

**'No smoke
without fire'
Traces and time/
ruins and residue**

Gemma Brace

I placed the ashes of burned paintings in chemical containers that measure and contain what can't be contained ... Like traces or remnants, they point forwards and backwards at the same time.¹

There's 'no smoke without fire'.² Yet in many of the artworks in 'Fire: Flashes to Ashes in British Art 1692–2019' there is in fact no smoke, nor fire, just 'traces or remnants', the sooty residue of the past; a physical memory of both flame and furl.

Whereas flames flicker and dance, beguiling us in their destructive path, smoke lingers; lilting and lifting, caught half way between land and sky, form and formlessness, obscuring, veiling and 'rubbing against the windowpane'.³ And it is these curling wisps of whispering smoke that are of interest. Whether pointing us forward or backward, smoke plays a fascinating role in relation to fire, and no more so than when explored through art. If fire suggests duality – symbolic of both comfort and danger – then smoke could be said to occupy one delicate strand of this contradictory torch, providing the darkness to fire's light.

Although often depicted sullyng pastoral skies or as yellowing stains with an acrid taste that remain long after the embers have lost their heat, smoke, despite its hazy darkness, has too its own duality. It is both material and immaterial, a symbol of worship and a signal for danger. In art, its history encompasses Palaeolithic cave paintings and surrealist experimentations, such as the technique of *fumage*, invented by Austrian artist Wolfgang Paalen (fig. 7) in which the smoke from a candle is guided to make an image in wet paint.⁴ Later still, artwork from the 1960s and 1970s made use of this 'immaterial material', seen in the work of American land artists whose interest in fire and smoke returns full circle to find its origins in prehistory.⁵

In 'Fire' smoke is represented through both material matter and subject matter, taking on a multitude of shapes and sizes. Pictorially it has been used as a symbol of modernity, seen in the industrialised landscapes of the nineteenth century such as Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg's *Coalbrookdale by Night* (fig. 2), and as an allegorical tool, as in Karl Weschke's monumental *Column of Smoke – Kenidjack* (p. 80). In Graham Sutherland's *The Smelting Works 'Twin Ladles'* (1941) smoke coagulates and loiters, suspended like a cloud over smouldering ladles, then billows into soaring towers in Samuel Scott's *French Firafts Attacking the British Fleet off Quebec, 28 June 1759* (p. 36). Its material use is equally eclectic; blackened clouds perform on the horizon in Anthony McCall's film *Landscape for Fire II* (fig. 8), it is applied to glass in Catherine Morland's fragile landscapes, and it lingers like a ghostly presence conjuring up a smoky past in Susan Hiller's *Measure by Measure Section II* (p. 100).

FIG. 7

Wolfgang Paalen | 1905–1959
Smoke Painting (Fumage)

c.1938 | oil, candle burns and soot on canvas
27.3 x 41.6 cm

The Menil Collection, Houston,
access #1987-07 DJ, photograph Paul Hester,
© Succession Wolfgang Paalen



Seen together, these works suggest that in art, smoke is as subject to change as it is in nature, flitting between visibility and invisibility with the lift of a breeze. Whether physically present – the faltering coughs from a painted flue – or simply a memory, as embodied by the charred surfaces of David Nash’s organic monuments, its fluidity perhaps suggests why its exploration is as equally appealing as that of fire, its far flashier relation. However, before looking further at, into or through the materiality of smoke in art, we need to explore smoke in its wider sense, to ask (between the ‘flashes and ashes’) where and what is smoke?

Metaphorically, the *what* of smoke can be many things: an intimate seductress, a dark cloud, a veil of mystery, a warning sign or a ghostly apparition. Long a vehicle for worship it has formed a link between heaven and earth, a celestial flume that promises ascent. It has been deified and sanctified, imbued with smells that are not its own and infiltrated by colour – for what colour really is it? In literature it has crept amongst the houses, hovered on horizons and plunged cities under its vaporous spell, seeping through the streets like an unwelcome visitor.

Physically, the *where* of smoke is harder to locate. Smoke moves, glides, elides, creeps, crawls, smothers, suffocates, a silent danger tiptoeing through the house. Never in one place for long, it shifts in shape, creating ‘uncanny spaces’⁶ whilst simultaneously displacing the air around it.

Scientifically, it is less of a poetic mystery. In visible terms what is seen in

the air is carbon (traces of tar, oil and ash) creating the grey-black appearance we commonly associate with its presence. Materially, it is a mixture of particles; solid, liquid and gas, essentially un-burnt fuel. For example, with a wood fire hydrocarbons escape from the wood, evaporating before turning into water and carbon dioxide. Once the wood becomes charcoal there is nothing left to burn and the smoke disappears. This idea of smoke as 'un-burnt fuel' is full of possibility – despite its occasional invisibility we know it exists – it is fleeting, but present.

But what does this presence look like in art? What is the shape, colour and movement of smoke? The most obvious place to start is with its visibility; the particles mentioned above. In various artworks in 'Fire' smoke is a concrete image and clearly visible, such as in Joseph Wright of Derby's exploding *Vesuvius in Eruption, with a View over the Islands in the Bay of Naples* (p. 40), or Claude Rogers' depiction of bygone ways in *Sun and Burning Stubble Field* (p. 78).

In other works smoke is harder to detect, or rather, in J.M.W. Turner's case, to separate out from other intermingling elements. In *Fire at the Grand Storehouse of the Tower of London* (p. 50) Turner's watery technique sees black bleeding into blue, creating shadows that dance across the sky. Turner was fascinated by the dense smoke and fog that hung over London, and an interesting correlation has been made between atmospheric conditions at the



FIG. 8

Anthony McCall
Landscape for Fire II

1972 | performance view
photograph Carolee Schneemann

FIG. 9

Tacita Dean CBE RA
The Russian Ending, Beautiful Sheffield

2001 | photogravure on paper | 45 x 68.5 cm
courtesy the artist and Frith Street Gallery, London



time and decreasing visibility within European painting.⁷

Smoke's increasing interference with visibility is interesting given that one of its oft-quoted qualities is its immateriality. However, it is clear that as the skies grew darker with smoke over Britain so too did skies within art. Taking two rather different examples, we can look at de Loutherbourg's depiction of Madeley Wood furnace in Shropshire – the first example of a coke-fired blast furnace in Britain – and Tacita Dean's evocative photogravure *Beautiful Sheffield* from the series *The Russian Ending* (fig. 9). Painted in the style of a Flemish fire landscape, de Loutherbourg celebrates the birth of the Industrial Revolution, creating a vision of sublimity.⁸ Although roaring flames can be seen springing from the open pit, the only glimmer of smoke is a small trail of vapours from a chimney (which were seen as a symbol of progress at the time) and the image itself is far from obscured.⁹ In comparison, Dean's depiction of Sheffield's industrial skyline is hazy at best. Blackened stacks dissolve into a dark mass below, whilst the smoke itself is diffused into the sky above, airbrushing out any detail. Words, such as 'an industrial hell', are etched upon the sooty surface making it clear that Dean's title for the work is intended as a lament. We can no longer see the pastoral landscape upon the edges of the city, nor even the city itself – everything is a shade of grey.

In post-war London the air quality was measured by visual darkness and officially described in terms of its 'greyness'.¹⁰ The British Colour Council graded colours based on intensity, gauged on the quantity of grey they contained;

tellingly 1951 saw the addition of 20 new colours of which five were shades of grey.¹¹ These shades can be seen in 'Fire' not just for the portrayal of smoke, but also the landscape such as the grey sea and skies surrounding an aircraft carrier in Eric Ravilious' war commission *HMS Ark Royal in Action* (1940) or John Piper's *Set design for the backdrop of Hell in Job: A Masque for Dancing* (p. 74) in which scorched earth and rock match the colour of soot.

However, the alarm was not only sounded in the post-war climate. Investigations into coal pollution in London began as early as 1285 but made little progress, as John Evelyn's 'visionary'¹² pamphlet *Fumifugium, or, The inconveniencie of the aer and smoak of London dissipated together with some remedies humbly proposed*, published 1661, is testament.¹³ Evelyn cautions his audience on the dangers of smoke from coal fires, which was particularly troublesome at the time. Later still, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were marked by renewed attempts to fight the smoke-filled fog, including the pithily titled 1844 *Committee into the Means and Expediency of Preventing the Nuisance of Smoke Arising from Fires or Furnaces* for which data was gathered from a variety of sources. Yet, dark clouds remained, and 'The Big Smoke' (as London was now known) lay under a thick blanket of what, in 1904, was termed 'smog'.¹⁴

This decline in visibility can be thought of in two ways: is it the smoke that is too visible or that the smoke has rendered everything else invisible? This is a subject intimately discussed by art historian Lynda Nead as she focuses on the Great Fog that fell over London in 1952 when visibility dropped to zero bringing with it 'all the fogs of the past' and interfering with our sense of time and space.¹⁵

Much has been made of this distortion, which has been both likened to Freud's notion of the 'uncanny'¹⁶ in its infiltration of space, and ascribed with a 'temporal disobedience'¹⁷ reflecting its ability to cross borders and boundaries. This idea of the uncanny is particularly important when discussing smoke in art. In Weschke's *Column of Smoke – Kenidjack* (p. 80) the thick black fountain that erupts from the land is more like an architectural form than the vaporous trails we commonly associate with its visual imagery, yet there is still a flicker of recognition. As with Weschke's earlier work *Pillar of Smoke* (1964), though visually based on the act of gorse-burning on the moors near his home in Cornwall, it has also been allegorically linked to the Vietnam War, drawing on his own experiences from World War Two when 'the landscape would smoke for days'.¹⁸

But what is it in each of these shapes that reminds us of smoke? In *Column of Smoke – Kenidjack* a fire at the base of the blackened form helps us to correctly identify the image, yet *Pillar of Smoke* is more abstract. Fire has an accepted representational shape based on a triangular form tapering upwards, but smoke has no such template. Likened to clouds (another atmospheric shape-shifter)



FIG. 10

Richard Ernst Eurich OBE RA | 1903–1992
Withdrawal from Dunkirk, June 1940

1940 | oil on canvas | 76.2 x 101.6 cm
National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London,
presented by the War Artists Advisory Committee 1947,
© National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, London

its very fluidity makes it feel familiar. Although its shape is not immediately definable, the space it occupies is. London's smog was perhaps 'uncanny' because it remained there, trapped, sidling down streets, rubbing against the window-pane. Smoke is supposed to rise. It reaches skywards, billowing upwards and outwards. It is the conduit between earth and sky, a celestial elevator used for centuries to commune with the gods. Its association with fantasies, dreams and imagination is bound up in the trajectory of this movement.

To discuss smoke in relation to movement is also to acknowledge the role of time – *where* and *when* is the smoke? In painting, drawing and sculpture smoke is temporally static, and even film contains temporal boundaries. Yet, time can still be implied. For example, in Richard Eurich's *Withdrawal from Dunkirk, June 1940* (fig. 10) he depicts the evacuation of 300,000 troops from France during World War Two. In the painting a bulbous cloud of grey smoke billows across the sky emanating from an oil tanker set alight by allied bombs. This threatening mass, which dominates half the picture frame, appears to be growing in size despite the static nature of the medium. On a narrative level it evokes a sense of increasing panic, and although painted many miles away in the relative safety of England, it helps us to identify a particular point in time.

Similarly, in John Piper's *Coventry Cathedral, 15 November 1940* (fig. 11) the artist captures the still-burning embers amongst the ruins and rubble. Arriving on-site the day after the attack, Piper was greeted with destruction as the building continued to burn (think back to that notion of un-burnt fuel). Faint trails of smoke can be seen drifting up from a small pile of fallen debris in the foreground, and to the left dense smoke emanating from the last few flames licks at the window's edge obscuring the frame. In both instances time may be standing still but the clouds of smoke continue to grow in our imagination.

Smoke not only tells us the time but it also moves *through* time, an ominously lingering omnipresence throughout history. One way of thinking about this is to move from smoke as subject to smoke as material, responding to the notion that 'to understand materials is to be able to tell their histories.'¹⁹ But, does smoke have a history? One suggestion is that smoke occupies two opposing positions throughout time, hovering between the 'pre-industrial'²⁰ (where it was associated more benignly with hearthside comforts) and the more menacing aspersions cast by Evelyn in *Fumifugium*. Throughout this period the air's ability to dissipate smoke changed considerably, creating an image of a glass overflowing or a 'container' reaching capacity as smoke levels rose.²¹ It has been said that by acknowledging the past, present and future state of air, we have bestowed air, and therefore smoke, with a 'history'.²²

This idea coincides with anthropologist Tim Ingold's discussion as to what we can consider a material. In art, materials are often seen as static entities,

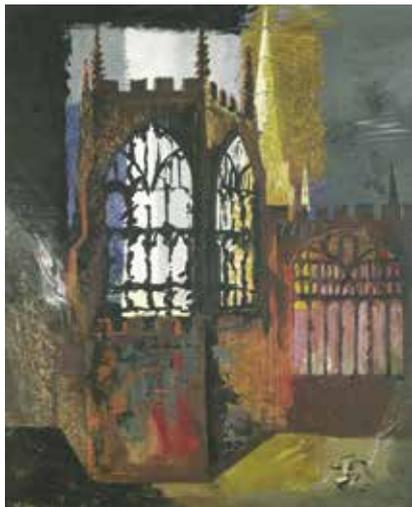


FIG. 11

John Piper ca | 1903–1992

Coventry Cathedral, 15 November, 1940

1940 | oil on plywood | 76.2 x 63.4 cm

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which by requirement are both solid and permanent forms. We have already established that smoke is the antithesis of this fixity; caught between flame and furl it is the embodiment of flux. Yet, Ingold allows for this movement. He asks us to reconsider the materiality of, for example, rain – ‘is it only material when it gathers in puddles and pools’ – and snow – ‘must it settle to be acknowledged’.²³ Fire and smoke are also placed in this category for consideration as he suggests that the process of becoming is as much a part of the material as the ‘finished’ form itself.

Smoke is very much a material caught in both the process of becoming and its dissolution. Vapours can dissolve, soot can be smudged, charred wood can flake away, yet a bitter smell still lingers. Morland’s version of *fumage* embraces this temporality, sitting somewhere between materiality and immateriality. Her ‘fugitive’ landscapes are made from the soot of burning church tapers applied to large sheets of glass allowing light to illuminate the image. In its softness, the work is full of nostalgia, as if we are already remembering an image that has been misplaced. This movement towards temporality is well documented within Modern art as terms such as fragility and ephemerality continue to gain currency.

However, some of the work in ‘Fire’ could be said to lack this ephemerality due to the visible lack of smoke within it. But here, Ingold’s notion of process can be utilised. In John Latham’s *Bachelor Experience Negative* (1962) smoke has been and gone, leafed pages have been burnt shut, the flames have subsided and the heat has crept away. But the dark, blackened, molten ruins still point to a smoky past. With Cornelia Parker’s *Red Hot Poker Drawings* (p. 118) the paper’s singed edges remind us too that smoke has been present. Yet, building on the notion that smoke is un-burnt fuel, you could say that it is still very much present with expanses of fresh white paper tantalisingly waiting between the tortured holes.

Returning to this idea of a work’s past, present and future, we can look at a description of Hiller’s collective practice, which suggests that her work evokes ‘absences, memories and ghosts’.²⁴ This description could easily be applied to a number of works in ‘Fire’ where singed traces and smoky residue, ripe with nostalgia, drift in and out of visibility and materiality, disappearing gently upwards. Perhaps, here, the history of smoke is twofold, wavering between representation – when in a sense smoke is at its most immaterial – and works in which it isn’t visibly present at all. As smoke lingers; tilting and lifting, caught half way between land and sky, form and formlessness, the works in ‘Fire’ are ever evolving, so that ‘Like traces or remnants, they point forwards and backwards at the same time.’²⁵