

Art And Fire

By Karen Elzinga

The Fine Art Lesson is about how you can portray fire in art. I experiment with burning artworks, making and creating artworks with a fire related theme and building 3D and art installations all with different fire angles.

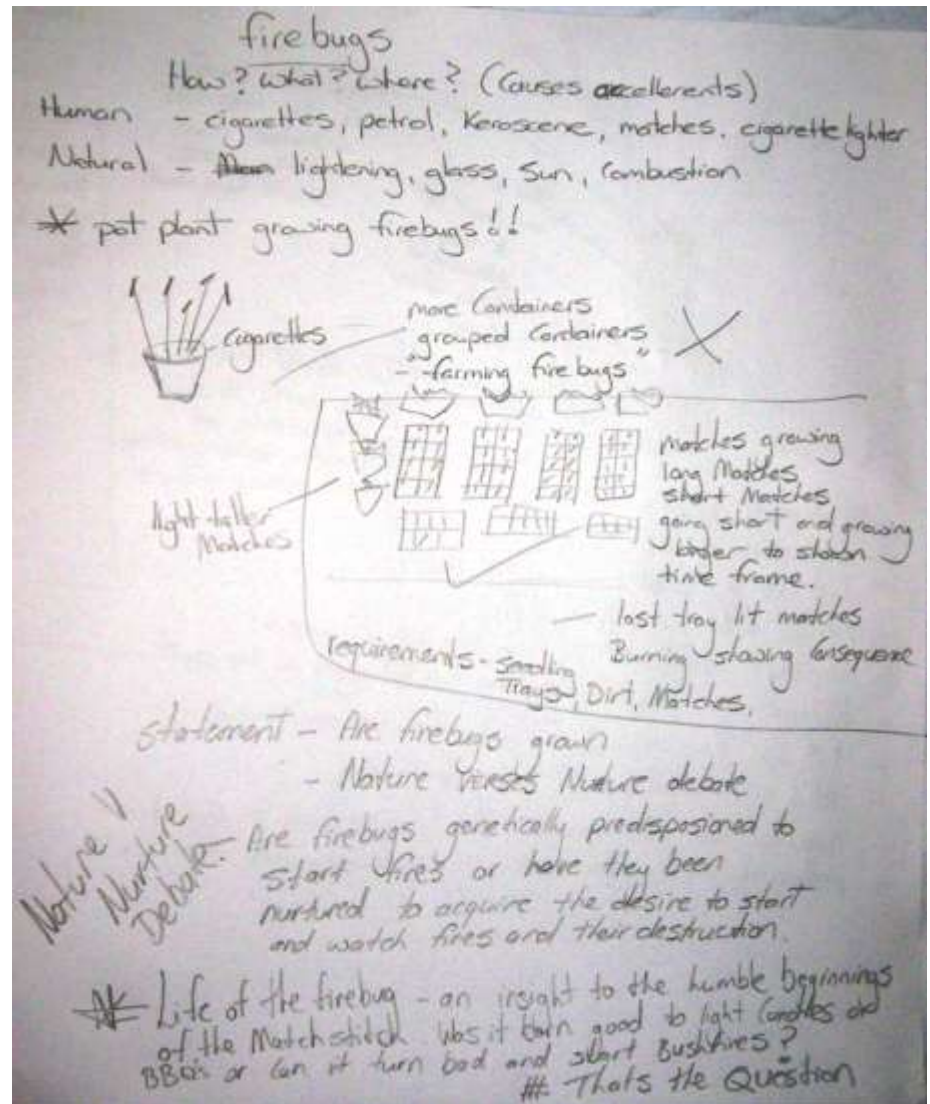
Disclaimer :Please note that whilst Karen Elzinga burns artwork she will not be held for any liability claim coming from the following reading of her lesson. Please use common sense.



Nature or Nurture? – Birth of a fire bug!

Sometimes an artwork can influence and change a person's thought process, especially if the message the artwork is portraying resonates with a person.

Environmental works for example have endless possibilities for doing just that. But is the change to do with the work itself or the words surrounding the work. The story can often be as important as the artwork.



Nature or Nurture? – Birth of a fire bug!



Gathered every plant tray I owned and filled with soil



Fiddled with layouts



Planted the various sized match sticks, in mass and intermitted through out the trays and planted cuttings to mix it up.



Overview of going on



I lit a select few large match sticks to showcase the early ignition of some mature sticks!

Work 1 -Final work - Nature or Nurture? – Birth of a fire bug!



Nature or Nurture? – Birth of a fire bug! Close ups and work detailing



The match sticks are at differing stages of maturity. The tall are strong, straight and ready for action, some displaying their lack of control by firing much earlier than expected. They vigorously excrete their flame for up to 6 seconds, before their in built programming fires its own self destruction, killing the matches but leaving the young and vulnerable safe and secure, for now! But what of their long term fate! Well scientists believe most will grow to end as nature intended, peacefully in BBQ's or by adding flames to candles. Unfortunately a rogue few will learn to be destructive after spending many years confined to a cardboard box. This confined space and lack of nurturing seems to send the match heads mad and thus when released they pop, flick, ignite and are unforgiving.... Burning landscapes!

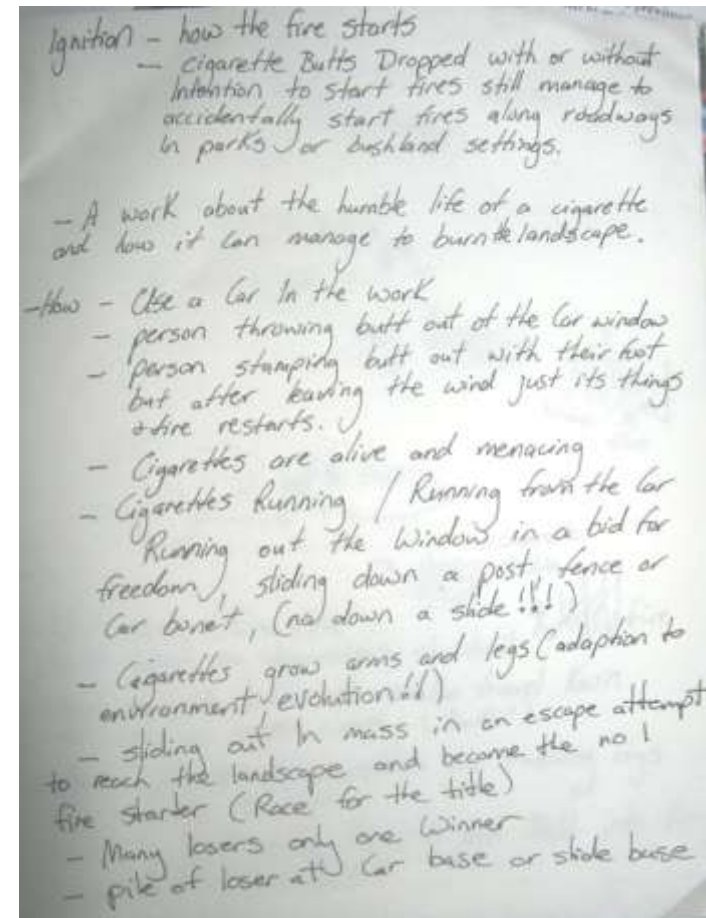
Give the readers and viewers of your Art a good story to imagine.

Ignition – The passive Fire Starter

Idea – How cigarette butts end up being a cause of landscape fires.

Concept – The humble cigarette is not only lethal to humans it seems. Many a smoker disregards their used cigarette out of their car window, somehow assessing this action as not littering. So what of the consequence of this action, well ignition is. I am going to a work based purely from the cigarettes angle, if it were alive how would it escape to the freedoms of the landscape where unknown to it, it has the power to create a new cancer to the landscape – FIRE!

Sketch and tease out your ideas before starting and your artworks will be more solid in their meaning and more easily understood by the viewers.



Ignition - Experiment Work- melting plastic pieces.

Idea- To melt together colour plastic mosaic pieces to form a sculpture representing fire.

Concept – to Use a camp stove to melt plastic pieces on top of chicken wire that hopefully could be moulded into an interesting fire representational form.



Purchased plastic mosaics



Set up camp gas hotplate



Laid out multiple layers of mosaics over the top of chicken wire



Turned on gas stove



Within 10 seconds the plastic mosaics were on fire, burning as if they were paper. I was really surprised at how quick they went up, I expected them to melt not be so full of fuel. I had to throw them off the stove real quick onto the ground to put out with water, it was quite the angry little fire.



The melted particles caused a fire on the camp stove surface also



Despite its short life, the plastic did melt together and even though the surface looks a little charred, it still had an element of interest to it.

I knew I could do this a different way, so to the oven inside I went to try again.

Experimentation is a big part of being an Artist

It is imperative that as an Artist you explore various materials so your reference library of knowledge grows for how you can work with various materials, how far can you change their initial meaning. What is successful and unsuccessful with each material investigation.

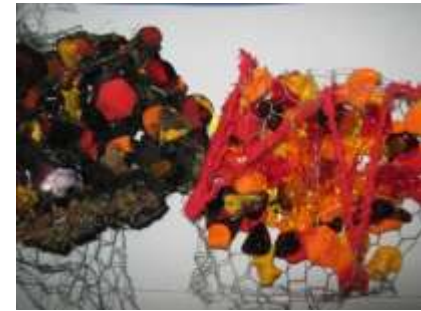
Ignition



So this is melting plastic mosaics experiment 2. After the outside open flame disaster, I turned to a slower cooking method, the house oven.



I used the same process on chicken wire and layering the mosaics. This processed worked very successfully and how I figured it would go by slowly melting the plastic on a really low heat.



Here are the two melted works, one charred and one normal.

Creating the work



I knitted a long length of wool on cricket wicket sticks



Attached knitted length to the car window



Poured out collected cigarette butts. I tell you the quickest way to get someone to stop smoking is get a bag of butts and travel in a car for ½ hr with them. Talk about disgusting, I felt so sick and I could even taste them in my mouth it was so strong, yuck never again!



Set up melted mosaics fire sculpture

A work idea is progress

Final work – Installation -Ignition



Wisdom within the woods – A message from the nature!



Picked the oldest looking tree in my backyard. This is rain forest territory where I live so the trees are very old.



Selected where I wanted the work



Started to carve out the bark exterior



Ripped the outer bark downwards to give the impression of the tree fighting back



I carved out the statement, oddly I barely touched the inner casing of the tree writing the words really lightly just to get the outline, and the words seemed to literally jump out of the tree, like that kids stuff, invisible ink that comes to life when you pour something on it, it was really weird, probably why I had such an emotional connection to the work



I like trees, and I have an appreciation for their purpose and beauty, but I have to say I felt really horrible doing this work to my backyard tree, I felt like I was taking something that could never be replaced from this old tree. I felt pain with each and every rip of the bark to get to the fleshy sappy interior that I needed. It was really bad, I have never experienced such an emotional experience that tore me up before in any work I have ever done. I find it hard to look at even as I put it all together here. Wow! I hope the viewer gets half my emotions from looking at it!

Wisdom within the woods – A message from the nature!



This work describes the pain felt by nature at the hands of human frivolity and lack of respect.

The tree is spewing out it's internal messaging, opening it's heart in an attempt to teach human kind the importance of the very air we breath. Without the humble power of the trees, we fail to exist!

We rely on the diversity of each other, as a means to both species own survival.



Ephemeral work – “Arson results”

Idea – To produce an ephemeral work based on the reality of a landscape on fire, on small scale, but made to look large scale through clever photographic angles.

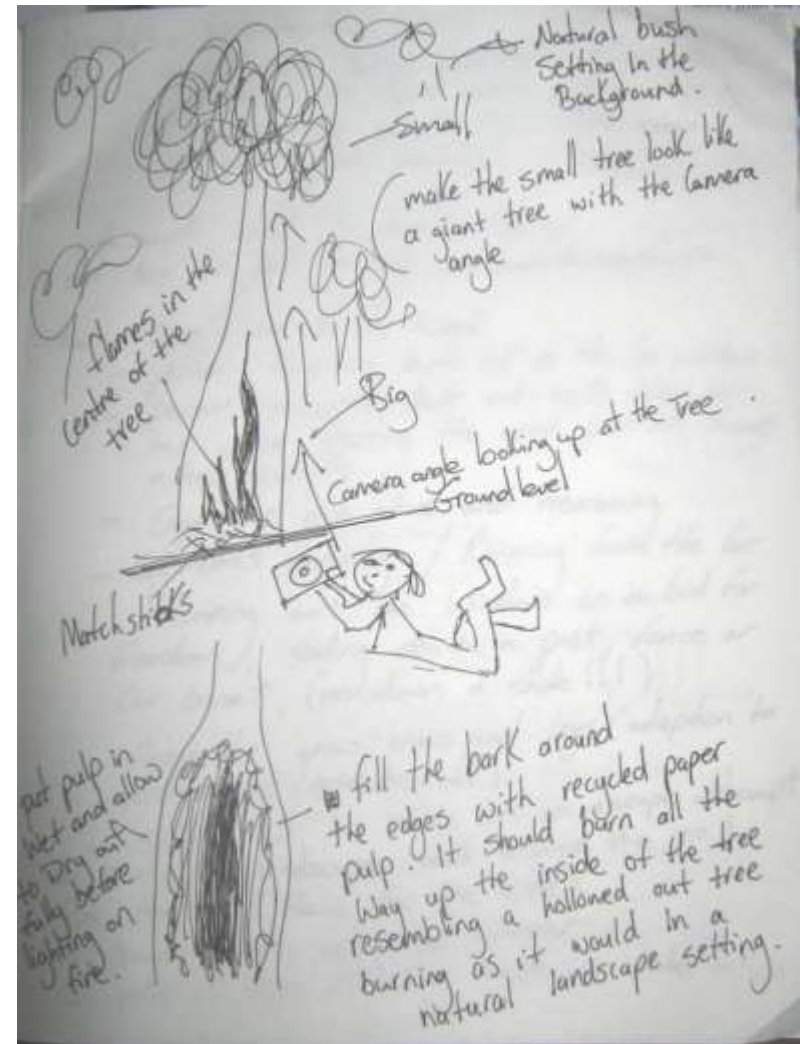
Concept – To mix man made material with a natural element that combine to enhance the potential of directed fire. I want the fire to go directly up the centre of the tree hollowing it out.

Materials – Paper pulp, palm frond, matches, natural setting, camera.

You don't have to go large to be large.....

It's all in the camera angle, sometimes you don't have to build a giant artwork to give the appearance of it being large.

Clever camera angles can be an Artist's best friend. If you want something small to appear large photograph it from the same height, if you wish it to be bigger, photograph it from beneath it looking up at it. If you wish it to look smaller photograph it from above angles.



Ephemeral Artwork – ‘Arson results’



I collected a piece of palm frond just the end bit that was approximately 40 cm long



I soaked recycled paper for 24 hours before placing it in the blender and mixing it into a pulp



I spooned the pulp to the inside of the palm frond



I allowed for the pulp to dry completely for a few weeks



I wrapped a length of bamboo around the top



Then thickened the foliage with more



Dug a small hole and planted the work, and dug a small hole to place the camera at the tree base to get the correct angle



Started the lighting procedure using only matches, I wanted to get the sense of a real pyromaniac. It took a few boxes of matches (windy day) very frustrating!

Ephemeral work – “Arson results”

I really loved the finished work, the angle just suits it I feel, and it does have a sense of being a huge tree. The one long flame just gives it perspective and keeps the work simple and clean.



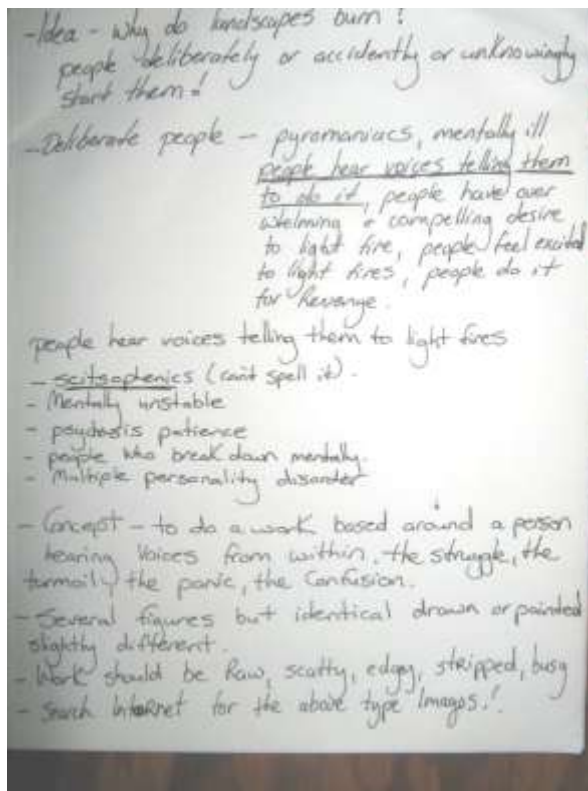
Try
photographing
something
from varying
angles



The voices in my head told me to do it". (Story of a fire starter)

Okay the next artwork we are going to look at will be based on the cause....what makes a person turn into an arsonist. I cannot stress enough the importance of gathering ideas, sketching ideas, word associating to gather work concepts and also ways of working. This is a vital process in art making that many people simply are not aware of when purchasing art. But for them to desire the finished product you must first design a work worthy of sitting on someone's wall. The most successful outcomes are achieved by enlightenment.

Enlighten your way to success



“The voices in my head told me to do it”



The above experiment was done to see how a cut out stencilled image transferred to fabric, when used in conjunction with paint and dye. I liked the finished effect and so was interested to take this further into a resolved work.



Let's see how it finished up.....

Finished work – “The voices in my head told me to do it”. 90cm x 70cm, Acrylic on fabric



The material application used was fingers and pen dipped into ink, tilting and slanting the fabric and a roller. The materials used were, acrylic paint, ink, red and turquoise pen and permanent marker.

Close up pictures of final work

The material application used was fingers and pen dipped into ink, tilting and slanting the fabric and a roller. The materials used were, acrylic paint, ink, red and turquoise pen, permanent marker, and cut out paper stencil that I drew. It was done Alla prima style. I used pen and ink because I wanted it to have a real rawness about it, I did the pen work very unconsciously wanting that roughness and quick action of the pen going various directions to literally speak for itself. It also reveals a shallowness and flippancy to the work that I think works to give the feeling of a scattered and tortured mentally ill mind. I wanted to give the feeling that when a person hears voices inside their head telling them to light a fire that the mind splits as it tries to fight what is right from wrong.



The background figure represents the source of the voices



This represents the mind running from the evil trying to penetrate the mind



This represents the breaking down of will power, the mind starts to bleed and give in to the voices to start a fire, to be destructive.



These figures represent the mind trying to determine the right from the wrong.



The figures at the sides of the mouth are the mind trying to stop the voices.

Devil dancers after the first match is lit.



Idea – To showcase fire demons dancing in a flame riddled landscape.

Concept – The idea is the first match has been lit deliberately causing a landscape fire in the floral fields, The fire demons are joyful that such destruction has commenced and are out in numbers to investigate and make their presence felt by dancing in the naked flames as flowers wither and burn in the glowing light of the fire.

FIRE AND ART- It is by far not a new concept but the potential as a subject matter has a lot of weight, the topics that you as an artist can explore are numerous and vast. Just think of some topics you can explore


1. Environment devastation
2. Lightening and fire
3. Property and fire
4. Human anguish
5. Fire by night
6. The naked flame
7. Fire causes

Can you think of any other topic idea categories for fire, there are hundreds

Devil dancers after the first match is lit

Let's now delve into a painted work, using fire as a demonic trait, fire has long been associated with 'hell', fury, anger, evil, though inherently beautiful to watch, it's hot and nasty as we are all well aware.

Let's check out the devil dancers.




Background of flames + fire
oranges/Red/ Yellow, white smoke
Black

- Very Messy, Wild, textured heavily
- flowers done in fire colours to portray sense of urgency and heat.

Idea - fire demons coming out of flames

Concept - To portray the essence of the landscape fire as spiritual demons the fire demons dancing within the flames. The fire has been deliberately lit and they are basking in its glory.

— figures should be haunting in appearance, no eyeballs just sockets, ghost like angry looking, demonic.



- Wrap paint in a circular motion around the heads to produce a sense of attention, of urgency and movement.

Work in progress - Devil dancers after the first match is lit



Painted the background



Added more fire coloured sky



Added fire flames across the middle



Added second layer of flames



Decided to add some large trees



Set large trees on fire, didn't like them



Added complexity to middle



Added flowers



Added fire demons



Added more fire demons

Final work - Devil dancers after the first match is lit. Acrylic on canvas 148cm x 116cm



Final work- close up images - Devil dancers after the first match is lit.

148cm x 116cm



Fire Experimenting

Concept – To experiment with the style using a length of wood. I am going to use a ruler, maybe later on I'll purchase a squeegee if I like the effects of the ruler, but for this experimentation I will stick to a ruler to slide and apply paint.

Aim – To produce multi layered works using the same colours at each stage, but applied slightly differently.

To burn an artwork we must first make one!

Even though the plan is to burn an artwork, if your going to photograph it, you need to create a half decent one first.

WHY ?.....

Because not all of your artwork will burn at the same rate, if you do it properly you should still be able to capture the over all essence of your artwork through the flames. Everyone has seen fire, there is nothing special about photographing fire, it is something that any one with a camera can do.

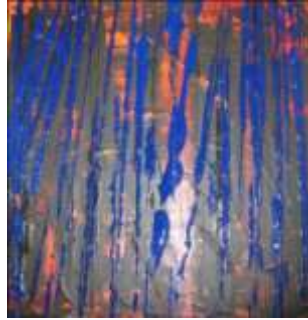
What is hard to do is combine artwork and capture the perfect flames combining the two. That then becomes a saleable artwork picture.

So play careful attention to how you design your artwork to be burnt.

Experiment 1 – Ruler application



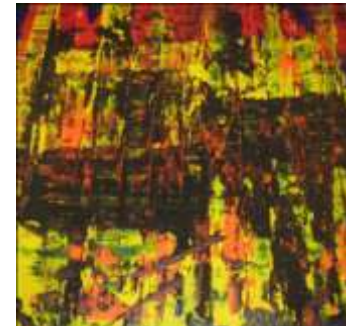
I used a ruler to smudge the paint across the board in one fluid motion



Once the previous brown paint had dried completely I added ultramarine blue, and again used the rulers to cut back the paint into sections.



Red/brown was added next, I decided I liked the blue so I tried to add it so that it complemented the blue



As this was experimental I had to loose the fact that I could have finished at the last stage as I really liked it, but I went on adding yellow and orange, allowing just a hint of the blue and red to shine through.

Use this process as a learning experience and try new techniques.

Final work -Experiment- "Fire1"



Experiment Fire Work 2



I used the same techniques as for work 1

Final work - Experiment – “Fire 2”



Lighting up Artworks

Although I enjoyed the process and the result, I wanted to do something a little different with the finished painted experiments using a ruler as the paint applicator. I decided it was time to up the anti and experiment with a little fire burning . So I ventured outdoors and with watering can at the ready for any emergency, and my trusty can of petrol. First I drizzled the petrol over the centre of the painting and with a long BBQ lighter, I carefully ignited it. I had about 10-15 seconds to take the pictures before the petrol burnt off and the fire went out. So after about ten tries I had enough photo's to choose from. I really enjoyed the process, and I think the results speak for them selves, capturing real fire mixed with art really increases the intensity of doing fire based portrayals. Photoshop is one way but you can't beat the real thing for fun and authenticity.



At first I started out just burning one at a time, but as my confidence grew I burnt two at a time and photographed like mad from all sides.

Fire Experiment analysis and conclusion

BEFORE
FIRE



AFTER
FIRE



Fire Experiment analysis

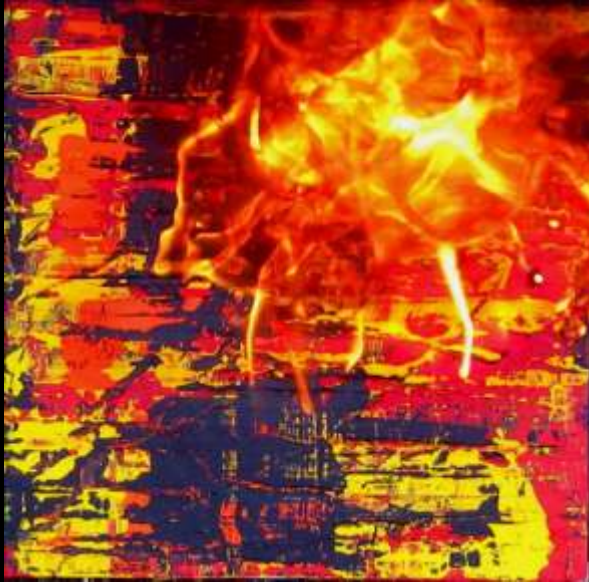
After the fire experiment on the painted boards, I was surprised to see little damage done to the surface of the works, the fire exhausted itself out after burning up the petrol and distinguished itself very quickly in a matter of 10-15 seconds. This allowed for repeat fires multiple times over on the same surfaces. Even after 10 times the surface looked practically intact with only very minor surface damage and alteration. I believe this type of photographic work could continue for up to 40 times on a similarly painted surface before the surface would deteriorate to a perishable state, and even then would produce maybe a more interesting fire and overall appearance to the photographic nature of this work. Overall a very successful experiment.

Experiment fire 1 - 30cm x 30cm



What one match can do!

Experiment fire 2 - Photographed 4 part series



Creating for the purpose of burning it

Art has long had a tradition of building art for the pure purpose of setting it a light. A festival held in an American desert called the 'The Burning Man' festival build's a giant timber man and at the festival's conclusion it is set a light. That is just one example of many.

Next we look at before and after the burn

ART BURNING DO's and DON'TS

If you want to set something a light, petrol is your best friend, but from a distance, don't use a cigarette lighter or matches, control your ignition with a long BBQ lighter where your hands are importantly away from harms edge.

Don't light a fire if you have petrol spilled on your hands or body. You may just end up being the artwork.

Have someone else present in case of emergency.

Have a hose pipe close by turned on

Be sensible in your burning, you don't need a towering inferno next to a dead tree.

Karen Elzinga is not responsible you burn at your own risk.

Flower pollen and stamens – Wood board, pipe cleaners, pom poms, staples, spray paint orange.



Cut pipe cleaners/chenille sticks into smaller parts



Attach pipe cleaners to the board with a staple gun in the middle and stick both ends upward like a V



Attach pipe cleaners side by side, using different sizes and widths



Attach hollowed pom poms to the ends of the pipe cleaners intermittently



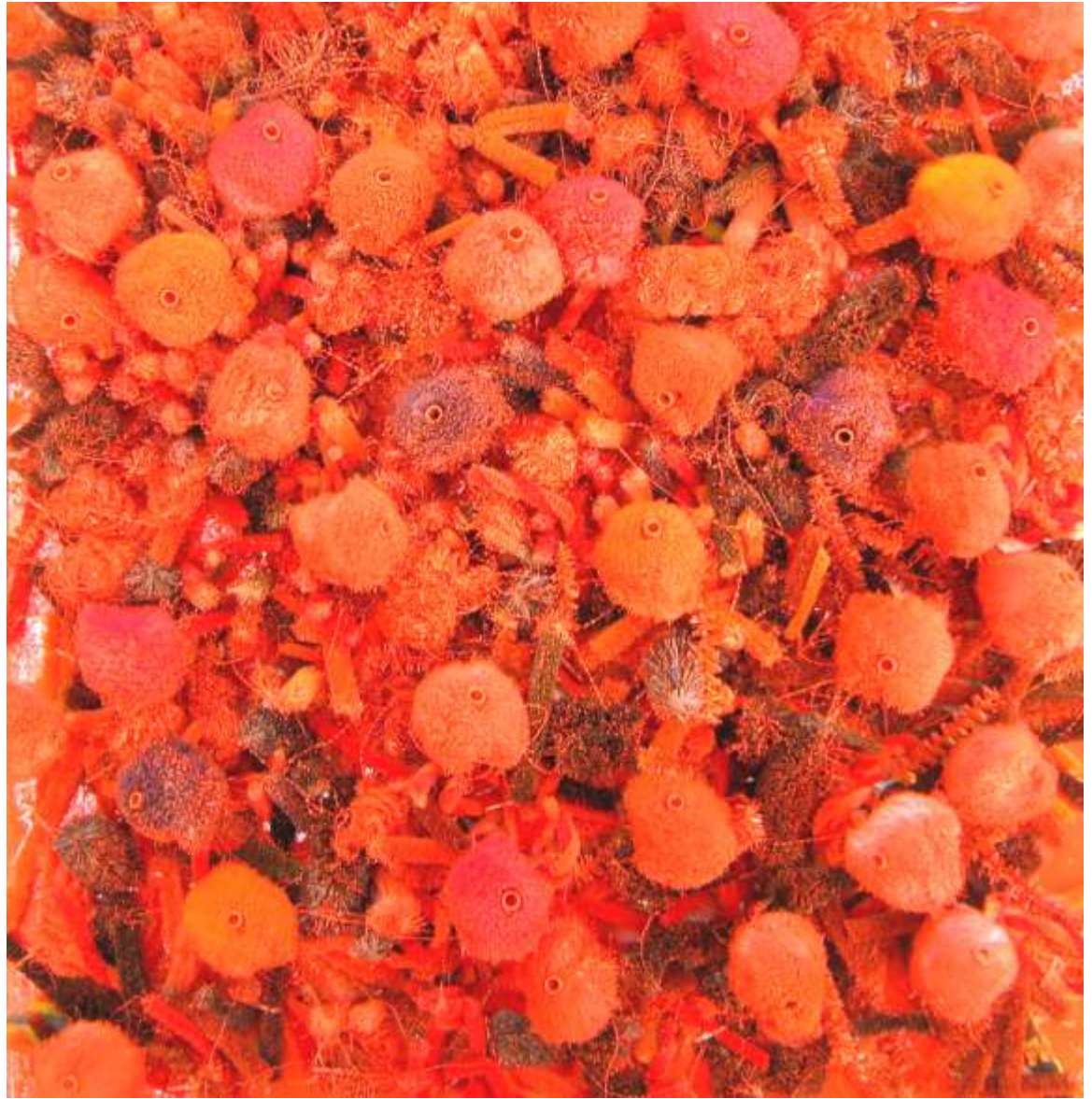
Spray with orange spray paint

This artwork was actually done for another lesson, but I figured it would go well for burning so let's take a look.

Flower pollen and stamens – Wood board, pipe cleaners, pom poms, staples, spray paint orange on MDF board. 300mmx300mm



Before the fire



Fire experiment 1 on pom poms and chenille sticks done on a cloudy rainy day

Continuing my experimentation into art work fires, I want to take my work from the earlier submission of flower stamens and pollen and recreate what a natural fire would do to a naturally occurring flower. The best way to do that is by adding real fire, now inside the chenille sticks is wire, so I am really keen to see what happens to it, will it melt, will it be fire resistant, will it go black or stay silver, will it retain its original shape, will there be nothing left. Will the pom poms completely disintegrate to nothing, will the underlying spray paint fuel the fire, will it go black, these are the questions I want answered in this next phase of fire and art work experimentation.



I decided to add to the work of my last submission and test the fire power of chenille sticks and pom poms. I was really curious to discover what would happen especially to the wire within the chenille sticks.



Adding petrol to the work meant that the material fabric component of the work, i.e. The poms and chenille sticks became very soaked and thus fuelled to capacity. So when it was lit it burnt very fast and furious. I allowed it to run its full course and self extinguish, however when the flames were getting very high I did almost put it out, I have to admit. But luckily it didn't last long dying down very quickly as the petrol burn up. The poms and chenille stick burnt very fast, I really liked the finished effect, left were really delicate forms very reminiscent of burnt sticks and grasses. I visited a fire in a national park years ago and the results were very much the same as what I saw on the ground there, it was really life like and authentic looking. I was really glad I did it and learnt a lot from the results, basically to think outside the box, and not be afraid to loose one art work to create an even better result! Since this work was successful I think I'll do a few more of a similar nature and try some more burning. (I'm starting to see what the attraction is to starting fires Ekk! Hahaha.)

The objective of this work is to highlight a series of photographs depicting the before, during and aftermath of a landscape fire on a flower and present it in a 6 part series.

And so it Burns to ashes Photographical work



Caught in the act

30cm x30cm pom poms and chenille sticks, acrylic paint on MDF



This was one of those freakish moments when you just go "what the hell is that". This was a purely random chance photo that straight away when I looked at it, it looked like there was a running smoke figure in the photograph, if you look carefully at the close up, it looks to have facial features even. Now I don't know if it is just me, but does that not look like a man running side on? I thought wow what a coincidence here I am doing a narrative about pyromania and deliberately lit fires, and now I have a smoke man for real running from the scene of the crime, how bizarre is that! haha

Fire experiment 2 on pom poms and chenille sticks done in full sun



Started with a board and staple gunned poms and chenille sticks to it



Finished surface before spraying, I decided to lengthen the chenille sticks longer than in the first work to gauge the difference in finished appearance



I also sprayed it in a different colour



Some of the photographs from the finished work

Added petrol and ignited it



After burning

One of the things I wanted to experiment with was different light and how that effects the fire colour, brightness and photographic potential. So with that in mind and the fact that I did the first one on a cloudy rainy day, I thought I would try this one on a very bright and sunny day. I think there is a significant different, this one definitely looks brighter and has much more yellow in the flame.

Fire experiment 3 on pom poms and chenille sticks done at night in full darkness



Added poms and chenille sticks to the board



Sprayed the board yellow and orange



Added petrol and burnt



In keeping with experimentation process of time, time of day etc, this work was burnt in the dead of the night in order to see the difference in fame colour.



The fire colour and characteristics were certainly different again from the previous two day time experiments. The flame colour was much more cooler producing a much whiter cleaner light rather than the deeper and richer hues of the daytime fires. This was a really interesting fire experiment.



Burnt work finished

Combined Final work – Burnt flowers 3 series 30x30cm board

This was actually a great experiment because not only did I get some fantastic burning photographs, the end work was also very fascinating and quite beautiful as a set of 3.



Close-up photo's



Work 15 - From fire come ashes



Discussion board

Hi here are works from sub 2, my revised theme is landscape fire, and specifically the relationship that arsonists and materials play in their lighting. Let me know what you think, love also to see some other student work! cheers kaz

Hi Huruko,

Your paintings are very interesting, I like the fact that you are looking through a door way or window out to beyond, it gives the work a more interesting focal point. I have to say I enjoyed the bolder use of colours in the first work the most, however that said the black and white does pose a new scenario and I quite enjoyed that one also as I found myself having to look closer at the work. Well Done Huruko! And thankyou so much for posting!!!!

Hi all, I thought I had just enough time to add a few more pics of my work to show you before I die of exhaustion. Boy have I put some hours in for this unit phewwwww. Anyhow once again my theme is landscape fire and how humans (fire bugs etc) play a role in its destruction. I had a great time playing with fire (literally) and I love what I have learnt from burning my art works hahaha sounds crazy but I totally recommend it!!! I learnt fire has different colours when photographing it burning at different times of the day, if you want to experiment, I used acrylic paint on board used petrol and it barely made a mark on the actual painting but allows for authentic photographing of fire mixed with art, its fantastic. I also used chenille sticks and pom poms which were also burnt and they end up looking like a real forest floor after a fire, its the 3 series work. Really fun stuff with some great results. If you want to try let me know if you need specifics on what I used etc. Hope everyone is getting through their work and again really love to see some one else's work, so don't be shy! Kaz

Self evaluation

I really enjoyed the direction I took within this submission, I tried to create a running story line starting with cause, what causes landscapes to burn i.e. The igniting material such as matches and cigarettes, then moving onto warnings from the landscape through to the human cause, and how a mentally unstable person is unable to deal with their inner conflict about burning landscapes, to depictions of fires. I learnt quite a lot about fire through the experiments such as colour and tonal changes of the fires at differing times of the day and how art works can withstand fire and burning and what creative differences can be achieved to you let go of initial art works and allow the process to take over.

I really enjoyed doing the fire burning and I'm glad I extended it to include different material surfaces as well as the painted ones, I think they look fantastic and I was really happy with the intricate nature of works 12,13,14, it was definitely the one I learnt the most from, I love how delicate and fragile it looks, Like if you touched it, it would snap off, I think that's what makes it look so real.

There are a few simplified works that could be pushed further like the fire sign and the tree message, but I'm not to sure how to push them further without losing the simple message, so I left as is.

I am happy with most of the work I have produced, my timing was good and I finished everything I started. I certainly need a rest just let me say, with my other pract unit I'm feeling a little overwhelmed with no time for anything else, so hopefully I have done enough. I honestly don't know where they get min 9hrs per week per unit work required, I work 7 days a week, at least 6 hours per day to get my work finished, so I don't know what others are submitting if they only put that amount of time in. Thanks for your teachings and I look forward to receiving your comments.