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### **Fire within the Art World**

In this essay we will be exploring the idea of fire in art, how it is perceived and used within other practises. In my current practise, I am experimenting with fire and the textures I can recreate using different mediums to construct it. I decided to work with fire specifically as I wanted to look at something new within my practise. I have never previously explored this subject matter and wanted to move on from my what I have created before. I am also exploring the way fire is interpreted by different artists and how they use it within their own works. I have specifically decided to explore fire as a medium and subject matter as I feel I can use it to move forward within my work and personal life, which overlap often when I am creating. It is the idea of getting rid of the past and moving forward mentally and physically. I hope to use the information I discover in my research for this essay to help further my material practise and knowledge around the subject.

In the book 'The Object', edited by Anthony Hudek, explores different people's theories about the object within the art world. Man Ray states in '100 Objects of My Affection' 1961; "Each object is art. Designed to amuse, annoy, bewilder, mystify, inspire reflection" (Hudek, 2014)<sup>15</sup>. Agreeing with this statement, where it implies that all art is designed to inspire a feeling, or bring up a memory, or evoke something. In relation to fire as being a subject matter, typically within art, fire is used to show the end of an event or to make a point about society.

In some cultures, it can be used as a way to represent the beginnings of something new, such as the Myth of the Pheonix in ancient Egyptian culture. The Pheonix, first appears in this myth, linking to the sun god Ra, and being "said to rise from its own ashes, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life and death." (ANCIENT MYTHOLOGY.net, n.d.)<sup>7</sup>. This myth relates towards the way my personal exploration of the subject of fire within artwork, depicting it as a means to an end, and to allow new beginnings to develop. In contrast to the majority of people's view on this element as an 'object' of destruction over creation. When it comes to fire and its beginnings in the world varies between

cultures. More commonly it is believed that “how humans came to possess the knowledge of fire is through a person, animal, or deity stealing it from a higher being who refuses to share it.” (TOTA, n.d.)<sup>14</sup>, such as seen in Greek mythology where humans received fire from the titan Prometheus who “smuggled fire in a fennel stock from Olympus” (TOTA, n.d.)<sup>14</sup>. In other cultures, the existence of fire can be explained by the existence of a deity, where they either are “depicted as the master of fire” or “considered to be a very powerful form of personified fire.” (TOTA, n.d.)<sup>14</sup>. Different cultures see these deities in different ways, and each have different stories about them, such as the Aztecs who believed the Mixcoatl “god of the hunt and god of war” invented fire by “spinning the heavens around their axes to create the fire drill” (TOTA, n.d.)<sup>14</sup> after harnessing percussion lightening and gifting fire to humans. Or how the “Babylonians used burning as a way to purify sacrifices and convey offerings to their gods.” (TOTA, n.d.)<sup>14</sup>, as in their culture they had many different fire gods that they worshipped.



(Fig 1)

When exploring what artists use or have used fire within their work, I’ve come across the Boyle Family. They are probably most well known for their Earth Studies, where they asked people to blindfolded, throw a dart at a world map then go to that spot and make a cast of a specific sized section of the land. The randomness and unpredictability of throwing the darts correlates to the unpredictability of fire in the way it moves and interacts with other materials. However, the work I have briefly explored is a series called. ‘Earth, Air, Fire and Water’ (Fig 1). The pieces within this work display bright vivid colours that appear to dance around the canvas, creating overlapping abstract shapes.

This work is a “projection of various chemical and physical reactions occurring in special containers in the projectors” (Locher, 1987) <sup>16</sup>. This was developed in the early 1960’s where “Boyle developed his methods to present elementary processes” (Locher, 1987) <sup>16</sup>. I found the processes Mark Boyle was experimenting with to be interesting in relation to my own medium experiments to best find the right representation of the natural world and its elements. He found that the final images produced were interesting and can possibly be classed as more important than the process as it shows the elements within in different light to how they are typically seen as raw elements when represented in art.



(Fig 2)

Another artist who explores site specific work, is Scottish artist Anya Gallaccio, specifically her work, ‘Preserve’. This exhibition contains a series of installation pieces that, “incorporate melting candles, felled trees, ageing fruit and decomposing flowers.”. *La Dolce Vita* (Fig 2), made in 1994, is comprised from candles and aluminium foil. This piece is displayed on the floor of the gallery, with different height candles spread across a sheet of aluminium foil, burning slowly. The candle flames are said to “evoke a site of religious veneration”, and “the accumulating wax also suggests and evolving geology.” (Studio International, n.d.) <sup>4</sup>. *La Dolce Vita* has a sense of calmness to it, creating a relaxed atmosphere, allowing time to pass shown by the melting of the candles. The way fire is presented within this work is not as a destructive force, but as a reminder that fire can be an element of calm and warmth. The element of fire is used within the outcome and process of the piece, giving a sense that the process is part of the outcome and just as important as the final image. This draws interest to the piece as most work displayed can be more focused at the final outcome of the image, which is in contrast to The Boyle Family’s *Earth, Air, Fire and Wind* series.



(Fig 3)

In my visits to the Biennale in Venice, I came across the work of artist Anna Maria Maiolino. A Brazilian contemporary artist born in 1942. The work on display, 'Anno 1942' (Fig 3), really captured my interest, initially only appearing to be a burnt piece of paper. 'Anno' is part of the 'Mapas Mentais series', which began in 1971 on her return to Rio de Janeiro from New York, "where she encountered Latin American artists who had escaped military dictatorships across the Southern Cone" (Biennale Arte, n.d.)<sup>2</sup>. The works in this series Maiolino "questions division and opposition between inside and outside, positive and negative, black and white, and front and back." (MoMA, n.d.)<sup>1</sup>. In these works Maiolino was interested in both sides of the paper, looking at the usually unseen, then exposing it by contorting and folding the paper to create "graphic object" (Biennale Arte, n.d.)<sup>2</sup>. This process is interesting to me as it is an intriguing way of processing material as well as looking at an object. When creating, and looking at the subject of fire, I am trying to create something that evokes viewers to look at the object from many different angles and to evoke the idea of growth from seeing it through these different views. However, the process is not considered as important as the final outcome of the pieces. This can be seen as similar to the Boyle Family's Earth, Air, Fire and Wind series, where the process to get to the final image is interesting and important towards the creation of the work, yet like most artworks it isn't really relevant once the work is finished.



(Fig 4)

Another artist is Stephen Cripps, a pyrotechnic sculptor. His works are “exceptionally experimental, dynamic, energetic, imaginative and continually pushing boundaries” (Henry Moore Foundation, n.d.)<sup>3</sup>. This is what I aspire to be like within my own practise, experimenting with different mediums and seeing the textures that those different processes create. I find his drawings and sketches (Fig 4) most intriguing as they have an energy to them that evokes a sense of urgency and immediacy to them. The use of watery mediums to create such fiery sketches show a great understanding of the mediums that he is working with. This and Cripps ability to create such works, partly could come from his experiences when training and becoming a firefighter with Greater London Fire Brigade, which he joined in 1997, which is further similar to my own work, by being influenced through personal experiences. In comparison with other sculptures or performance works, Cripps felt that his works engaged with the audiences more, creating a connection between the artist, viewer and artwork. Cripps states, “As soon as I have rehearsed, everything’s gone. By experimenting at each performance, I am seeing [the work] for the first time along with the audience.” (Turner Contemporary, n.d.)<sup>10</sup>, further implying that the process, such as in Gallaccio’s works; is as, if not more, important than the final outcome. This could be down to the work being performance based, allowing the viewers to more easily see and understand what the artist is trying to achieve within the work. In terms of performance art, Cripps’ work follows the that his actions are used to develop work that is unique, however it is focused less on the artist himself and more on the actions and results of these actions. His use of fire as a medium to create is interesting with the stimulus that it is dangerous, which he addresses in the statement; “There’s a great fear about explosives as a destructive element, I use them in a creative way.” (Turner Contemporary, n.d.)<sup>10</sup>. What’s intriguing is that Cripps is clearly aware of the dangers surrounding the elements he chooses to use, however uses them to show that they can be beautiful, turning the initial impression of fire away from the stimulus that fire is always a bad thing.



(Fig 5)

The final artist I have explored within this essay is David Roberts. A British ceramicist, who mainly focuses on the art of Raku. Raku is a type of pottery that originated in Japan during the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. This process originally used hand-built pots for Japanese tea ceremonies, were fired in high temperatures then removed while at the peak temperature, and rapidly cooled to create cracks in the glazes. This process in pottery is decorative, so mainly items created using this process focus more on the final outcome of each vessel. Roberts was first introduced to ceramics in 1966 while completing his degree, and mainly focusing on Raku in the late seventies. Currently Roberts is classed as “responsible for the introduction and promotion of modern, large scale Raku in Europe.”, with his work being collected displayed in collections and galleries throughout the world. What’s so interesting about his work is that the final pots produced have a very refined look to them, in contrast to the process to create them. The Raku process is very intense and unpredictable, whereas the ceramics Roberts makes appear clean, polished and delicate, with neat patterns (Fig 5). Furthermore, this is curious as most raku fired ceramics have an essence of the process, incorporating bright colour and flowing, random shapes and lines. The final ceramics usually reflect the process of creation from the fire. This links with the ancient Egyptian myth of the phoenix, where the new life and beauty rises from the ashes. The idea that the pots and their creation is new life brought into this world through the hard work of an artist is exciting.

From this research, it appears that the initial perception of fire isn’t entirely true. Fire as an element and medium has been used within the art world as a tool that can be harnessed for both destruction and creation. As an object, it can come across as a means to an end, but also as a means for new life to prevail as shown in the myth of the phoenix. Many artists actually use fire more for creation within practise to enhance or develop their work on another level, whether this is exploring the elemental possibilities as the Boyle Family has done, or as part of the process in David Roberts’ ceramic work. When it comes to furthering my own practise, I would in future look at the method of some of the artist discussed within this essay and seeing how it will affect my own processes. Such as experimenting with Raku in my ceramics workshops and exploring the possibilities of mixing the physical element of fire with other mediums. The idea that

fire can be a vital part in some artists' practises is inspiring and allows viewers to realize that although dangers at times, fire is a beautiful element that isn't always just the end of something. As humans we always look for an explanation for the unknown and for things that we don't fully understand. We use our beliefs and prior knowledge to attach stories and emotions to objects, something we do unconsciously as a species. Through time these beliefs have helped us gain a more developed understanding and allowed us to expand our knowledge of the world and the things in it.

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