Fire is primordial and eternal. It attracts us and burns us like moths but heats us and gives us life. The core of our planet burns, and the center of our solar system does, too. As the planet heats up, fires become more prominent and more dangerous, reminding us of our beholden existence to Gaia. Their remnants of ash and char point to something volcanic and ancient. These materials gave humans our first medium for drawing, seen throughout countless caves across Europe, Turkey, Western and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Australia—soot and spit mixed, among other earthy pigments, then drawn with fingers and sticks. The drawings expressed lives lived on the land and possibly triggered hallucinatory visions as moving images. We utilize fire but respect its boundaries; we harness it and at times lose control. The indigenous people knew it well, as poet Gary Snyder aimed to remind us:

Fire is an old story. / I would like, / with a sense of helpful order, / with respect for laws / of nature, / to help my land / with a burn, / a hot clean / burn.... And then / it would be more / like, / when it belonged to the Indians / / Before.¹

We think of fire as being inside us, too—as driving us to move, to act, and to create. We connect to it in ceremonial and symbolic ways. Erin Wiersma, with Konza Prairie, brings her body to the land as an active matrix in an expanded field of drawing. She uses her self as a conduit for past and present time, as internal desire and external reality. As a body of work, it takes its name from, and engages with, the Konza Prairie Biological Station, particularly the controlled burns there that instigate prairie regrowth or restoration. Sitting in the Flint Hills of northeast Kansas, the Konza Prairie Biological Station is part of the largest remaining expanse of tallgrass prairies in the world, stretching across 3,487 hectares of uncultivable hills. Shifts in landscape position and soils are revealed by the plants in this region; the balance of grasses and forbs (wildflowers) changes with topography and fire frequency, and the edges of benches are often marked by the woody plants, including the invasive sumac. The plant compositions differ based on whether the prairie is grazed by bison or not, creating differing experiences visually. During a prescribed burn, the fire moves along a sweeping demarcated yet jagged line that crawls along the ground, devouring the vegetation under billowing plumes of smoke. The winds of the land send signals up into the sky.

The fire line in the prairie does not become a border but a moveable site of regeneration and re-creation. One side consists of the current and past season’s growth in light browns and greens; on the other is the blackened terrain. The line moves
Transect 310 K1B (Northward) (2018)
Transect 315 SUB (JPW) (2018)
along changing the landscape, preparing it for a future of new growth, in real time. The blaze follows the contour of the land, slowing as it moves downhill and accelerating when it moves uphill, shifting according to the dynamism of this place and its elements (wind direction and speed). In this recently burned space, Wiersma drags large sheets of paper across the charred ground—a primeval landscape that some might confuse with a wasteland—etching and scraping the soot across the cotton paper, marking it and scarring it. The duration of dragging, her trajectory through the landscape, and the speed at which she moves build up the surface of the paper with layers of bio-char that create dense yet subtle images for the eye to navigate and the mind to travel. Wiersma’s own immersion in this place is a slow transection of material and immaterial fields and processes that promotes the attainment of an intimate knowledge of the place. The works vary in hues of brown and black, like early sepia-toned photographs or charcoal drawings, some more subtle than others. These colors are generated by the interactions of fire with plant composition, the amount of dead plant matter in a given burn, rainfall during a growing season and current precipitation, and the time at which Wiersma puts paper to ground. Thus, the works become both abstractions and representations, both of which are bound to the natural and man-made processes of the prairie. In Transect 310 K1B
(Northward) (2018), lines appear vertically like meditative strokes that resemble individual grass stems and a snow-covered prairie. Her fleeting yet conscious movement across the land dictates the resulting image, which references her body and its interaction with the Earth’s processes at particular times and places. This reflexivity in other works, such as Transect 315 SUB (JPW) (2018), appears speckled and hazy from edge to edge and reminds one of the aerial footage of the process itself while provoking a densely rendered cosmos. These drawings mark Wiersma’s process and labor through their images and titles while denoting the prescribed burns and human interaction with nature; as such, they are a record of the land and its renewal through fire as matrices of a complexly nuanced and beautiful world.

◆ ◆ ◆

Inherent to Wiersma’s process are the fleeting nature of both temporality and labor. What binds them, and the meaning of her work, is walking (and running). To walk the line between the body, the land, and history, the artist must overcome obstructions to her movement, to be the impetus to spark the process from idea to object, from head to hand. This action requires her to drag the works through the burned fields and as such, they exist somewhere between drawing, photography, and printmaking. Traditionally, the painter or drawer sets the substrate or base material on a wall or easel, chooses their medium (graphite, charcoal, oil, acrylic, and so on), and puts it in hand, marking across the surface in movements of varying speed, pressure, and layering. The resulting artwork, then, is the result of the mind’s decision, the extension of the body, and its impact onto a static surface. In Wiersma’s case, this traditional process is subverted and made more immediate by the artist’s giving agency to the land itself. Here, she engages her entire body in a radical act that allows the land itself to do the drawing itself—the charred grass is put into direct contact with the cotton paper in movement, a partnership between the artist and the Earth. Like Mary Corse’s Black Earth series,3 works molded made directly from earth into large, glistening-black ceramic tiles that are then exhibited on the wall like a drawing or painting—Wiersma utilizes the land and the Konza as a specific site to realize the artwork’s final form.

2017 (Install View) K20A Goodwin Hill, charcoal on paper, 72in x 366in
2019 105+123 2C, charcoal on paper, 60in x 45in
Labor is essential to this connection and puts her within the legacy of conceptual artists Agnes Denes and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Denes is most known for her “environmental installations” such as Wheatfield—A Confrontation Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan (1982), a two-acre, fully harvestable wheat field cultivated in downtown Manhattan on a landfill. As a critical art installation, her gesture commented on the industrialization and capitalization of the modern environmental world, a direct counterpoint to Wall Street a short walk away. Ukeles, on the other hand, sought to draw a connection to the artist as an author of acts, particularly in utilitarian terms and according to stereotypes of gender and labor roles. Initiated by her Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969! she began documenting the process of daily tasks like dusting or changing diapers. She recorded these acts photographically and displayed them serially. The photographs provided evidence of the artistic act, and eventually, she would turn these into large performances, such as washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, at times wielding a mop like a painter does a brush.

The works become both abstractions and representations, both of which are bound to the natural and man-made processes of the prairie.

Wiersma’s labor practice with the Konza Prairie series exercises this history of the artist as laborer and the artist’s role in how a work is made. Her movement across the ashen terrain becomes a line in the landscape in which she is an agent for each strand of smoking grass, allowing them to make marks as the hand might. “The primordial movement, the agent, is a point that sets itself in motion (genesis of form),” wrote Paul Klee. “A line comes into being. The most highly charged line is the most authentic line because it is the most active. In all these examples the principal and active line develops freely. It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of a walk.” Wiersma’s walking through the land becomes a reflexive state whereby the land marks the paper by way of her gesture, her action. She is the dot that goes out for a walk.

Each work marks a specific duration of time and so becomes something like a photograph, too. Like light, here the natural process—of fire converting into bio-char—results in an image on paper that recalls its source: the Konza Prairie. The works then become evidence of the burning that took place and of Wiersma’s tract through the land. Photographs, or “light writings,” build an image over a duration of light and the reaction of sensitized material. The image is an index of the thing it recorded, like smoke to a fire. Wiersma’s drawings also display markings scratched into the paper not unlike prints resulting from etchings into copper in printmaking techniques. The limestone soils of the Flint Hills further this connection to printmaking through lithographs, or “stone writings,” which require a large lithographic limestone, along with the incongruous relationship of oil-based ink and water, to transfer an image from the plate to a sheet of paper. The bio-char, only existing from the prescribed burn, needs a matrix (the artist) to transfer its medium to a substrate. I think of these works by Wiersma then as Fotiágraphs, if we’re to use the Greek language as per custom—they are not light writings, not stone writings, but, under the expansive umbrella of drawing, are “fire writings”—works born out of an ancient yet very present activity.

With Konza Prairie, Wiersma gives the land agency, and her process becomes a method of expressing its ecology as well as the act of creation. The historically incorrect idea that the environment is a stage for human drama, that it is only for human fulfillment or entertainment, is thus rendered false. Instead, her drawings become works that mark duration, change, creation, and destruction—all essential processes of the Earth and life. They point to the long and changing relationship of humans to their specific locations, their rooted place. The drawings demonstrate the artist’s slow discovery of the immensely diverse prairie in which these works were made. The humility of laboring for the land and for the particular site that is the Konza Prairie becomes an extension of the site and, as she writes, is a testament to her “body’s capacity to absorb and respond to the environment.” Her body becomes our body. This dialogue between body and land reminds the viewers of that ancient and unbreakable bond we share with the Earth, and our ultimate reliance on its sustainability. In the words of Rebecca Solnit, each work expresses “the rich potential relations between thinking and the body; the way one person’s act can be an invitation to another’s imagination; the way every gesture can be imagined as a brief and invisible sculpture; the way walking reshapes the world by mapping it, treading paths into it, encountering it; the way each act reflects and reinvents the culture in which it takes place.” The recollection of ritual as part of her experience is embedded in the process, and so into the works themselves: her sensing of a peregrine falcon, traversing the ancient cattle paths, or her own unique ritual of dragging through the fire.
Wiersma’s drawings become works that mark duration, change, creation, and destruction—all essential processes of the Earth and life.

The images as an index of the process are then conduits between body and land, idea and image, and connect to the primordial existence of fire, the ancient peoples in the cave painters and the Kaw, or “the people of the south wind,” who once inhabited that region. A charge exists that aims to conjure imaginative awareness, laborious process, ecological mindfulness, current issues in environmental effects, and wonder. After the death of Jackson Pollock, painter Allan Kaprow described the former’s “diaristic gesture” and breaking with tradition in his drip paintings: “Pollock’s near destruction of this tradition may well be a return to the point where art was more actively involved in ritual, magic, and life than we have known it in our recent past.” In a way, Wiersma reminds us that ritual can co-exist with science in meaningful ways that can reverse our degraded relationship with the terra we call home. Ritual, or magic, are tied to very real processes in the environment, connecting the human beyond cultivation and economy, beyond sustenance and exploitation, but in pure spirit and livelihood. Wiersma has compounded all of this into images that appear at first to be simple, but which are in fact as diverse and complicated as the lands she trekked across, if one looks long enough. The mind, the heart, and the blood become the engine that drives the fire inside us that moves us to action and with these Fotiágraphs are evidence akin to the soot on the walls of caves made thousands of years ago.

Erin Wiersma studied at the Instituto San Lovidico in Orvieto, Italy as an undergraduate; she received her B.A. from Messiah College and completed her M.F.A. at the University of Connecticut. Wiersma is represented by Robischon Gallery in Denver, Colorado and Galerie Wehlau in Munich, Germany. Since 2011, she has exhibited with A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, New York, the first and longest operating women-run gallery in the country. Wiersma has had solo exhibitions at Robischon, A.I.R., at the Salina Art Center, Mid-America Arts Alliance, and more. Her work has been featured in OnVerge / CUE Foundation, Art21Online Magazine and Two Coats of Paint. She has attended residencies through Two Coats of Paint in Brooklyn, New York, and in Caylus, France. Erin Wiersma lives and works in Manhattan, Kansas and is an Associate Professor of Art at Kansas State University.

Colin Edgington is a visual artist and writer currently living and working in the greater New York area with his wife Jennifer and dog Jasper. He holds a BAFA in studio art from the University of New Mexico, and an MFA in studio art from the Mason Gross School of Arts, Rutgers University. His visual work has exhibited internationally and won the Iowa Review Photography Prize in 2012. He also holds an MFA in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts, NYC and has written for The Brooklyn Rail, MOMUS, Afterimage, among others and has written several essays for artists catalogue’s and books including a meta-fictional interview for Patrick Nagatani’s Buried Cars (Museum of New Mexico Press).

NOTES


2. Industrialism and manufacturing provided artists an immediacy they had never had before. With the invention of tubes of paint, a variety of graphite and charcoal made readily available, they were no longer required to source their own materials, mix their own pigments or deal with the locations of these processes to make art; they only had to find a manufacturer they liked and go from there. This also placed yet another boundary between them and the land itself, the materials they used were packaged, clean, and of a utility cut off from the ecology of its homeland. Today, we experience this more intensely than ever before. Wiersma’s process is then a return to the land and understanding of a particular place’s ecology; it is not lost on many artists in the 21st century that their materials are tied to a cultural and environmental epoch that has caused so much harm and ultimately placed us, as a species, in a state of possible extinction. See the work of photographer and artist Matthew Brandt for another example.


