

In the Manner of Smoke: THE ARTWORK OF Rosemarie Fiore

Written by Michael Richards

When I first wrote about Rosemarie Fiore back in 2009, she was just beginning to make her mark as an innovative, groundbreaking artist. As the editor of '76 Pyro magazine back then, I genuinely loved her beautiful firework abstractions, and the circles and lines she was able to induce with smoke and explosives. To put it in the simplest of terms, she created some great stuff, and our readers—judging from the emails we received—loved her work, too. Several times over the next few years I saw where her artwork had been cut out of our magazine and pinned on the walls of pyrotechnician's workshops. →

Smoke Painting Documentation,
Art OMI, Ghent, NY, 2012
Color smoke firework residue on paper,
Smoke Painting
Tool: Sting Ray
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio and Art OMI
Photo credit: Ross Willows



THE ARTWORK OF Rosemarie Fiore

Rosemarie Fiore was born in 1972 in Mount Kisco, New York. She currently resides in the Bronx, New York where she has her studio. She received her M.F.A. from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and her B.A. from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. In addition, she's attended residencies at Art Omi International Artists Residency Program, Yaddo, Skowhegan, The MacDowell Colony, Roswell Foundation AIR Program, Saltonstall Foundation AIR Program, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Bronx Museum (AIM Program).

Fiore has exhibited her work both nationally and internationally, and she's racked up an impressive list of awards granted through The New York Foundation for the Arts, The New York State Council for the Arts, The Sally and Milton Avery Foundation, The Marie Walsh Sharpe Foundation, The Lower East Side Print Shop, NY and The Dieu Donne Paper Mill, NY. She has also had solo and group exhibitions that include The SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah, GA, SCAD Atlanta; Von Lintel Gallery, NY; Winkleman Gallery, NY; The Anderson Gallery VCUarts, Richmond, VA; Grand Arts, Kansas City; The Bronx Museum, NY; Weatherspoon Art Museum, NC; The Queens Museum, NY; Socrates Sculpture Park, NY; The Roswell Museum, NM and The Franklin Institute of Science, Philadelphia.

Von Lintel Gallery in New York currently represents Rosemarie. Her work has been reviewed by The New York Times, New York Magazine, Art in America, Artforum, The Village Voice, NY Arts Magazine, FLAUNT Magazine, Art Papers Magazine, The Washington Post, Art on Paper and even '76 Pyro Magazine. Now she'll be able to



Smoke Painting #40, 2015
Color smoke fireworks residue on paper
63 X 76 in. (160 x 193 cm.)
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio

add Pyrotechnic Magazine to her list, too, which just might be more important since our readers definitely understand what fireworks are all about!

Rosemarie first became interested in using fireworks as an artistic medium when she dropped a smoke bomb onto the ground and liked the marks it left in the street. This inspiring moment spurred an entire new art form in her mind. In fact, although she is not the only individual artist experimenting with fireworks and colored smoke, you could say she is part of growing new genre of art I'm going to label "pyrotechnic abstraction." (Take that, New York Times). Rosemarie says it is more like "fumage," however, which is a surrealist



Smoke Painting #36, 2013
Color smoke fireworks residue on paper
40 1/4 x 72 1/4 in. (102 x 183.5 cm.)
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio

technique where impressions are made using the smoke of candles or kerosene lamps on paper. Salvado Dali called a similar technique he used, "sfumato" which is derived from the Italian words for smoke and blurred. Regardless of what you call it, or where the technique derived, Rosemarie Fiore's large-scale compositions are simply beautiful to behold. There is an aggressive delicacy to her work; a kind of pyrotechnic inspired spirituality. I don't know whether it is the broad swaths of color she intersperses with recognizable shapes and forms, or the geometrical elements combined with smoke-induced color gradations, all I know is that I love looking at the explosive motif she creates on paper.

For me, personally, her work is reminiscent of Wassily Kadinsky. She may disagree, but I find the same innate balance in her paintings, the same inherent harmony and inner resonance. You can stand in front of a Kadinsky painting and immediately sense the structural balance amidst the



THE ARTWORK OF Rosemarie Fiore

chaos. I get the same feeling when I look at her work, the same sense of harmonic tones and congruity. I like it that she describes her process as a “meditative dance on top of the paper, carried out in silence.” I like it because her work evolves in layers. She doesn’t just “do it” and she’s done. There’s a rhythmic choreography involved that creates and changes and metamorphoses into a finished work.

What I find the most fascinating about Rosemarie’s artwork has little or nothing to do with the art pieces she creates (although like I said, I love her work) it is the machinery she has devised to create the artwork. Of course, I’ve only seen pictures of her



Smoke Painting Tool: Sky City, 2013
Mixed media
26 x 36 x 36 in. (66 x 91.5 x 91.5 cm.)
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio



Smoke Eclipse Tool: Space Oddity, 2015
Altered steel trash can, enamel paint
21 x 21 x 4 in. (53 x 53 x 10 cm.)
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio

marvelous contrivances, but since you obviously can’t use brushes to paint with smoke bombs, you have to develop something that will focus the color on paper and give you a modicum of control amidst volatile combustible spatter. And in addition to these ingenious mechanisms, she may enlist anything and everything else to satisfy her hunger to create art. It may be a waffle iron, windshield wipers, pinball machines, pyrotechnic debris, an old air freshener or even a section from an old amusement park ride. She constantly pushes her own envelope and forces herself to cross the line to experiment with a host of new ideas—ideas that may center on experimental photography, video or combine all her ideas into one multi-media sculpture.

We had the opportunity to ask Rosemarie Fiore a few questions recently about her life, her creative process and her artwork:

PM: Why put your studio in the Bronx? After all, you were born in Mt. Kisco, which is an awfully pretty little place and only about a 50-mile drive from New York City

Smoke Eclipse Tool: Fire Star, 2015 >>>
Altered steel trash can, enamel paint
20 ½ x 20 ½ x 27 ½ in. (52 x 52 x 70 cm.)
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio

(where you’ve worked before). What is the appeal of the Bronx? Is there an art community there we are unaware of? Cheap warehouse space? What?

FIORE: Yes, I was born in Mt. Kisco, but my studio is located in the Bronx where I live and work now. I’ve had studios in Red Hook, Brooklyn, Long Island City, Queens, Tribeca and the Lower East Side. My family was originally from the Bronx so I moved back there 10 years ago. Initially, right after graduate school, I rented some temporary studio spaces with friends but was awarded some great workspace through one of New York City’s non-profit organizations, Sharpe-Walentas Studio Program. As time went on, I found it was optimal to set up my studio exactly how it needed to be for the type of work I planned, so I moved to back to the Bronx where there is much more space for a lot less money. The studio setup I have now allows for greater flexibility and has an outdoors work area that is wonderfully hassle free.



THE ARTWORK OF Rosemarie Fiore

PM: What fascinates me most about your artwork—almost as much as the body of work itself—are the numerous gadgets/tools you’ve devised to create the patterns, shapes, and to spread the colors. Do you have a MacGyver-like mind, or are you mechanical inventions born strictly out of necessity? Which device or devices are you the most proud of creating? Do you have a favorite gadget in your arsenal?

FIORE: I’ve been working with smoke now for over fifteen years. From day one I found myself developing my own tools because they are necessary to help direct the colored smoke downward onto a surface. Since smoke naturally floats upward and the burning process generates some heat, my initial challenge was two-fold: finding tool materials that were heat resistant and discovering forms that made good containers. At first, I used ‘found objects’ such as metal cans and buckets as tools. With them, I would contain the lit firework on paper and then cut out the explosions, layering and gluing them together to create a thickly collaged abstract image. I soon began attaching smoke canisters to broom sticks using 2 x 4’s to guide my lines as I drew over my pieces.

About 4 years ago I stumbled upon an image of the ‘Green Man holding a Fire Club’ in John Bate’s, *The Mysteries of Nature and Art*, 1634. I realized that the ‘Green Man’s Fire Club’ was similar in design to the simple smoke painting tools (smoke canisters attached to broom sticks) I had been dragging across my pieces. I wondered if I could create more complex tools related in concept to the fire club and if they would aid me in creating different effects, designs



Smoke Eclipse Tool: Colossus, 2015
Steel and enamel paint
69 inches (175 cm.) in diameter
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio

and marks. I had an opportunity to explore these ideas during the summer of 2012, when I was working up in Ghent, NY at Art OMI International Artist Residency. There I developed many tool prototypes using wood, plaster and resin. Some of the tools were hand-held, some were pushed, while others twirled on wheels. The tool designs were based on function and purpose. With each new tool, I tried to achieve specific effects with the smoke. More recently, I’ve been working mostly in steel with trashcans and trashcan lids. I’m pretty excited about the new tool “Colossus” that I’ve created for my exhibition at the Weatherspoon Museum in North Carolina. It’s a 4 ft. diameter galvanized livestock water trough that I transformed into a ‘Smoke Painting’ tool with the help of the MFA students at the UNC Greensboro department of Art. It takes 4 people to work and creates large images on 5 x 5 ft. paper. The tool itself and the paintings created with it will be on display at the museum through April 17, 2016.

PM: There are several other artists worldwide who create beautiful artwork using a variety of fireworks as their artistic catalyst. David Sena, for example, who we interviewed and wrote about in *Pyrotechnic Magazine* issue #6. He does amazing work by exploding firecrackers to create burn marks directly onto paper. Cai Guo-Qiang, the exceptional Chinese artist who worked with Phil Grucci during the Olympics, also creates elaborate art pieces using burns, colored smoke and controlled explosions. When I look at your work, Wassily Kandinsky immediately comes to mind. Are you simply experimenting or attempting to solidify “fumage” as a permanent gallery category? Also, is there a difference between “fumage” and “sfumato”?

FIORE: As an artist, I am always experimenting. Part of the reason why I make art is to expand my understanding of a technique or an idea. Once I understand the limits of a process, I try to take it further. I am influenced by many artists, Kandinsky is just one of them, as well as ‘Abstract Expressionists’ such as Pollack and Yves Klein, to name a few on a very long list. Early on in my career, I was very interested in ‘Automatism.’ Automatism is a method of creative production developed by the



Smoke Dome #5, 2012
Glass blown with firework smoke
10 x 9 x 6 in. (25 x 23 x 25 cm.)
Courtesy of Rosemarie Fiore Studio

Surrealists in which there is no conscious self-censorship. For example, the artist might paint with the flame of a candle (fumage), create surface rubbings (frottage) or randomly draw. Chance and accident are embraced and movement, mark or line is not consciously directed. I experimented with Automatism by removing my hand from the work and replacing it with machines that acted as ready-made paintbrushes. I created paintings using the windshield wiper of my car, the brush of the floor buffer and blade of the lawn mower. The machines painted chaotically and somewhat randomly with little guidance.

PM: What led you to colored smoke?

FIORE: I became interested in color smoke fireworks when I was living in New Mexico in 2001 and 2002 when I was there on a fellowship supported by the Anderson Museum of Contemporary Art. Having arrived in Roswell, the home of Robert H. Goddard’s early liquid-fueled rocket experiments (many of which are on permanent exhibit at the museum), I initially became interested in creating paintings using rockets. I eventually gravitated more toward experimenting with consumer fireworks as paintbrush tools and got

interesting results from working with smoke bombs and smoke canisters. One 4th of July, I lit a blue smoke ball and it accidentally dropped onto the concrete. I was intrigued as it rolled and created a perfect arched blue dotted line. I discovered I had found a way to paint with smoke and grabbed a piece of paper. I then began to develop my fumage technique.

PM: So, your technique is more ‘fumage’ and not ‘sfumato’?

FIORE: Popularized by the Austrian Surrealist Wolfgang Paalen, the fumage technique defines a work on canvas or paper that features marks left by a candle or kerosene lamp. Salvador Dalí utilized the technique in his paintings, and called it “sfumato”. He co-opted the Italian word “sfumato” which is used to describe an oil painting technique in which paint (with no smoke involved) is applied so that the image appears smoke-like or vague and blurred. Leonard Da Vinci is famous for this technique. The fumage technique I have developed I call Smoke Painting. No gunpowder is involved. When the formula is burned, pressure is created and the dye and pigments are forced out of the canister where they condense and hang in the atmosphere. As an artist, I intervene

at the exact moment the dyes and pigments exit the canister. By capturing the smoke in tools that act as containers of various sizes, I am able to direct the smoke onto paper. I must act quickly because once the smoke leaves the surface and floats upwards, I have lost the color as it quickly disperses into the air.

PM: Most of your pyrotechnic work to this point has been predominantly two-dimensional using colors, shapes and lines on paper. I noticed, however, that you have also delved into three-dimensional pieces like “Smoke Paintings: Sky city” that place smoke patterns you’ve created behind as 3-dimensional structure. Is this somewhat new for you? Is this the next logical step, or simply more experimentation? Are you looking for a way to tie all of your expressive work done in oil, ceramics and video into one complete form for yourself?

FIORE: The Smoke Painting tools aren’t the only attempt I’ve made at working three dimensionally. In 2011 and 2012 I created

THE ARTWORK OF Rosemarie Fiore

sculptural work that spoke about the form of smoke. I researched various casting methods that would enable me to cast the firework's smoke plume. I eventually ended up developing a technique under the guidance of Hotsand Glassblowing Studio in Asbury Park, New Jersey, where I used smoke bombs to blow glass. During the creation of these works, I embedded the smoke bombs into the molten glass in order to capture the breath of the firework inside a glass form. The form of the work was determined by the time it took for the firework to release its smoke and the time it took for the molten glass to harden. These works are called Smoke Domes. I later took this technique to VCU in Richmond, Virginia to work with Jack Wax and his glass students in their 'Hot Shop' facility. We developed and refined the technique I was using, and I exhibited a few from the series at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond.

PM: Is that when you created your amazing 'Sky City' machine?

FIORE: After I developed my moving and spinning Smoke Painting tools in 2012, I took the new tool designs back to my Bronx studio. It was there I created Sky City. This large tool actually takes 3 people to operate. The 30 plus smoke canisters are fitted into the top of the tool and their fuses are tied together connecting them. When lit, pressure shoots the colored smoke out of the chambers onto the paper through the series of hole designs pierced into the bottom of the containers. The tool itself is moved with poles. As each section spins, they create large interwoven swirling patterns. Over time, the tools become clogged, chipped and broken, so I am constantly in construction, repairing, adding and taking away parts.

Presently, I am working on a series of metal tools (of which Colossus is the largest) that I developed last year in Utica, NY using the sculpture facilities at Sculpture Space. There, I altered trashcans and lids and created new tools to work with.

PM: Unlike other fields, the art world seems more like an unpredictable living, breathing creature. Just when you think you've got a handle on almost every facet imaginable, something new pops up that startles and re-energizes art as we know it. Fifty years

ago, who would have predicted that artists would someday be using explosives and colored smoke exclusively to create Modern art. So, what are your predictions? What path do you see your own artwork taking as your techniques logically mature and you gain even greater control over your media? And what are your predictions about artwork in general? What kinds of artwork do you think will manifest itself into the next century?

FIORE: I would guess that work using new materials and technology will continue to be very popular into the next century. Technology like 3-D printing seems upcoming and interesting, but who knows what techniques and materials will be available for artists to experiment with in the future. Whether its sculpture, painting, video or whatever is next, one thing is certain—engaging artwork always rises to the top. ■

Rosemarie Fiore is currently represented by Von Lintel Gallery in Los Angeles.

To see more of her work visit:

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