

Fire and Water

Fire and Water is the outcome of a serendipitous moment, when what is known is reconfigured, creating a field of ambiguity, a new reality, or dreamscape. The work has, most recently, taken on a political significance as our government strips away policies that address the pressing challenges of climate change.

The Burn

*at the threshold
in a time of not remembering,
summer yields to fall,
winter to spring –
the fires burn.
surrendering to this world of dust and matter
i am home.*

Understanding our universal need for connection and the inevitability of separation has been the primary focus of my photographic life. I photographed births with the understanding that our very first separation occurs at the moment the umbilical cord is cut. Later, I turned my attention to the final separation from life, the last breath, photographing hospice patients, slaughterhouses, and autopsies in addition to witnessing the preparation of bodies for burial. I traveled to the holy cremation site of Varanasi in India, and to Mexico to observe the Day of the Dead. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina I photographed the devastated remains of a community with an eye toward any hint of renewal.

In 2007, the universal mystery of birth and death became more personal. Within the space of a few days my first grandchild was born and my sister was diagnosed with cancer. At the same time, while attending an artist residency at the Ragdale Foundation outside of Chicago, I witnessed and began photographing controlled prairie burns. Photographing controlled burns is dangerous work. Though I try to stay ahead of the smoke, shooting demands that I push myself into it. The smoke can be blinding and sometimes the heat is so overwhelming that I have to leave the site for relief. The smell and sensation of the burn permeates everything I carry, clinging to me for days.

I spent ten years photographing controlled burns in prairies, woodlands and wetlands in Lake Forest, Illinois, while simultaneously watching my grandchild and sister follow their separate paths of rising into and falling away from life. Although burns are violent and destructive by nature, they are also regenerative. Prairies and other natural habitats depend upon fire for the survival of some native species. The fires challenged and comforted me in ways I could not have anticipated, speaking to loss and gain, chaos and order, passing and arising, despair and hope – that is, life itself. The photographs are my attempt to capture the ephemeral moment when life and death are not contradictory, but harmonized as a single process to be embraced as a whole.

Fire and Smoke are my equivalents: abstract manifestations of an inner state where the mysterious resides. Smoke both obscures and reveals. The densely layered landscape is enveloped in veils that are alternately transparent, translucent, and opaque while flames leap from the earth. The foreground melts into the background in the quickly changing terrain, altering a sense of scale and space. Reference points and orientation are intentionally obscured. My interest is not in a realistic rendering of the landscape. Rather I look for visual references of a place that my mind cannot grasp; a place in which the sublime resides, inviting a state of quiet meditation.

*winds sigh in the bittersweet hour,
fires of crimson rearrange the landscape
into a starless carpet of charred remains.
above the clear dark waters
ashes take flight
on the wings of
possibility.*

- Jane Fulton Alt