



Smoke Screen

Interacting with nature in the process of making an image can be intensely personal. In her six-year series *The Burn*, Evanston, Illinois-based photographer Jane Fulton Alt shadowed restoration ecologists to capture images of controlled prairie fires, a subject she first encountered in 2007 during an artist's residency at the Ragdale Foundation in Lake Forest, Illinois. Witnessing a controlled fire on the grounds there, she photographed it, collected some ash, and asked some of the ecologists involved if she could follow them for a shoot.

Alt's first trip out the following spring had a greater significance: It coincided with the birth of her first grandchild. It was also her sister's first day of chemotherapy treatment for ovarian cancer.

When she looked through the viewfinder, Alt says, "I was thinking about the parallels between the burn on the prairie and the burn going on in [my sister's] body. For me, it became a whole parallel universe and process and a way of trying to understand the life cycles."

The ensuing series, which recently concluded and which is being released in October as a book (*The Burn*, Kehrer Verlag), was as much about the images as it was about focusing on that connection, which sustained Alt throughout her sister's battle with the disease. "They became much more subjective pictures than they would have been if I had simply documented the burn," she recalls. "I shied away from shooting the fire—it felt too violent, and I was more interested in the ephemeral quality of the

smoke." The images focus instead on its obscuring, destructive, and regenerative properties.

Photographically, *The Burn* was also an extension of Alt's earlier work altering image surfaces with beeswax to add luminosity to prints of natural subjects. The smoke, she says, "was the first time I'd found that luminosity in the subject of the print itself"—and while she was satisfied with uncoated prints for the book and exhibitions, on individual prints for custom copies of the book she applies coats of beeswax to add depth.

The shooting experience was both intense and strangely soothing, especially as she returned to it repeatedly over time. While the restoration ecologists Alt trailed were careful to keep her out of danger, she found herself nevertheless compelled

Alt's "Burn No. 53."

toward the hot ash, making images, coming home with her clothes and equipment blanketed in soot. For Alt, it was as much about being immersed in the physical environment as it was about capturing final images—having the tangible experience of natural burn and regrowth helped her to tie the idea for the series into a broader idea of both ecological and human life cycles.

Her sister died of her disease, but Alt found that having worked with controlled fires as closely as she had enabled her to cope in a way she otherwise might not have. "I was able to focus on the loss within a larger idea of regeneration, the idea that new life comes out of things that die or pass away," she says. The work is dedicated to her sister.