

Thoughts on Pyrographs

Pyrographs are drawings made with the use of a burning tool.

Through these organic abstractions I explore the elemental relationship of the body to the landscape, the cellular nature of the body, the granular nature of the soil, the sense of time and space in the natural world.

Large windows in my studio look onto a broad array of sky. I see the swirling patterns of birds, a flock of pigeons routinely harassed by a hawk, clouds moving across the sky, the changing light falling onto my table, varying by time of day, time of year. The patterns of flight, the movement of clouds, the falling light make their way into these drawings. In my studio I have a piece of limestone from a quarry in the Flint Hills. Embedded in this blue gray limestone are fossils of tiny jellyfish and other various forms of underwater life. These artifacts from a prehistoric era when shallow seas covered the land are a part of this work.

When exhibiting at the Salina Art Center, I made many trips across I-70 through the heart of the Konza prairie. I saw the landscape in all seasons but most remarkable was the spring in which the burning of the fields to restore nitrogen to the soil is a routine process, a fertility ritual in a way. The smooth mounds and crevices accentuated by shadow, stretching for miles and miles, evoked a deeply sensuous response; richly brown and barren of all extraneous plant life, as if an invisible hand had softened the edges by running along the hilltops.

This burning of the prairie is seminal to the pyrographs. I respond to the pristine paper as I respond to the landscape. I use the pointed tip of a burning tool to draw the mark into and out of the paper. There is an intimacy to the process as I make millions of burns in the surface accentuating pores, finding crevices. I rarely direct the work. It is a means of finding out; one mark following, responding to, another. The intimacy with which I work the paper is vaguely reminiscent of the unseen hand caressing the curves of the prairie.

I often think of the pyrographs as time-based drawings. I take pleasure in the contrast that time-based work generally refers to video, a high tech medium, while the time-based aspect of the pyrographs refers to the very low-tech practice of responding to the heat from the burning tool. By moving the scorching tip slowly, holding it longer in place, it sometimes burns a hole in the paper, while moving it lightly, quickly over the surface varies the tone of the mark from dark to almost translucent.

In 2010 I had a residency in Tokyo. That experience has found its way into my work in myriad ways: through a sense of topography, of quietness, of stillness, of commitment to and trust in process to find the way. I find that this influence provides a veiled presence pervasive throughout the work.

Susan White, 2017