



SUSAN WHITE
KANSAS CITY

Ever since Prometheus pilfered a few flames from the bonfire of the gods, fire has served as both a creative and destructive force—at least for those willing, or daring enough, to play with it. In her solo show, *Pyrographs* [Sukhoi Exhibition Space; March 22—April 28, 2007], Susan White managed to unite these forces, producing close to twenty works every bit as contradictory and unpredictable as her volatile medium.

Working with a wood-burning tool similar to those found on craft tables and in woodshops, White transforms paper into its direct opposite—from a thin, blank, and light substance into a heavy, dense, and dark matter. The process is inherently bipolar; creation occurs through destruction. The results are intensely ethereal. That's because White does not char her surfaces; she lightly brands them, leaving behind smoky traces and carbon shadows.

Although several pyrographs remain untitled, the artist frequently references nature in her larger works, subtly alluding to fire as an untamable, natural force. *Field*, 2007, presents a deft touch, softly singeing rather than scorching the paper to make repetitive, layered marks. The result closely resembles an x-ray of wildflower petals, the oddly oblong shapes abutting and overlapping to form an incandescent pattern. In *Untitled (Hay)*, 2005, the burns are leaner and deeper, and thus much sharper. Rendered with searing precision, the prickly blades resemble barbed wire or a crown of thorns more than a loosely rolled bale of hay. Still, anyone who has ever touched freshly harvested hay will recognize White's deftness at rendering the subject, which borders on sketchbook realism.

The human body is another recurring theme in White's work. A crisp, white line bifurcates two sinuous lines in *Corpus*, 2006, which depicts a woman's body, curving, undulating, and depending on your viewpoint, obliquely

vaginal. More abstract, the triptych *Your Brain On Reading*, 2004, is like a surreal brain scan. Ganglia, neurons, and gray matter collide madly, caroming off one another and back again. Is the imagined reader absorbed in a philosophical treatise or a Harlequin romance? It's impossible to tell, making *Your Brain On Reading* equally engaging and inscrutable.

White applied watercolors, sumi ink, and graphite to some of her smaller pieces. This adds depth and texture, as well as a gentle, blurred quality. Her twofold process—withdrawal and adding—underscores the push-pull dialectic that is at the heart of the series. Nowhere is this more evident than in *Cloak*, 2006, which resembles two scarves suspended in mid-air—a frozen study in contrasts. Scratchy, rough, and vaguely menacing, the cloak closest to us sinks and slowly disappears into the lower right-hand corner. Visible both underneath and behind its sharp-edged twin, the second cloak is soft and caressing. This pyrograph is a fitting metaphor for the constant struggle between opposites and the ongoing effort to achieve balance. As such, *Cloak* represents White's own experimental Yin and Yang as well as the dual nature of her medium.

The duality of Susan White's pyrographic process makes for a provocative and compelling viewing experience, from crackly hay to petal-soft shadows...

—Kim Carpenter