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Touched by fire

by Larissa Ardis

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Russell Maier spends up to several days painting vibrant, abstract images on canvas. The colourful geometric shapes that animate his painting address themes such as perseverance, chaos, sacrifice, and fear. And when he's done, Maier carefully lays painted, gasoline-soaked paper strips on the canvas surface. He strikes a match and ignites it. In a death-dance with the flames, the painted surfaces bubble, change colour, peel and evaporate. In as little as 30 seconds, his creative work is reduced to scorched shreds.

Is this a self-effacing act of someone who's a few cards short of a full deck?

Not at all.

At the Rustic Roost, a cozy Smithers chalet where he and his girlfriend Gabrielle have bunked down for a few days, this engaging 27-year-old comes across as courteous, well spoken and thoughtful. Although he grew up in Whitehorse and studied philosophy in New Brunswick, this self-taught graphic designer's work has taken him around the world. His successful ventures in design and e-commerce have employed up to a dozen people at a time.

Do Maier's pyrotechnic pursuits make him a performance artist?

Not really, although he reveals that mixing paint and fire began as a public act—in Costa Rica, where he recently spent three years working as a designer. Maier and a friend had already been holding "painting parties," where groups of people—including some who had never considered themselves creative—used whatever painting materials they had at hand to transform virgin-white canvases into experimental group paintings. During one such event, Maier was lighting candles around the patio while a friend worked with spray paints on the canvas.

"I'd always wanted to see what would happen if you put a candle in front of spray paint," remembers Maier. His friend indulged him. And he was utterly dazzled by the burst of flame and its effects on the canvas.

"A painting on fire is really beautiful: the colours of the fire, mixed with the paint... and the textures created by the interaction of the two," he relates. "It's gorgeous."

These days, Russell torches his paintings in private, away from the distracting reactions of observers. Burning is a powerfully charged event that sometimes evokes regretful pangs when he looks at the scorched, fibrous remnants of his bright canvases.

"Sometimes, I feel like I've lost an old friend."

But such feelings are quickly eclipsed by the joy he takes in the work that follows. Burning isn't the end of a work; it's but one step, albeit a critical one, in his creative process.

Using a four-megapixel digital camera, Maier photographs his paintings as they succumb to flames. He then takes the photos he likes and manipulates them in graphics software such as Adobe Photoshop: cropping them, combining images, and applying digital effects—such as colour inversion, which makes flames appear in blue.

The result? One destroyed painting spawns multiple rich abstract images, capturing a dramatically transformative moment. And, unlike the original, which was bound in time and space, these new pixel-based compositions can be instantly reproduced without compromising any of

their original purity and power—and freely distributed to an international audience via his website.

In that sense, observes Maier, fire painting is "a comment on traditional art versus where art is going."

But if he is intrigued by the democratizing aspects of digital media, Maier is clearly seized by the more primal element of fire—and its cultural significance.

"[Fire-painting] seems like a very simple idea that would extinguish itself after a while. But I find the more I do it, the more there is to explore," he says. "Not just from a technical standpoint of shutter speeds, apertures, and fuels, but from a spiritual one."

He cites numerous cultural and mythic associations with fire: references in the Bible to the burning bush and "tongues of fire," its prominence in tribal religions, and well-known myths, such as the Phoenix, a magical bird which rises immortal from ashes, and Prometheus, who angered Greek gods by stealing their secret of fire and giving it to humans.

A common theme underlying many of these associations, and central to Maier's work, is the principle of creative destruction.

"When you destroy something, you get something back.



creative destruction

The brevity of the fire painting's moment magnifies colour and meaning to an exceptional height, according to Maier.

In most cases, it's something new, fresh and beautiful," he says. "In modern society, we try to insulate ourselves from this natural, spiritual principle. But it's very real."

To Maier, creative destruction is all about reconciling yourself to change and loss as part of life, and recognizing it as the mother of creation and growth. On an emotional level, it's about accepting uncertainty, giving up some control, having the faith to "follow your bliss" and give freely of yourself and your talents—and trust your intuitive mind.

"[Intuition] is something I'm just getting used to, because my background is in philosophy," says Maier, pointing out that logic is the primary means of knowing in that discipline. "Everything important was mental. Emotions were secondary, even meddling, nuisances. By painting, I'm coming to really understand how important intuition is in leading you to do meaningful things. I've come to believe it's more important."

Not coincidentally, creative destruction and letting go is as dominant a theme in Maier's own life as it is in his art. In Costa Rica, Maier decided he was more of an



the idea that doesn't extinguish itself

Russell Maier sets fire to his paintings to capture the moment and beauty on film—for digital immortality.

artist than a businessperson. He shut down his businesses, handed off his clients to his employees and sold most of his possessions. In February, Maier started making his way back to Canada, staying with friends along the way, selling some images from his website, and producing commissioned pieces.

He calls this one of the most liberating decisions he's ever made.

For Maier, letting go also meant removing constraints on the circulation of his art. That's why he offers his work from his website—not just for purchase, but for free download—with no strings attached.

"Lots of people who don't understand think it's crazy," he says. "But this felt like the appropriate thing to do if I wanted to follow this philosophy through."

It appears to be working for him. In an online world, where intellectual property is increasingly gated or offered at a hidden price, offering art for free tends to attract attention—including the kind of publicity that opens doors.

Maier's art is also rooted in the concept of mindfulness, which he defines as being attentive to all of our

moments.

"This moment is all we have. There's a beauty and message in all of our moments, and every moment is a creation of the choices we make," he says. "Fire-painting is about capturing a moment, even more than a photo would. You have 30 seconds to capture that moment, or you've wasted two weeks of painting."

Where fire painting, an "ongoing life experiment," will take him in the long run, Maier can only guess. For now, this creative quest has brought him to Smithers, where he and Gabrielle have chosen to settle for the winter.

The experience of autumn—something he's missed for three years in Central America—has inspired him to paint a series of abstract landscapes. And not all of his paintings are given a fiery send-off into digital immortality: several of his landscapes are being exhibited at Kokopelli's Cafe in Smithers.

To view, download or purchase Russell Maier's fire-painting images, visit www.fire-painter.com.



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