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Printed Matters On Fire by Jonathan Griffin

By *Leila Easa*

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From artists' monographs to beach reads, *Printed Matters* offers a monthly take by a rotating group of contributors on visual art through the printed word.

Jonathan Griffin wants to make us all voyeurs. Or, at the very least, rubbernecks. Though he narrates his text with taste and sensitivity, it's difficult to fully avoid a degree of morbid fascination with the stories *On Fire* tells, a fascination perhaps inherent in the subject. The book recounts the evolution of the artistic practice of ten artists who've experienced arguably the most devastating event an artist can face: the destruction, by fire, of their studio and the art housed within.



Jonathan Griffin. *On Fire*, 2016. Courtesy of Paper Monument.

Whether conveyed in black-and-white photographs replete with charred wood, exposed beams, peeling walls, and extensive ruin, or with evocative textual description—"the building was entirely burned out, blackened from within, and still smoking" (52)—the images of this destruction are part of the book's jarring power. However, for his part, Griffin avoids projecting an easy narrative of loss onto the artists he profiles; "I have been determined," he explains, "not to see phantom shapes in the darkness" (11). To this end, he strives to present the stories in neutral terms, reserving his analysis and theorizations for the introduction and the epilogue. The book is therefore ten narratives of loss and redemption sandwiched by Griffin's perspective, accompanied by black-and-white photographs depicting the aftermath of the fires themselves: never the work that was lost, but instead the work that was found. For example, one of the photographs shows Kate Ruggeri's mixed-media work *Hero*, a piece she made after the complete destruction of her studio by fire. The work examines the application of Joseph Campbell's hero monomyth to Ruggeri's struggle with this loss, asking whether—if the hero's reward at the end of the challenge is transformation—the artist herself might emerge from the ashes not remade but completely new.

The profiles vary. Some start with action and dialogue, some are divided into two contrasting halves (before... and after), some rely heavily on the artist's own words, some dive deeper than others into raw emotionality. There is no hint of *schadenfreude* in Griffin's explorations; in fact, at times he seems more upset than the artists about their losses. In one particular moment—one of the most significant departures from his promise—he makes claims about losses "that do not exist in the eyes of those who tell them" (11)—he protests artist Anthony Pearson's disinterest in recovering negatives found when Pearson brings Griffin to visit the ruins of Pearson's former studio. Griffin laments that, "it seems so callous to abandon [the negatives] there like that, for anyone to see, like pages torn from a journal" (35). That Griffin can hardly let go, even when Pearson already has, is somewhat disturbing in itself, but it also connects directly to one of the most surprising discoveries of the book: that artists who mourn the loss of their studios are devastated more by its impact on their future potential work than they are by the work that is completed (and therefore, in their eyes, past).

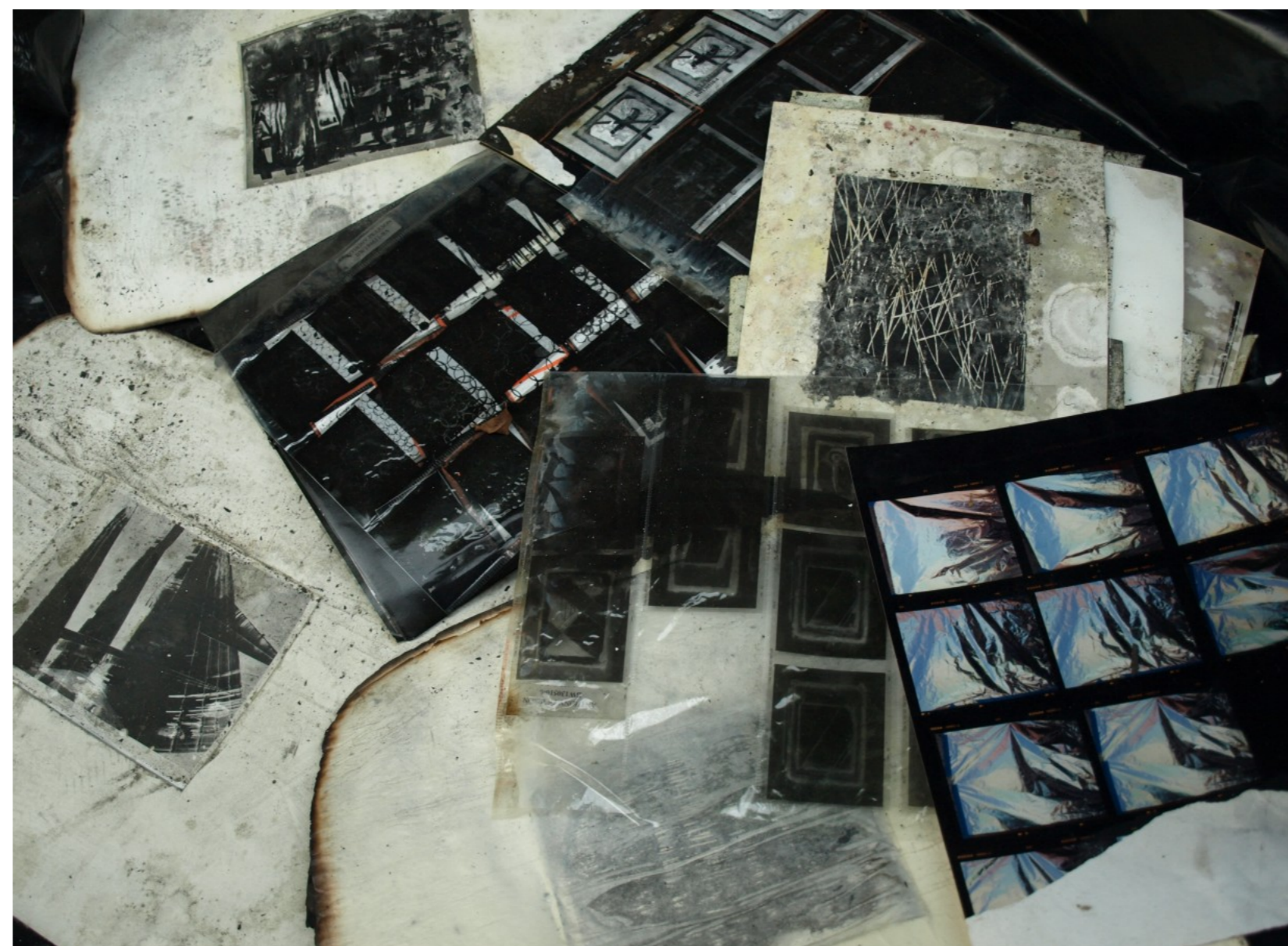


Christian Cummings's studio after a fire, Pasadena, 2013. Courtesy of the artist.

Although the book can certainly be seen as an exploration of how *anyone* confronts a moment of "losing it all," Griffin—a writer, curator, critic, and teacher—focuses on art in general and studio spaces in particular. It's not just that art so often produces an irreplaceable object of indeterminate value whose loss can never truly be compensated, but also that the frequently contested status of art as "work" can be deeply troubled by the loss of an artist's legitimate work space. In some cases, this questioning of the artist's "legitimacy" can be compounded by legal proceedings after a significant fire, during which artists may have to explain their losses and their practice in language the court can understand in order to win even the smallest settlement.

Yet for Griffin, art and fire are deeply linked; in a sentence that might make a statistician cringe, he claims that "throughout art history, artists' studios are always burning down" (15). Practical reasons for this are suggested—the highly flammable nature of linseed oil, the poorly maintained studio spaces artists are able to afford, the (possible) tendency for artists to take risks—but his true interest is in fire's meaning and the way it can, for the right artist at the right time, catalyze growth and evolution.

Griffin is fascinated by fire's dual role in our collective imagination—as a mercurial force of destruction and loss and as a deeply felt, passionate form of inspiration. His exploration of fire's connection to art and meaning ranges from evolutionary to philosophical to ideological. The idea that fire enabled cooking, which enabled calorically denser food, which decreased the need for time spent hunting and gathering, which in turn allowed early humans to use time in other ways (including—surprise!—making art) is merely the starting point of an extended exploration of the marriage between these two forces. These explorations can, at times, feel profound; indeed, there is little anyone can say about the literal and metaphorical meaning of fire that Griffin hasn't already offered in his introduction. However, for me, the most powerful connection is made by Erik van Lieshout, one of the artists Griffin profiles, who recounts his earliest experience with making art: "I discovered how to be an artist, when I had charcoal in my hand, and a photo, and a piece of paper, and I made a drawing. Yes, burnt wood is the first thing I used!" (55).



Debris found on the site of Anthony Pearson's former studio, Los Angeles, 2014. Courtesy of the Artist.

Still, Griffin's focus isn't so much on the work itself but rather on the development of habits of practice by artists. It may be a curious book that seeks to examine the practice of art through its utter destruction, but Griffin theorizes that losing the objects can create a profound freedom, a rip in the continuity of the story that allows for true innovation. Though his title locates his interest in the *process* of burning, on what is currently, at present, "on fire," the text itself is more interested in the before and after of loss, the possibility for redemption and change. One could be, his project suggests, the kind of person artist John Riepenhoff has become: more nimble, someone who boasts "enhanced agility" (81) or other forms of abiding transformation.

This phenomenon allows a book about destruction to be more positive than you might expect. Artist Matthew Chambers calls his fire "the biggest editing session that I have happened for me" (26). But when painter Catherine Howe admits that if she caused the fire that burned her studio, she doesn't regret it because "she needed to do it in order to get her painting to where she is now" (49), it's hard not to cringe over the callousness with which she frames an event that could have caused great harm (even to the firefighters she lightheartedly criticizes for not being as good-looking as their counterparts in Manhattan).



Kate Ruggeri. *Hero*, 2013; mixed media. Courtesy of the Artist.

Griffin dances on this very edge when he claims that "if lives had been lost, these stories would lose their potential to redeem, and I would not be writing this book" (10). His concluding question, literally the last words of the book, is whether fire, for an artist, is a curse or a gift. This question feels pat, replete with the magical thinking necessary to completely divorce the metaphorical value of fire with its actual and potential impact. Perhaps moving so nimbly between reality and metaphor is at times simply unpalatable; while it's fascinating to stare into the face of a consuming fire and imagine the rising phoenix, it may also be worth recognizing that there is danger in seeing disaster as merely allegorical, and not just to our "rubber" necks.

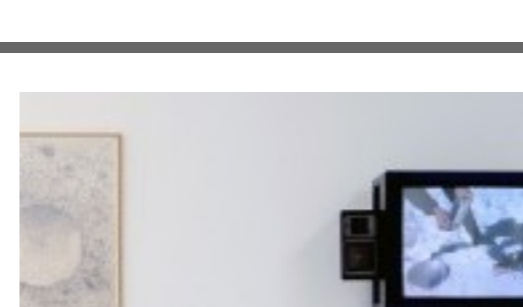
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