

Painting the Unpaintable, Without the Paint

By Katherine Zaremba

Take a picture of a candle and see if your photo still has a flame. Sure, there's a second of color encapsulated, but that's not the restless dance that is fire, hurting your eyes and daring you to keep looking all at the same time. Fire is simply one of the many things that cannot be done justice in traditional representational art. So it figures that a subject like fire that refuses to be caught can be used to capture other such infinite wonders, like sunshine and dreams. *Fire Script*, an exhibit by Mirang Wonne recently debuted at the de Saisset Museum on Santa Clara's campus, does just that. What at first appears to be billowing rich silk taffeta is actually steel or steel mesh flame-etched with a blowtorch covering it with nature inspired patterns. The show, which runs from April 10 to June 15, features seven similarly created pieces, some with multiple parts in front of one another. The spacing creates an effect similar to seeing below the surface in a clear and still pond. The mesmerizingly smooth iridescent lines the flame creates give the art, and the whole gallery room a sense of gentle movement, like a bobbing rowboat. The motion and emotion conveyed by the exhibit manage to give a true sense of some of the things Wonne's work stands for.

This isn't the Bay Area artist's first foray into painting with fire directly onto a metal "canvas"; she has also worked in copper and shown flame etched metal pieces across the globe. Furthermore, Wonne's work has long reflected various aspects of nature regardless of medium, as seen in the lines on these pieces currently being displayed; many resemble flowers or kelp. She also originally hails from Korea, which has influenced her to explore various Asian cultural aspects in her art, as evident in "Fire Script" (Kouvaris). From the teachings of Confucius onward, the Eastern world has often shown itself to be more respectful and reverent of nature than the West. Wonne's exhibit is an understated sort of beautiful, it doesn't badger the viewer but simply presents what is perceived; and what is portrayed happens to be pretty jaw-dropping all on its own.

The room in which the exhibit is held has pieces centered in the middle of each wall, using much of the available space. Hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room are fourteen matching steel mesh panels, lined up but also offset, some more left or right, some higher or lower. The spacing is reminiscent of willow trees, clustered but not identical, with the material looking deceptively fragile despite the fact that in actuality it is steel, and steel christened with fire at that. Pale oatmeal to pink in color, with slight floral and other plant life patterning, the panels appear soft and pretty, an interesting juxtaposition with their medium and mode of creation. As the first thing that catches the viewer's eye, they set a tone for the entire exhibit. There is an organic feel to the

space, the natural world's inspiration for the art is evident, and quietly awe inspiring. It is nature's simplicity that makes it so hard to convincingly reproduce synthetically. The pieces do not compete for attention but work together functioning as one unit despite their slight differences.

The three brightest works of art are situated on the far wall, directing the viewer's attention as they walk further into the gallery. The middle of the three consists of two panels a few feet wide each and covers the wall almost completely from ceiling to floor. The two panels are a bright blush color with a few large circular flowers, titled "Capturing Sunlight". Both panels are solid and look taut, in contrast with the two works on either side of "Capturing Sunlight". Both of its neighbors are composed of a mesh panel hanging in front of another panel that is cloth or paper, painted with many different colors. This contrast gives "Capturing Sunlight" a sharper, more directed and bright appearance, even more so than its strong coloring. It's edging on sharp in a pleasant way, like the gorgeous sunlight that inspired it. As the sun peeks out from behind a cloud, we automatically both squint and smile.

On the left of "Capturing Sunlight" is the most standard representational piece in the collection, "Dream Butterfly." More than simply using the outline of natural shapes as a pattern for abstraction as the rest of the collection does, the back panel is painted to resemble a small amount of a meadow or sunny field, entrancing the viewer with clearly represented grass and multicolored flowers stemming from the ground. While there are no actual butterflies in the scene, the vibe conveyed truly does match what comes to mind when one thinks of a butterfly, a happy and summery outdoor scene. It feels as if viewers could only enter the painting they would have the most lovely of picnics, if not for the gauzy-looking overlay of the front panel. This ethereal layer floats over the meadow scene, keeping it otherworldly and just out of reach, literally and figuratively.

"Dream Butterfly" is in a way very typical of all the pieces in the exhibit. It is a representation of a feeling associated with a tangible natural thing, in this case, a butterfly. The butterfly flits through a field somewhere within a dream, and though it isn't directly depicted it is felt in the airy movement, layering, and background of the piece. The same association can be drawn with "Capturing Sunlight" (and other pieces of a similar feel called "Capturing Moonlight"). Sunlight isn't viewed as pink in the physical world, nor is it florally patterned. However, there is something matching in the spirit of sunshine and Wonne's art piece. Just like the flicker of the flame Wonne "paints" with, the true look of sunlight cannot be held in a single frame; her piece captures not only how the sun looks in the sky but how it changes throughout a day, how it feels warm on your back. Wonne's artwork conveys the truth that there are better representations of the sun and the

connections we as people feel to it than a yellow orb with rays. She has truly “captured” sunlight, in a way only abstraction can.

Works Cited

Kouvaris, Lindsey, curator, *Fire Script* exhibition information, 10 April-15 June 2014, de Saisset Museum, Santa Clara, CA.