a very challenging human endeavor," Leigh said.

Using an artistic eye to look at fire science and management could, Leigh suggested, offer insights into the complexity of the system.

"Fire is not all about destruction. It is also a natural part of our ecosystem, with diverse and valuable effects. Fire management is about maximizing those benefits and minimizing the risks," Leigh explained.

Painter Jennifer Moss noted the draw of such a "holistic approach to investigating a subject."

“Intertwining with the management community and the cross over between art and science really led to a deepened understanding of the process and the science that is involved (in fire management),” she said.

Franzen noted the experience of visiting the management facilities—seeing the control center, the vast amount of equipment that continually moves in and out of the Alaska Fire Service facility throughout the fire season, the weather monitoring and other aspects of fire management and suppression — was stirring.

“To watch the system in action, with all of the moving parts, is to witness a well-orchestrated dance,” she said.

Artists

More than 30 artists submitted proposals to be part of the show, and nine were chosen to participate. They work in varied media including wood, metal, photography, painting and fiber.

- Jessie Hedden: Mixed media and painting
- Yasunari Izaki: Wood and metal sculpture
- Jennifer Moss: Painting
- Amanda Ellis: Photography and sculpture
- Erinn Kathryn (Hatter): Mixed media and painting
- Ree Nancarrow: Fiber
- Phil Marshall: Wood sculpture
- Sarah DeGennaro: Painting and drawing
- Hanna Stevenson: Metal and fiberglass sculpture
- Artists joined for a variety of reasons but all enjoyed the inspiration that fire, and the science and management components, turned out to be.

“I’ve always found fire to be aesthetically interesting but I really had no direct experience with fire other than the yearly fires we all experience in the Interior,” painter Moss said.

Wood sculptor Marshall has long delighted “in cruising the boreal forest to spot and harvest unique tree treasures.” He said he “gained a breadth of knowledge” and “a lot of good jargon” while interacting with scientists and managers on field trips.

Nancarrow has a background as artist—she moved to Alaska in 1964 with a degree in art education — and a biologist — she is close to earning her master’s degree in botany. She also has a great deal of experience turning to nature for inspiration: Her husband, William Nancarrow, was Denali National Park’s first naturalist. Nancarrow and her husband spent plenty of time observing changes in the park area — a tundra pond’s transition into a meadow, decreasing number of moose near their home in the park, changes in temperature patterns and snowfall.

Driving back and forth between her home in Denali National Park and Fairbanks, where she gets most of her groceries, Nancarrow has had plenty of opportunity to witness and document the changes fire can bring to a landscape.

“Year after year I watch what happens with succession, and I’ve wanted for some time to do something with these images and ideas,” she said of her work related to fire. “I feel like I am just barely getting started. I could spend a whole lifetime on this subject and images.”

A series of lectures by artists, managers and scientists will be included in the APLIC exhibit, held at 7 p.m. Aug. 8, 15 and 22. Also sculptor Marshall will offer tours of his studio, Polhavn Woodfabrik, in Fairbanks Aug. 4.

The exhibit will travel to Alaska Pacific University in January. Leigh said it may travel to other sites following the Anchorage show, possibly generating a following for the next "In a Time of Change" project, "Tropic Cascades," which focuses on predator-prey interactions as fuel for the art.

Erica Franich is science writer for Alaska Fire Science Consortium (AFSC), Scenarios Network for Alaska & Arctic Planning (SNAP), and Alaska Center for Climate Assessment and Policy (ACCAP). She can be reached at elfranich@alaska.edu.

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