

# The Washington Post

**In the galleries: Some art is sultry, while other pieces are smoky**

By Mark Jenkins

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Dennis Lee Mitchell uses an acetylene torch to create his pictures. (Dennis Lee Mitchell/Gallery Neptune & Brown)

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## Dennis Lee Mitchell

Trained as a ceramist, Dennis Lee Mitchell has long worked with fire. But putting shaped clay in a kiln is less risky than the local artist's current project: applying an acetylene torch to paper. Each of the pictures in "Smoke Drawings," his show at Gallery Neptune & Brown, acknowledges the difficulty by listing the number of tries needed to get the desired result. One large, floral-like abstraction was preceded by 37 attempts.

Mitchell isn't the first to sketch with soot. In 2016, Hemphill Fine Arts showed smoke drawings the late Rockne Krebs made with a candle. But Mitchell's method yields stronger gestures, blacker blacks and subtle gradations of brownish grays.

The artist has said he enjoys the element of chance in his fiery process. Yet the finished works, based on preparatory drawings, appear anything but accidental. Their crispness recalls Man Ray's photographic abstractions, while the spare but meticulous designs suggest traditional Chinese ink paintings. With a torch as his brush, Mitchell sears forms to their essence.

Sharing the walls with Mitchell's work is a selection of stylish advertising posters made in Shanghai between 1914 and 1935. The posters, which the gallery has exhibited before, intriguingly juxtapose the exotic and the mercantile.

***Dennis Lee Mitchell: Smoke Drawings Chinese Art Deco Posters: 1914-1935 Through July 27 at Gallery Neptune & Brown, 1530 14th St. NW.***