

# Where There's Smoke

Beautiful and Terrible: fire, smoke, and explosions

Curated by Linda Griggs

**Davide Cantoni**

**Gregory Crane**

**Barbara Friedman**

**Joy Garnett**

**Allen Hansen**

**Elizabeth Kiethline**

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Beautiful and Terrible: fire, smoke, and explosions

**Kathryne Lynch**

**Chris McCaw**

**Steve Mumford**

**Rupert Nesbitt**

**Grace Graupe Pillard**

**Lawrence Swan**

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

*Where There's Smoke*

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Curator's Statement © Linda Griggs  
Essay © Wesley Gibson

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## CURATOR'S STATEMENT

Explosions are an unfortunate part of reality and for many, after 2001 every explosion—real or Hollywood—was a raw, fresh, anxious sorrow.

Some explosions like mushroom clouds became iconic. Others are televised so often that they fade into banality. We become blind to them. Art lets us see them again; and although they are processed and seen from a distance, we truly look.

Explosions, while devastating, do have a perverse beauty. We watch the flash and the smoke rising and billowing. Separated from the tragedy, they become mesmerizing.

As a culture we celebrate that fascination every Fourth of July when fireworks offer us a bloodless, joyful reminder of freedom earned.

It comes as no surprise that politics and religion try to exploit or explain our seemingly inherent fascination. Burnt offerings carry sacrifices to heaven in smoke. The story of the prophet Elijah who called for God to send fire and accept his sacrifice is shared by Jews, Muslims and Christians. Censers burn in cathedrals and in Jewish, Buddhist and Taoist temples, where the rising smoke is symbolic of prayers rising to heaven.

Where there's smoke you'll find our greatest yearnings and our worst actions.

Steve Mumford and Barbara Friedman are what we might call deceptively realist painters. Their paintings appear painstakingly realistic, but are not. Mumford travels to Iraq and Afghanistan to make experiential watercolors. These are stand-alone works, but when he returns to his New York studio these watercolors become the basis for his carefully laid out, large scale paintings. In *The Battle of Baqubah* we see a convoy of U.S. armored personnel carriers engaging 'Al Qaeda in Iraq' in the heavily fortified area they had claimed as the 'Islamic State of Iraq.'

Explosions and smoke punctuate this fifteen foot, epic painting. In the distance, past rooftops and telephone wires, smoke rises in a column where an Apache helicopter hovers. In the middle ground, oily smoke pours from a car on fire. There is a puff of smoke on a shattered roof wall. To the right of that building is a small figure holding an RPG launcher whose round has exploded on the side of an M113 armored personnel carrier. It is all deftly painted, delicate grey glazes or violent painterly yellows and reds. Two perspective points allow you to see past, present and impending danger. Unlike a snapshot, which is a frozen moment, Mumford's paintings are examined moments, sometimes conflating time to create those moments. He is in the tradition of war artists like Winslow Homer, who Mumford cites as an influence: "Homer's art didn't describe politics. He focused on the experience of the Union soldiers. His artwork is relatable to soldiers in all wars."

Barbara Friedman's *Camp Bernie* could scarcely be, at first glance anyway, more different in tone, campers paddling across a lake in an idyllic setting, it is serene. But what is that reflection in the water? Smoke. But from where does it originate? There is nothing else in the painting to indicate fire or calamity. It turns out it is a ghostly image, a haunting. As Friedman says, "After 9/11, I had a very concrete displacement to work with. I live in the financial district, 300 yards from the World Trade Center, and for over a month we weren't allowed to return home. *Camp Bernie* depicts my daughter on a Girl Scout retreat with the smoking towers reflected under her canoe. The smoke looks like shadows on the water's surface; it's what we were all reflecting on even as we watched our children. Two realities co-existed with neither one able to snuff out the other."

In the work of Gregory Crane and Joy Garnett the

brushwork is more in-your-face gestural, though Crane is more Van Gogh and Garnett is more Turner. Crane's *Red Hook Ruins* is a characteristic landscape, magically realistic. Vibrant, exuberant even, there is still something a little menacing here. It isn't simply the bonfire at the center of the painting. Almost everything seems to be aflame here: the vibrating plants, the jittery sky, even the wobbly ground. It is the world, landscape, as conflagration.

Garnett's painting, *Flood (2)* (*Strange Weather Series*) re-contextualized a news photo of post-Katrina New Orleans, flooded and on fire. Stormily, perhaps even angrily painted, the vividness of the event is rescued from the endless repetition of mass reproduction and restored to the vividness of its particularity. Garnett describes her work this way: "My work is associated with the 'apocalyptic sublime,'" a metaphysical condition of combined astonishment and terror in the presence of huge natural or uncanny human and technological forces," qualities fervently on display in *Flood*.

Two artists use fireworks as a starting point, Allen Hansen and Kathryn Lynch. But Hansen's is an abstraction and Lynch's is a more realistic landscape. Hansen's *Untitled (#07)* records, not the fireworks themselves, but the aftermath of the event, the smoke in the sky. Some of the marks read as rips or tears through the picture plane, implying violence; yet the painting as a whole is intensely beautiful. It reflects the artist's observation that, "While explosions are devastating unto themselves, there is a perverse beauty to the visual experience."

Lynch shows us the fireworks themselves, but with a twist. Conventionally, images of fireworks are all chromatic bursting shrieks of reds and greens and yellows; but Lynch's fireworks are surprisingly subdued. Squiggles and dashes and spots of color indicate fireworks or their reflections over a sepia-colored background. If less overtly political than some of the work here, there is a certain melancholy and perhaps that faint tinge of regret that memory can sometimes bring. There may be a celebration, but the celebration has been muted.

Three artists literally use forms of fire to create their work: Davide Cantoni, Elizabeth Keithline and Chris McCaw. Cantoni burns paper by using a magnifying glass to focus and direct the rays of the sun. He works on thin,

translucent vellum and uses graphite powder to sketch out his images.

Like Garnett, he uses images found in the news media, in his case, the New York Times, and they are usually images of calamity. His *New Bomb test 04003* depicts just that, a horizon; a landscape, if you will, of a bomb test. The image has an abstract formal beauty, but its charred edges give it its menace. Like several artists here he seems drawn to the terrible beauty of destruction and tries to reconcile it with the reality of destruction's violence.

Elizabeth Keithline literally burns her work into being. *The Empty Chair* is fairly typical of her recent process. "Chair" was made from the artist weaving thin gauge copper around a wooden chair and then burning it out. Keithline says: "The work I was making at the time reflected the concept of human grasp—the difference between the 'actual object' vs. the memory of the objects in one's mind. Each woven object that I made was like a ghost, a shadow, a holograph." Like Cantoni's, it is an original technique that had produced work powerfully evocative of absence and loss.

Chris McCaw's *Sunburn Series* has been described as "entirely literal." What they mean is that he sets up his camera for long exposures in the Mojave Desert or by the San Francisco Bay, letting the open lens work as a magnifying glass to focus the sun's light on paper negatives. The piece you see here is what could really be called a conventional shot of a landscape enshrouded in fog, except that the image is melancholically grey and there's a streak burnt across the center of sky. The streak tracks the movement of the sun which inevitably reminds us of the perilous state of our planet with global warming and glacier-melting and animals almost being burned, you might say, into extinction.

Grace Graupe-Pillard's and Lawrence Swan's work is, visually, in a way that is flatter, a little more graphic. Graupe-Pillard's *Strikes* really has the feel of graphic art. But she takes the medium and inverts it on itself. With its fiercely glowing planes and that swooping, violent rainbow that

indicates fire, or something explosive, she takes the glamour of graphic art and teases a deadly meaning out of it. It's a loud and defiant piece of work. Graupe-Pillard is another appropriator. Like several other artists here, she begins with an image from a journalistic source and then blows "... apart the reality of the photograph so that the final result is distilled and disintegrated from its original context..." In this distillation and disintegration she creates images that are theatrical and potent.

Lawrence Swan's graphically powerful cartoon drawing, *Design for the Monument to September 11, 2001 Attacks (laser hologram at a height equalling that of the Twin Towers and placed at the site)* is a wry and pointed commentary on the whole idea of a 9/11 memorial. For the anxiety-ridden figure in the drawing, the memory of the devastation is ever-present and inescapable. It has altered his very shape. Swan was the manager on duty at Borders Bookstore in 5 World Trade Center when the 2001 attacks occurred and was responsible for the safe evacuation of the employees. Never Forget? ... as if we could. Memorials are of course put in place so that we won't forget; but Swan's biting drawing from his *Panic in Zero Decade* series seems to ask: what aspect are we actually not forgetting?

Finally, there is Rupert Nesbitt's *Bunker Explosion Ground Atmosphere*. A set of four animations in their own "vitrines," they will helplessly recall the CNN images of the first Gulf War promulgated by Bush the Elder for anyone old enough to recall the terrible beauty of them. I remember thinking, this is gorgeous, and that it was wrong for me to feel that it was gorgeous as I knew untold thousands were dying violently under the beauty. In a way, Nesbitt is a vector for many of the artists here. He's got the fireworks, he's got the almost literal images of war as recorded by CNN, he's got the beauty, and he's got the morally ambiguous implication of us as voyeur and spectator to a beauty that is killing.

—Wesley Gibson



Steve Mumford  
*The Battle of Baqubah*, 2006 (diptych)





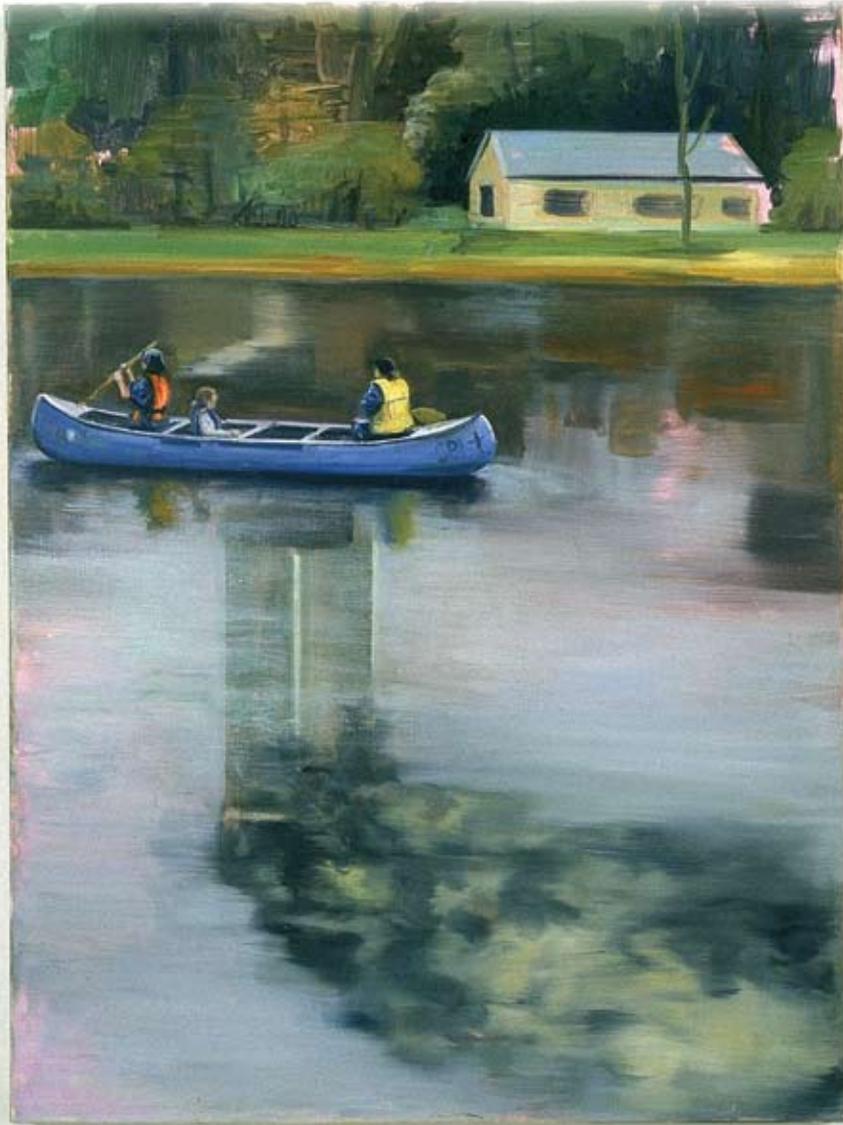
Allen Hansen  
*Untitled (#07)*, 2008



Kathryn Lynch  
*Fireworks on Crescent Beach, New Construction, 2008*



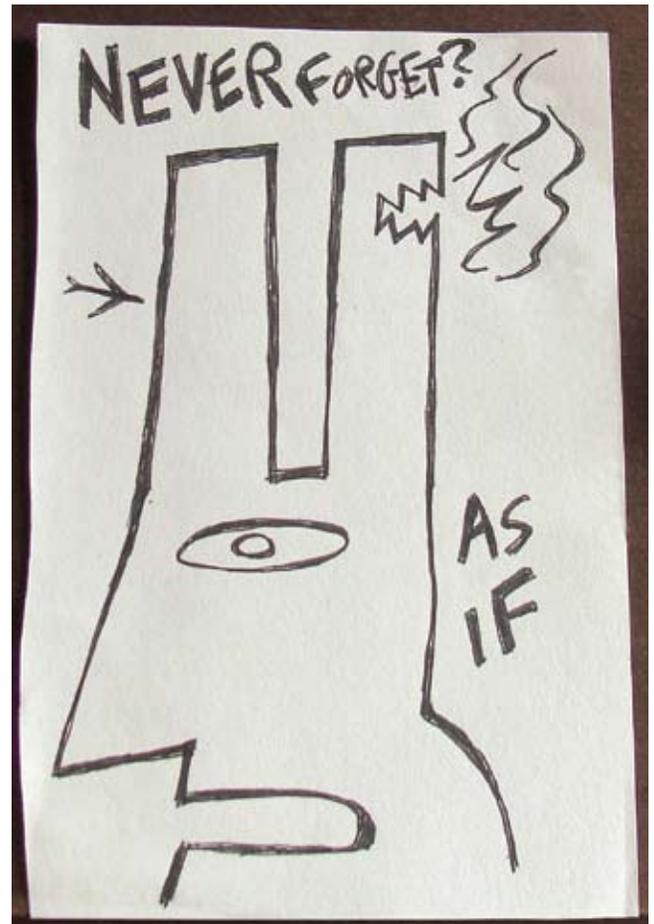
Gregory Crane  
*Red Hook Ruins, 2009*



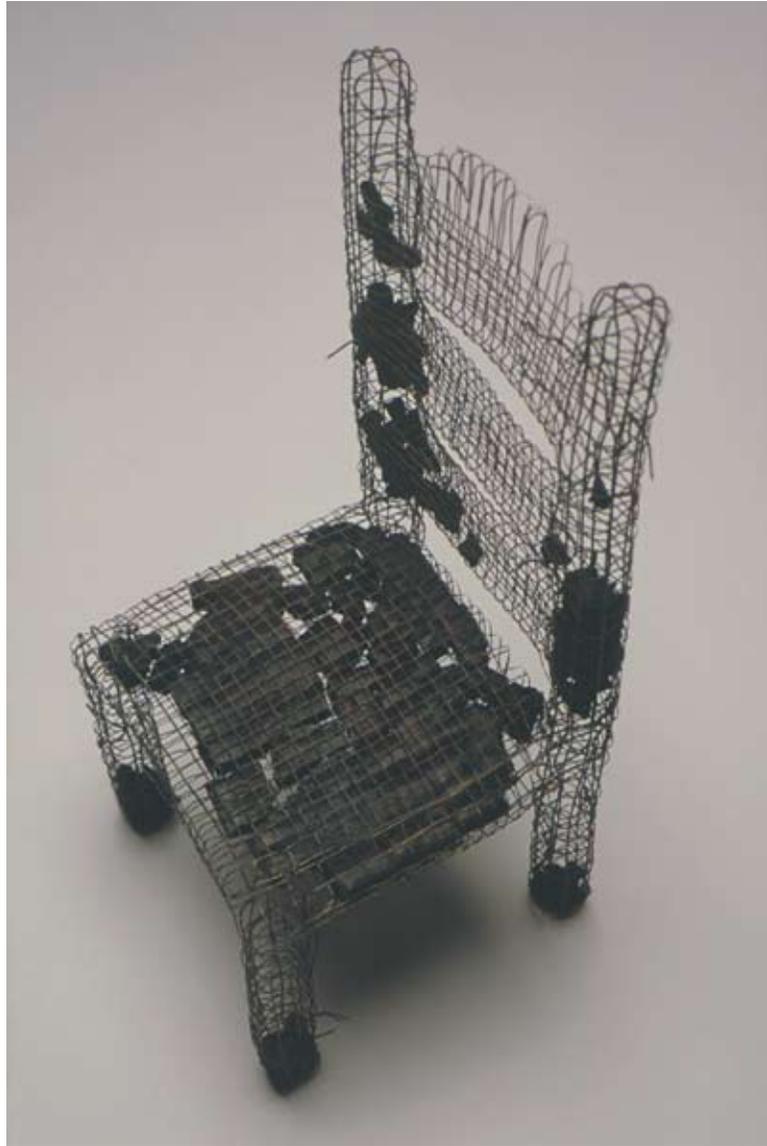
Barbara Friedman  
*Camp Bernie*, 2001



Grace Graupe-Pillard  
*Strikes*, 2003



Lawrence Swan  
*Design for the Monument  
to September 11, 2001  
Attacks (laser hologram at a  
height equalling that of the  
Twin Towers and placed at  
the site)*, 2003



Elizabeth Keithline  
*The Empty Chair*, 1996



Chris McCaw  
*Sunburned GSP#250 (Santa Cruz Mtns/Fog Coming In), 2008*



Daide Cantoni  
*New Bomb Test 04003, 2004 (detail)*



Rupert Nesbitt  
*Bunker Explosion Ground Atmosphere 2007*

Where There's Smoke  
Checklist

**Davide Cantoni**

*New Bomb Test 04003*  
2004  
carta bruciata / burned paper  
9 x 12  
Courtesy of Blindarte, Naples

**Gregory Crane**

*Red Hook Ruins*  
2009  
Oil, wax, on linen  
20 x 40  
Courtesy of the artist, New York

**Barbara Friedman**

*Camp Bernie*  
2001  
oil on linen  
40 x 30  
Courtesy of the artist, New York

**Joy Garnett**

*Flood (2) (Strange Weather series)*  
2005  
Oil on canvas  
26 x 46  
Courtesy of Winkleman Gallery, New York

**Allen Hansen**

*Untitled (#07)*  
2008  
Oil on canvas  
48 x 48  
Courtesy of the artist, New York

**Elizabeth Keithline**

*The Empty Chair*  
1996  
steel wire, charcoal,  
6 x 15 x 6  
Courtesy of the artist, Rhode Island

**Kathryn Lynch**

*Fireworks on Crescent Beach, New Construction*  
2008  
Oil on canvas  
60 x 48  
Courtesy of Sears-Peyton, New York

**Chris McCaw**

*Sunburned GSP#250*  
*(Santa Cruz Mtns/Fog Coming In)*  
2008  
Unique Gelatin Silver Paper Negative  
24 x 20  
Courtesy of Michael Mazzeo Gallery,  
New York

**Steve Mumford**

*The Battle of Baqubah*  
2006  
oil on canvas  
66 x 180, diptych  
Courtesy of the artist and Postmasters,  
New York

**Rupert Nesbitt**

*Bunker Explosion Ground Atmosphere*  
2007  
Installation: Column with  
4, 4 x 9 video screens  
36 x 36 x 96  
Courtesy of the artist, Newport, RI

**Grace Graupe Pillard**

*Strikes*  
2003  
oil, alkyd, solubar/wood  
24 x 30  
Courtesy of the artist, New York

**Lawrence Swan**

*Design for the Monument to*  
*September 11, 2001 Attacks*  
*(laser hologram at a height equalling that of the*  
*Twin Towers and placed at the site)*  
2003  
pen and ink on paper  
4 x 6  
Courtesy of the artist, New York

Dimensions are in inches;  
height precedes width precedes depth.