

# Where There's Smoke

Dennis Lee Mitchell | By Buzz Spector | 2019

Not all studio accidents are happy but, every once in a while, an accident reveals itself to be a pathway to an unexpected artistic future. Dennis Lee Mitchell was at work in his studio in 2011, holding a blowtorch while welding a multi-part clay sculpture of the kind that had constituted a significant aspect of his long prior career as a ceramic sculptor. The eureka moment for Mitchell came when, torch in hand, he reached toward a sheet of drawing paper on a nearby table, and the passing flame left an inscription of soot on the white sheet.

In the eight years since then, Mitchell has produced a body of drawings made using the smoke of various industrial torches. These elegant works on paper are mainly circular in composition. These resemble the celestial coronas of the sun or moon in eclipse, or of the interstellar nebulae from which galaxies and planets are born. Other circular evocations include cherry or chrysanthemum blossoms, the ripples of stones thrown into ponds or, in more vertical compositions, the light beyond partially drawn curtains. In all of this body of work, Mitchell's adeptness with torch in hand operates at the verge of incinerating the paper on which he draws.

Fire's ancient connection to art includes charcoal, the kiln, blast furnaces, and the guttering candles used to light millennia of artworks. From Prometheus on, western art has represented fire in relation to the passions, rituals of purification or erasure, and as both the light of heaven and the burning depths of hell. I'm paraphrasing Gaston Bachelard here, whose 1938 book, *The Psychoanalysis of Fire* relates reverie to research and flames to inspiration. But what of smoke? Fire's residues, its embers and ashes, are very emblems of melancholia and loss. Not so with smoke. Whether in the atmosphere or as soot on a wall—or a sheet of paper—smoke confirms the vitality of the fire from which it arises, and soot-covered architectural surfaces, such as domestic or industrial chimneys, the upper reaches of old cathedrals, or even living room fireplaces, are themselves each emblems of production, celestial praise, or hospitality.

Smoke in or as art is a more recent development. The soot covering medieval altarpieces is a conservation problem; the sooty portions of Yves Klein's *Fire Paintings* (1961-62) are what define the work. Klein's partially burnt panels are compositions activated by scorching more than by actual burning. Klein used a flamethrower to make these works, and described his process this way: "I have succeeded in painting with fire, using very powerful and searing gas flames ... to lick the surface of a painting in order to record the spontaneous trace of fire."<sup>1</sup> Another post-war art movement, Italian *Arte Povera*, included several artists who worked with flame or soot, such as Jannis Kounellis, whose sculptural installations of the 1980s often included welding torches with their flames turned on, or Pier Paolo Calzolari, whose wall-mounted lead panels were sometimes fitted with sconces to hold burning candles.

These examples from Modern art history attach burning or its implements to artworks in real space, but the work of another *Arte Povera*-associated artist, Claudio Parmiggiani, is closer to Mitchell. In 2014 Parmiggiani filled a room with thick smoke. The rows of shelved books running along one wall were then removed, leaving their silhouettes on the prepared wood panels the artist had positioned behind them. These untitled panels have been exhibited in many situations since, each appearance reiterating the ghostliness of this library of smoke. Abby McKenzie, reviewing a 2017 show of Parmiggiani's work for the website, *Widewalls*, described this work as "a haunting representation of memory itself, a series of reflections, with incremental estrangement from fact."<sup>2</sup> Just as the outlined and absent books of Parmiggiani remain present as vaporous graphic traces, so Mitchell's smoky coronas evoke the movements in space of the torch that gave them form. In this way Mitchell's art, too, is one of memory.

Mitchell uses several types of gas-fueled torches to create his effects, but his choice of implements is more about drawing than painting. The "palette" in Mitchell's smoke on paper is by and large matte black, except at places where brownish scorching can be seen. Another reference to draftsmanship is in the way the works' layers of soot retain their inherent material dryness; an effect related to charcoal more so than to oil paint. When Mitchell's torch makes crested furrows on horizontal sheets, a suggestion of Chinese ink brush landscapes also comes to mind. That said, veils, fronds, explosions, sediments and flowers are the most common representations in these works. Mitchell's touch ranges from ghostly to near solid black. Visible layers underlie all but the blackest

of Mitchell's drawings, but even in the densest of these works there is a persistent subtle transparency that is a specific characteristic of the powdery nature of the soot itself.

A key recent work of Mitchell's, *Finite-Infinite*, 2012 (pages 32 & 33), includes eighteen comparatively small-scale (each 12 x 12 inch) smoke on paper drawings, individually framed in white lacquer wood. These are arranged in parallel rows of three; the nine *Finite* works to the right, and the nine of *Infinite* to the left. All of these works feature swirling circular gestures that evoke nebulas, the clouds of astral dust and gas from which our solar system was formed more than five billion years ago. This cosmological inference is reiterated in Mitchell's title which joins finitude of experience to immeasurable essence. The striking difference between the arrays is that the nebula forms in the *Finite* drawings are isolated against pristine white, while the comparable forms in the *Infinite* drawings emerge from fields of dense black. We're accustomed to reading the whiteness of the paper as a kind of void behind whichever drawings we contemplate, but here Mitchell demonstrates that when the paper itself is visible, there is no such emptiness, only the materially tangible sheet of paper with its four edges. Although all 18 drawings are the same size, the sooty blackness of the *Infinite* makes those drawings visually unstable because they evoke our universal childhood experience of realizing that the night sky is not a ceiling studded with stars but an endless beyond.

The many floral format works in Mitchell's oeuvre are compelling in their frail beauty, but all together these blossoms operate as a kind of garden of smoke, reminding us, as in the words of Robert Harbison, that a garden starts, as biblical history did, in a garden that was at first the "fullest dream of integration, where [we] can persuade [ourselves] for a moment that ... life is beautiful and true because natural and therefore not just [a] wish fulfilling itself."<sup>3</sup> Here is where the cosmological implications of Mitchell's titling become understood. Two smoke flower drawings of 2019 bring this out; one is entitled *Encircle* (page 26) while the other is *Encircled* (page 28). The action of surrounding leads to the condition of being surrounded, like the radiant and ever-so-brief moment of an embrace.

Harbison notes that every garden is a veiled Edenic representation, whose arrangements of flowers and greenery are ways the gardener (artist) can make a space to represent the world. Just as in

Mitchell's nebular works, his smoke flowers expand outward in the mind, from the physical through the ephemeral toward the universal.

In such single panel works as *Untitled (48.3)*, 2019 (page 14), the largest on view in the Zolla/Lieberman Gallery show, the floral suggestion in the smoke drawing is subverted by sheer scale. In its six-by six-foot frame, this image is more like a blueprint for a fireworks explosion than a blossom. The near solid black field of *Smoke on Smoke #67*, 2019 (page 38), is also explosively resonant. At the corners of the work Mitchell has pulled the torch away from the paper, leaving visible the edges of his sweeping gestures. This is a difficult work to see within its protective glazing, but the reflections of themselves that viewers encounter make *Smoke on Smoke #67* into a kind of magic mirror.

The smoke drawings are means of fixing in place some of the most fleeting of perceptual instances. Whether the eye is drawn inward, as in Mitchell's floral or nebular images, or outward towards the suggestion of the horizon in his landscapes or veils, their uncanny delicacy of form is central to their eloquence. The graceful gestures forming these works visually exciting in a manner that also calls to mind the subtly apparitional aspect of flames in a fireplace, or even the sinister beauty of smoke curling upward from a lit cigarette. Mitchell's smoke operates at the margins of materiality; it is a recorded trace of movement without any of the preserved force or velocity usually visible in a drawn line or smear of paint. These drawings are a kind of armature of the ephemeral, and what's barely present in them as material is indelible in its firing of the imagination.

#### FOOTNOTES

1: Yves Klein, excerpt from "Chelsea Hotel Manifesto," 1961, in *Overcoming the problematics of Art: the writings of Yves Klein*, Spring Publications, 2007

2: Abby McKenzie, "Claudio Parmiggiani's Cyclical Creative Destruction at Simon Lee Gallery," Widewalls, March 24, 2017, accessed May 3, 2019, <https://www.widewalls.ch/claudio-parmiggiani-simon-lee-gallery>

3: Robert Harbison, from the Foreword to *Eccentric Spaces*, New York: Knopf, 1977