Beauty From Ashes:

Creating Charcoal Art in Burnt Forests

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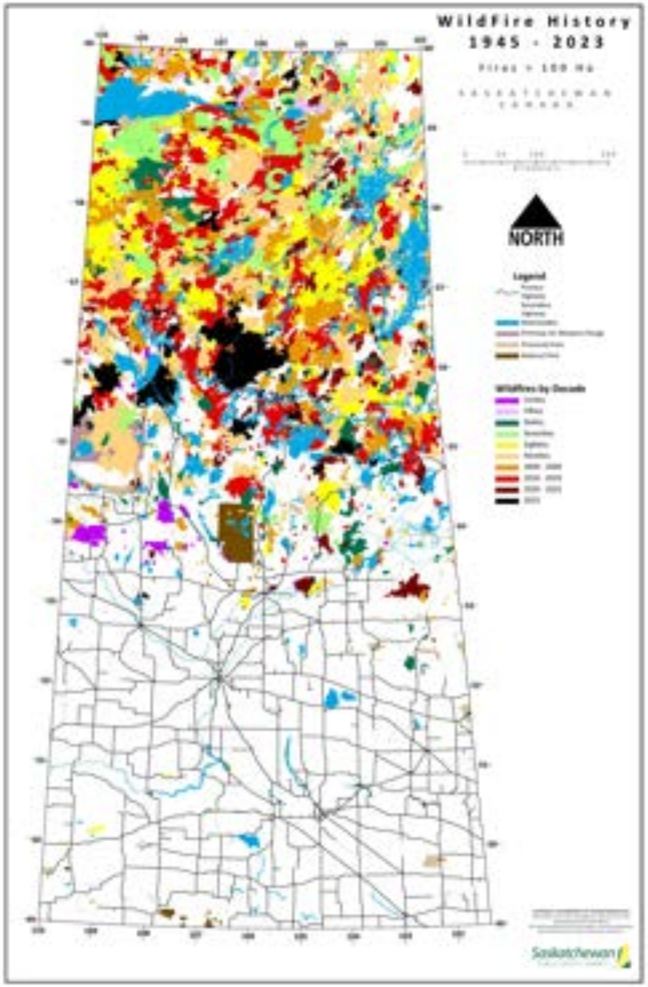
Introduction

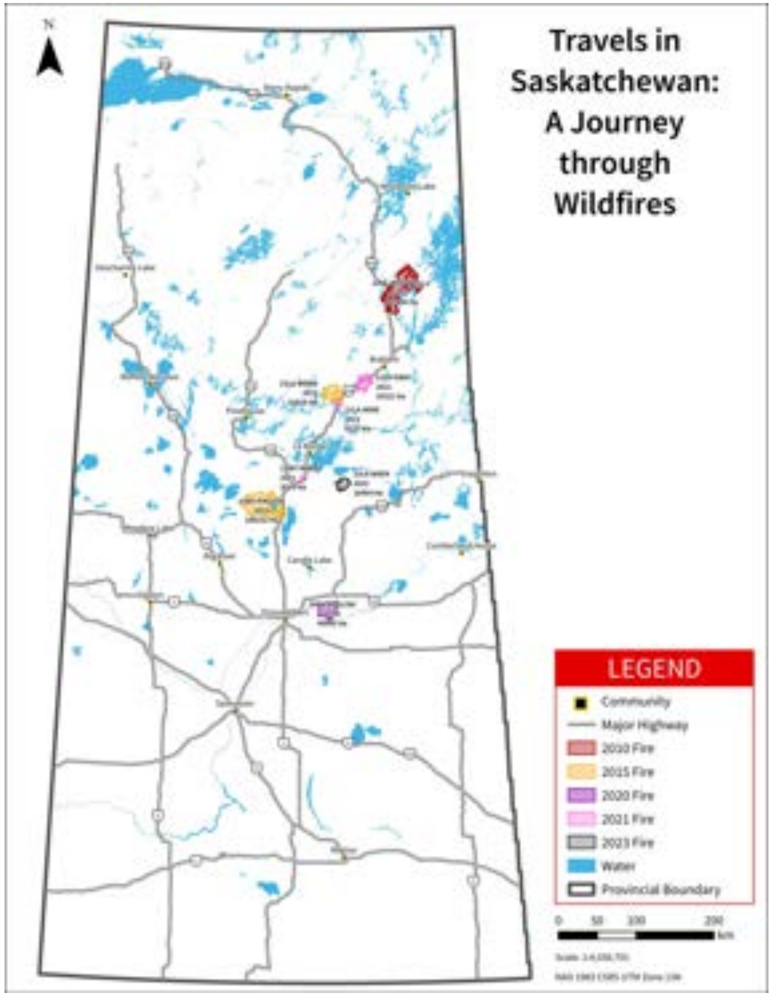
Fire has been a natural part of our boreal forest ecosystem for thousands of years and are increasing in frequency and intensity across our boreal landscapes. On average, there are 8000 fires that burn approximately 2.1 M ha each year in Canada with Western Canada seeing a dramatic increase in forest fires the past several years. Thus, there are millions of ha of charred burnt landscapes that are considered unproductive, where few people enter because they are unwelcoming and unattractive until they regrow and become green again. But shouldn't we engage with these desolate, black landscapes to share their stories, to understand their impact on the environment and in a sense breathe life back into these dreary wastelands by creating art?

My first encounter with forest fires was as a 17 year old when our Junior Ranger camp was seconded to fight forest fires in northern Ontario – ever since then I have had a fascination with forest fires. However, in 2010, I was personally impacted by a forest fire which burnt my research plots at Davin Lake in northern Saskatchewan—a place where I was researching the movement of carbon in jack pine forests. When exploring the damage to my research equipment, charcoal from the standing burnt trees was being transferred to my clothing in interesting patterns. Was there another way of examining this now burnt forest than from my traditional science perspective? This experience led to my exploration of burnt forests in northern Saskatchewan for the last 15 years, not strictly as a scientist studying the ecological functions of the forest, but as an artist/scientist designing and experimenting with these burnt remnants to capture their charcoal in landscape works.

The purpose of this book is to illustrate the processes for collecting charcoal markings on paper and canvas from burnt forests after forest fires. Scan the QR codes to look at videos of some of the processes.

The burnt research plot in northern Saskatchewan following a forest fire in 2010





Fire history map (1945-2023) for Saskatchewan (L) and map of fire sites used for my charcoal art studies (R)

Black spruce tops after a hot burn

Paper Media

In the beginning I started with watercolor paper taped to a board and charcoal marks were collected as I interacted with the burnt trees. The process never involved making marks with charcoal in my hands – the trees made the marks from my collaboration with them.

My first charcoal artwork on watercolor paper. The process was one of randomness, abstraction – as one never knows what kind of mark would be made until it has been done



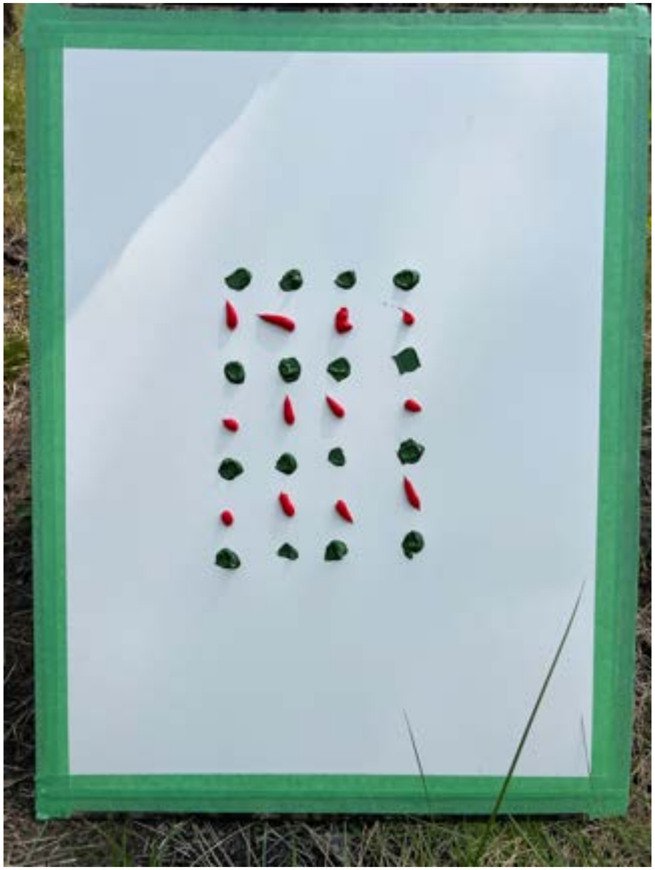
Examples of charcoal artwork by rubbing watercolor paper mounted on a board against burnt trees (all pieces 20.5 x 28”)

Sometimes just using your hands and the intimate connection of the paper directly on the burnt tree brings different results

‘Five Fingers’ one piece done by each digit (4.5 x 9.5”)

Any work done on paper or canvas was sprayed with a fixative to preserve the charcoal markings

Charcoal and acrylic on paper



Initially, I started by putting paint on the burnt tree but the mark making didn't take shape so instead paint was added to the paper first before making the charcoal marks

Musical charcoal

Examples of adding acrylic paint while making charcoal markings. Scan the QR code to hear the making of musical charcoal from tree branches

Playing in the burnt forest

Canvas Media

Pulling raw canvas around burnt standing trees creates unique charcoal markings

Examples of the charcoal markings on raw canvas – L Reaching for the Heavens (40 x 48”) and R Eve (40 x 48”)

Spraying fixative on canvases in the burnt forest near Dickens Lake

Different species of boreal trees and the severity of the burn on the tree as well as time since the fire can also impact the mark making which all present interesting challenges. And knowing when to stop adding charcoal marks is even more difficult!

Laying raw canvas on the ground

Raw canvas placed on the ground with burnt logs and rocks on June 20, 2017 (left) and removed logs on October 17, 2017 (middle) and resulting canvas on a board to show that parts of the canvas were decomposing when on the ground (right)

Another example of canvas placed directly on the ground (L) and the resulting image after five months of contact with the environment (R)

To reduce canvas rotting/decomposition, the canvas was attached to stretcher bars to get it off the ground which helped; however, canvases were still damaged by wildlife

The most successful process was to wrap raw canvas on birch panels (36 x 36”) which kept the canvas off the ground and resisted damage from wildlife encounters

SK Arts Project

The objective of the SK Arts Board grant was to understand the impact of the natural environment on the transfer of charcoal from burnt forests components to canvas. The process examines how the natural elements (wind, rain, snow, heat and cold) during a five month period impact the transfer of charcoal from the burnt logs to the canvas. To understand this process, half of the canvases placed in the burnt forest were covered with a shelter to exclude the elements. The hypothesis was that covered canvases would not allow the rain and snow to aid in the leaching of charcoal thus resulting in little charcoal transfer. Sites were selected near Prince Albert in the Fort à la Corne forest and near McLennan Lake north of Missinipe SK.

Scan for more on SK Arts Project


Fort à la Corne Site (English fire 2020)

Raw canvas was attached to birch panels (36 x 36”) to provide a more solid surface and then placed on the ground before arranging the burnt material on top of the canvas. This project had one of the canvases covered with a shelter to exclude precipitation (rain or snow). Opposite photo - a bear had bit into the canvas.

Canvases (36 x 36”) after 5 months (May 3 – September 29, 2023) in the burnt forest where the left canvas was uncovered, and the right canvas was covered


with a shelter
McLennan Lake Site north of Missinipe (Gray fire 2021)

Site with canvases covered with shelter and uncovered – bottom R – after 5 months the left canvas which was under the shelter was covered in a white dust from wind erosion

Canvases (36 x 36”) after 5 months (May 10–Oct 3, 2023) *in burnt forest where the left canvas was covered with a shelter and the right canvas was uncovered*

Grey Fire (2021) with a view over McLennan Lake

Capturing Charcoal On The Forest Floor

Acrylic medium added to a birch panel and pressed into the charcoal on the forest floor to capture an imprint

Charcoal imbedded in acrylic paint mounted on paper (11 x 11”) L and a birch panel (8 x 8”) R

Art Installations In Burnt Forest

Raw canvas wrapped around the trees – clothing for the naked burnt trees!

Beetles invaded the site after the fire and burrowed through the canvas

Green painting

Installation of a green painting in a lifeless burnt forest (see QR code on p 39)

Charcoal sculptures

Left - Charred logs mounted on rock from the Canadian Shield. Right - Sculpture used by attendees to create their own charcoal art on paper at an exhibition

Charcoal Performance Art

Becoming a human canvas interacting with the burnt trees

To watch performances of creating charcoal art or to watch the green painting on page 36 scan the QR code

‘Carbon Capture’ Exhibition Mann Art Gallery

“These abstractions might be considered as collaborations with the landscape – due to the strong element of chance involved in their production. The directness of working *en plein air* is taken a step further when the actual stuff of the forest makes its mark on the canvas. In designing and experimenting with these burnt remnants, Ken van Rees works as both artist and scientist.”

Marcus Miller
Former Director/Curator Mann Art Gallery

Exhibition at the Mann Art Gallery (November 2021 – January 2022). On the right Wildfire' (diptych) 36 x 48" and 36 x 36" Permanent Collection Mann Art Gallery)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About the Author

Ken van Rees, originally from Ontario, is a retired forest soil scientist (University of Saskatchewan) and an artist which allows him a unique opportunity to look at the intersection of art and science in his praxis. He is an avid en plein air painter and paints with a group of painters known as the Men Who Paint. He has travelled and painted from the Pacific to the Atlantic and as far north as Ellesmere Island. Ken has spent the last 14 years playing in burnt forests creating visual and installation works, trying to capture the character of these black, forgotten ecosystems.

Acknowledgements

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