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Faculty Focus: Drawing--in Place

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Drawing — in Place

Art professor Erin Wiersma uses char from tallgrass burns and an intensely physical process to capture the prairie

By Sarah Caldwell Hancock



photos by David Mayes



Gaze at Flint Hills tallgrass prairie, and you may see scenic hills stretching under an open sky, a home to richly diverse wildlife, or an ancient sea floor. Erin Wiersma, associate professor of art at Kansas State University, sees a new way to draw and understand her adopted home.

The color of the hills changes with the seasons. In spring, the area is smudged with black ash left behind by burning, a management practice that maintains the endangered landscape's health. Moments to weeks after the burn, Wiersma methodically rubs or drags large paper over the freshly charred grass of the Konza Prairie Biological Station (see photo top left), effectively using the burned grass as charcoal to create large-scale drawings. Her process captures marks that show the growth patterns spanning the area's terraced topography along the ledges and shelves of flint shale.

Wiersma excels at making sense from chaos, whether it's natural or man-made. As she creates the Konza drawings, Wiersma experiences the wind, temperature, humidity and other natural conditions that create and inform this precious landscape. These works are related to the large-scale performative drawings and paintings she has been creating for more than 10 years. Wiersma consistently relies on a linear, drawn language, aiming to evoke heightened awareness of the bodily form through the gestural mapping of her body's movement. Another ongoing series of work contains paintings in which lines proliferate and travel in many directions. Pockets of stillness emerge from the kinetic labyrinth. If you look closely, you might think of neural networks, or circuits — or even a tangle of grass (see photos left and top center).

The East Coast native says the Konza project is helping her immerse herself in the prairie of her new home, engaging in dialog with the space and systems that shape this land.

“The expansive environment of the prairie is new to me; through the process of making these drawings, I continue to learn about this preserved, endangered land,” Wiersma said.

Working at Konza Prairie, which is jointly owned by Kansas State University and The Nature Conservancy, has deepened Wiersma's understanding of the grassland's

history and the urgency for continued ecological research. Her artistic process has been intensely physical because of her chosen method as well as the scale of the work, which conveys a sense of place and the experience of prairie burning to viewers.

“In my creative practice, I constantly strive to cultivate a heightened level of mindfulness — an awareness which I believe is desperately needed in all lives. Being present for the burn and witnessing regrowth becomes a personal, intentional act of awareness,” Wiersma said.

When she takes the pieces back to a studio, memory of the physical process comes into play (see photo top right).

“Our visual memories can't retain the whole prairie,” she said. “By tracing into these mappings made by the char material, I draw from the memory I have of experiencing the environment itself.”

Understanding the ecology of the prairie is the aim of the long-term research at the Konza Prairie. John Briggs, director of the station, said about 94 percent of original tallgrass prairie has been lost or modified by urban and agricultural development. The burning and grazing programs at Konza Prairie were implemented in the late 1970s. Areas are burned at different intervals, with and without grazers, and the process is critical for maintaining the diversity of the grassland ecosystem.

Briggs said Wiersma's art could help viewers understand the value of the prairie.

“We are here to promote ecological research, education and prairie conservation,” he said. “Erin's work offers another way for people to understand this amazing place.”

Wiersma has exhibited throughout the U.S., including recent solo exhibitions at A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, New York; Mallin Gallery at Kansas City Artist Coalition in Kansas City, Missouri; Soho20 Gallery in New York City; Sarah A. Coyne Gallery at Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York; and Rebecca Randall Bryan Art Gallery at Coastal Carolina University in Conway, South Carolina. Her work has been featured in *OnVerge* — CUE Foundation, *Art21Online Magazine* and *Two Coats of Paint*. Wiersma's work is available at Robischon Gallery in Denver. **k**