

Carrie Schneider

Burning House

Curated by Kendra Paitz
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Programs at University Galleries are supported in part by the Illinois Arts Council, a state agency. Reverse: Burning House (July, sunset), 2011, c-print, 40 x 50 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago. ©2014 Kendra Paitz, "Slow Burn."

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SLOW BURN

If you will stay close to nature, to its simplicity, to the small things hardly noticeable, those things can unexpectedly become great and immeasurable.
– Rainer Maria Rilke, 1903, published in *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1929

Between 2010 and 2011, Carrie Schneider took twelve trips to northern Wisconsin, each time building a small wooden house, rowing it to a tiny island, setting it on fire, and photographing and filming it. The endurance of her performative action is mirrored in the fortitude of the house, which, although perpetually engulfed in flames, never seems to burn down, even as the times of day and seasons shift. In Schneider's *Burning House* photographs and 2012 video, one is immersed in the beauty of the minimal Wisconsin landscape. Though not a locale typically considered picturesque by outsiders, through the artist's lenses it is a tranquil, changeable wilderness punctuated by a mysterious, perpetually burning house. There is no sign of how the fire started or how it will be extinguished. What role does this eternal flame play among the cycles of rotting and reemergence that surround it?

In a shift from most of Schneider's other work, the body is not apparent in *Burning House*: the performance aspect of this work is hidden from the viewer. Schneider constructed, rowed, and torched each house in isolation (with occasional help from family members), and it was of the utmost importance to her that she was able to make and carry the house independently. The history of female performance artists exploring the lived experience of women is long, but with this project, Schneider breaks down some of those expectations of domesticity or bodily issues. She situates herself in a role historically assigned to males, that of the builder; brings to fruition a house, traditionally thought to be the woman's domain; and then sets it aflame and watches from afar.

Schneider's archetypal structure is reduced to the shapes that most can immediately recognize as a house: square walls, triangular roof, and rectangular openings. We infer notions of comfort and refuge from a house, and a primary fear for many people would be the destruction of their home. From this house, smoke billows, wafts, or sometimes barely whispers its presence. It rises slowly into the sky or trails across the lake depending on the weather patterns. We never see the house burn down, so its form is always recognizable. It becomes a sort of beacon, drawing attention to the little island that at times might be subsumed by the water or ice surrounding it. Unlike other contemporary works featuring buildings on fire, both welcoming spectacle and implicating a power structure—for example, Ed Ruscha's *Los Angeles County Museum on Fire* (1965-68), and Chris Larson's 2013 building and public burning of a to-scale cardboard replica of a Marcel Breuer house—Schneider's work ultimately elevates the wonder of nature itself.

Over time, the house became less important to Schneider and the drama of the natural environment

took over. She thinks of the images as studies in time, light, and shadow akin to Monet's *Haystacks* or *Rouen Cathedral* paintings. They are also studies of a particular place. Although Schneider has lived in Brooklyn for the past few years, she grew up in the Chicago area. The lake in north central Wisconsin where she created this work has a strong family connection. Her grandfather was a member of the Civilian Conservation Corps, a "Soldier of the Forest" who cleared brush and helped plant the trees surrounding the manmade lake that his team also helped dig. Schneider's father later sought a connection with the land her grandfather had once cultivated, and the artist began exploring her own relationship to it.

Through working on this project, Schneider says that she learned the area and its weather patterns very well. Although she chose to represent every season, her project is not a scientific study that indexes each month or day. Instead, the artist was responsive to the times of day and weather conditions, even foregoing shooting when the lake was not safe for passage. Roni Horn's *You are the Weather* (1994-1995)—100 photographs of the same woman immersed in an Icelandic hot spring, her face registering subtle changes due to the weather—comes to mind. In Horn's work, however, the weather and water are secondary to the close-ups, while in Schneider's, the resilient house ultimately takes the back seat as viewers look beyond the smoldering structure to notice the perpetual cycles of renewal and regrowth surrounding it.

Sometimes warm and inviting, sometimes frigid and off-putting, the lake reflects the changeable Wisconsin climate. In one photograph, the still lake's glassy surface nearly provides a mirror image of the scene, while in another, the lake is so densely covered with snow and ice that the little house almost threatens to disappear into the landscape. Some are incredibly dramatic, particularly *Burning House (August, daybreak)*, with its brilliant gleam of orange caressing the tree-lined horizon and its reflected counterpart. Others are subtle, capturing the traces of others' passage through this area: a truck's tire tracks in the snow or a bald eagle feeding on its prey. As with her *Reading Women* (2012-2013) series, Schneider slows the level of concentration, finding moments of total immersion for herself and the viewer. Whether the cool purple light cast across the frozen lake and bare trees or a gray, rainy day when the thawed water is fringed by emerald foliage, Schneider captures the "hardly noticeable" effects generated by sunshine, wind, and water, and renders them awe-inspiring and "immeasurable."

Kendra Paitz is Curator of Exhibitions at University Galleries of Illinois State University, where she curated Carrie Schneider: Burning House (on view January 14-February 16, 2014).

