

AMERICAN CONNECTION

When the second largest wildfire in California history struck, **Luther Gerlach's** life was changed forever. He talks to Susan Burnstine about the devastation that hit his area and how it led to a new series of photographs.

susanburnstine.com



Rose Valley Phoenix, 2018



Ring of Fire, 2018



Hillside #1, 2018

Southern California based photographer Luther Gerlach has long been known as one of the most knowledgeable practitioners of alternative processes in America and his newest series, *Thomas Fire Burn*, is perhaps his most personal and poignant to date.

Gerlach was raised in Minnesota and first studied photography with his father who was a social and cultural anthropologist. His father took the entire family along for his field research to places like Haiti,

Columbia, Tahiti, Moorea and Europe. As a boy, he assisted his father with shooting footage and stills for movies and slides used for presentations. He attended the Minneapolis College of Art and Design, apprenticed with Brett Weston for a stint in the 1980s and then focused on learning wet plate collodion, tintype and ambrotype positives.

In 2001 he began working for the Getty Museum as the specialist in historical photographic processes and technologies in the education department. He

became a respected instructor, often presenting demonstrations, restoring cameras and lenses, printing for others, restoring photographs and remaining busy with museum and gallery exhibits.

In December 2017 his life was changed forever when the second largest wildfire in California history, the Thomas Fire, erupted a quarter of a mile from his home. His community suffered immense destruction, but his home was spared. He had to wear a breathing mask for two weeks following the fires and tried to

leave the area as much as he could to avoid the smoke. In the face of it all, he began thinking about the photographs he wanted to create of the devastation in his area.

Once he returned home he started photographing a number of burned areas around the place. 'The first area was near the origin of the fire, at Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula,' he says. 'This area has natural hot springs bubbling up in its valley, which are filled with mineral-rich water flowing over the black ashes of

the forest that was once there.' Additional locations included the mountains above his home in Ventura, which includes Rose Valley and Lion's Mouth, in Los Padres National Forest.

For this body of work Gerlach used three different 8x10in cameras including a vintage 1930s Gandolfi, a 1950s Deardorff and an extreme wideangle camera he made himself. 'Over the years I have collected over 250 lenses which allow me flexibility in format and aesthetic,' he says.

Gerlach collected ashes and sulphur-laden water from hot springs at the origin point of the fires and applied them to developed prints as a catalyst to shift the colours and make the print an organic part of the fire's destruction. 'The idea came to me on seeing the mineral-laden hot spring water mixed with black ash flowing through the forest at Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula,' he says.

'As an alchemist and a very curious person, I wondered what this would do to the silver gelatin prints that I was making. I experimented and, much to my happiness, colours emerged on

the prints from deep reds and oranges to pinks, purples, greens and blues. This is a purely chemical reaction that arises when acids and bases act upon the silver compounds...when I fix the images, making them archival, the silver stabilises and the radical molecules floating at the surface of the print are washed away. The end result is rusty, charred-looking artefacts that you see in the final prints.'

Gerlach's purpose for mixing ash into his prints was so they would carry and act out a

memory of the burn on the image, which he felt could be likened to post-traumatic stress syndrome in humans. In his initial experimentation he realised if he applied the chemistry ashes and water to a freshly developed but not yet fixed image he could get solarisation as well as the hues of colours seen on the print.

Selections from his *Thomas Fire Burn* and *Kelp* series are exhibited at the Carnegie Museum in Oxnard, California, until 17 February, 2019.

luthergerlach.net



Burning Bush, 2018



Ghost Trees, 2018



Inferno, 2018

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EXHIBITIONS

USA

AUSTIN

Harry Ransom Center
Until 6 January
Ed Ruscha:
Archeology and Romance
hrc.utexas.edu

BROOKLYN

Brooklyn Museum
Until 31 March
Half the Picture:
A Feminist Look at the Collection
brooklynmuseum.org

CAMBRIDGE

MIT Museum
Until 28 February
Imagined Communities:
Photographs by Mila Teshaieva
mit.edu

CHICAGO

Art Institute of Chicago
Until 3 February
My Building, Your Design:
Seven Portraits by David Hart
artic.edu

LOS ANGELES

The Getty
Until 10 February
Sally Mann: A Thousand Crossings
getty.edu

RIVERSIDE

California Museum of Photography at UCR Arts
Until 30 December
Collected:
New Permanent Collection
artsblock.ucr.edu

ROCHESTER

George Eastman Museum
Until 1 January
Gail Albert Halaban:
Out my Window
eastman.org

WASHINGTON DC

Smithsonian American Art Museum
Until 6 January
Trevor Paglen: Sites Unseen
americanart.si.edu