

Wildfire art exhibitions help make sense of Canada's new climate reality

HALEY RITCHIE

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The Forest Sighed On Either Side by painter Kyle Scheurmann.

KYLE SCHEURMANN

Last summer, as wildfires ravaged Northern Ontario, many on the eastern side of Canada experienced the visuals of wildfire for the first time. But the haze was all too familiar for Vancouver painter Liz Toohey-Wiese, who was attending an art residency on Toronto Island last year when smoke blanketed the city.

Toohey-Wiese had experienced weeks of unsettling orange skies in 2017. That summer inspired her first wildfire art – a topic she's been exploring since.

"I honestly think it was just a way to process," she explained. "I find wildfire smoke is such an amorphous anxiety, especially when you're in the city because you're thinking, 'Well, my house isn't going [to] burn down and there's nowhere to go, but I feel bad.'"

"Unfortunately, that new reality is just becoming so repetitive each summer," she says. It's why she thinks we're seeing more wildfire art and why it's having more impact. "It's just something more and more people are dealing with."

This spring, Toohey-Wiese and her colleague Amory Abbott, both members of Emily Carr University's visual arts faculty, are helping organize an exhibition at the Legacy Art Gallery in downtown Victoria called Fire Season.



Vancouver painter Liz Toohey-Wiese and her colleague Amory Abbott are helping organize the Fire Season exhibition at the Legacy Art Gallery in downtown Victoria. It runs until Sept. 7.
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The show, on until Sept. 7, is one of several art events that puts wildfire in focus as increasingly severe fire seasons inspire artists to explore ideas around climate change and the destructive forces of nature.

"This exhibition, in Victoria, is interesting in that the show is spanning fire season. So the work will not change, but how the work feels may change very much by the end of summer," said Toohey-Wiese.

Charred forest landscapes are not new to Canada's forests, or Canada's artists. Tom Thomson, for instance, captured the moody desolation of a burnt-over Algonquin Park landscape in *Fire-Swept Hills* in 1915.

But today's wildfires reflect a new climate reality. The 2023 wildfire season was the most devastating on record in Canada. By early September, more than 6,132 fires had burned 16.5 million hectares of land. Communities forced to evacuate included Edson in Alberta, West Kelowna in British Columbia and Yellowknife in the Northwest Territories. Fire-prone provinces and territories are already preparing for another intense fire season this year. Severe drought conditions in much of western Canada make destructive megafires more likely.

Amid that anxiety, multidisciplinary artist Krystle Silverfox believes art-making can help people process the trauma of wildfire and make sense of the changing land around them. Silverfox, who is based in Whitehorse and is a member of Selkirk First Nation, co-led a workshop at the Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning that invited community members to learn about wildfire and contribute to a large-scale collaborative art piece on a 10-by-five-foot canvas. The workshop was part of a series of events encouraging residents of the Yukon and Northwest Territories to share art and poetry after a summer of evacuations.

"There's this tendency to want to find solutions right away rather than sitting with and feeling our way through what's happening," Silverfox said. "I think art can create a space for us to really listen to each other and hear how everybody's being affected differently."

Silverfox started the sprawling piece with a sketch of a burnt forest drawn with charcoal gathered from local fire-prevention work. Attendees added to the canvas with markers, pastels, beads and other art supplies to represent a forest recovering from fire.

"There were elders, there were young people, there were people from different communities and backgrounds. The group had such a great energy," Silverfox said. "I heard so many stories from the participants talking about their own experiences. People would also share positive words about aspects of wildfires. We often think of all the negatives but we have to think about it as a more nuanced and complex thing."

Wildfires are complicated. Blackened landscapes can bounce back quickly to healthy bright green. They're a natural and necessary part of many ecosystems, but are also exacerbated by climate change. When they encounter human-built environments their destruction cuts through politics, class and geography – although their impacts are felt differently.

Back in Vancouver, Toohey-Wiese and Abbott believe art is one way for people to better understand that nuance.

The artists have previously published two volumes of an art anthology called *Fire Season*, which collects essays, visual art, poetry and photography to try and make sense of wildfires. *The Forest Sighed On Either Side* by painter Kyle Scheurmann appears in the anthology. In the painting, a convoy of canoes flees a raging inferno into the cool forest around the bend. Despite the flames and the smoke, the paddling doesn't feel urgent – the canoes are empty of possessions. Scheurmann himself sits in one, painting.

Scheurmann's art was recently shown at Toronto gallery Bau-Xi. Many of the paintings in the show were inspired by his time protesting at Fairy Creek and other old-growth anti-logging blockades. But as his summers were repeatedly interrupted by fires – roadblocks, smoke-filled days and glowing horizons – wildfire has entered his art as well.

"I feel a real responsibility to be truthful in my depiction of what's going on in my backyard and hopefully jolt some people into looking with a different set of eyes," said Scheurmann.

In another painting in the Bau-Xi show titled *Thunder*, tiny yellow water bombers are overwhelmed by spot fires and incoming lightning. Smoke rising from chimneys at the edge of the forest suggests people are still home – unaware of or unmoved by the approaching peril.

Both paintings are easy metaphors for the slow creeping danger of climate change, but many of Scheurmann's scenes are based on real life. On colourful canvases, he depicts some people racing from beloved cabins in speedboats and others choosing to stay as wildfires surround them.



Work by Jonathan S Green at the Fire Season exhibition.
JONATHAN S GREEN

“I don’t think that people know what they’re going to do until the fire is right there,” he says, adding that art that shows wildfires may help Canadians begin asking this question of themselves: “They’ll have a subconscious thought: ‘What am I going to do when the fire gets here?’ Unfortunately, it’s a conversation we’ve got to have.”


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