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## Art on Fire

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The Burn Series

**With a deep appreciation for Mother Nature and an interest in the cycle of life, North Shore artist Jane Fulton Alt captures our captivating landscape in her compelling photographs.**

To photographer (and Glencoe native) Jane Fulton Alt, the magic of nature is her artistic stimulus. From our vibrant prairie lands to the cerulean waters of Lake Michigan, she finds inspiration for her photos in the backdrops of the entire North Shore—which is why a residency at the artist's retreat, Ragdale, turned out to be the perfect place for her to work. Jane first heard about Ragdale, a world-renowned community tucked away in Lake Forest overlooking 50 acres of protected prairie, through a member of the critique group that she runs out of her Evanston home. After hearing a rave review of the group member's retreat experience, Jane knew she had to apply. She recalls first arriving on the property and being overcome with emotion. "I felt like crying. It was sort of like, 'Oh my God, somebody feels like I deserve to be at a place like this,'" she explains.

This was the beginning of what would become three residencies at the tranquil estate. "It's a place where you're not really in the role of a mother, or sister, or aunt, or daughter. You can focus on the creative process," Jane says. "It's a magical place. Stuff happens there that wouldn't happen at home." During her first residency, she started working with leaves from the grounds—scanning them in and enlarging them. Upon returning the following year, though, she found that



Photographer Jane Alt in her Evanston home  
(Photograph by Steven Johnson)

the fates had a plan for her: The Lake Forest Open Lands Association was conducting a small controlled burn—a common practice for eliminating invasive species on prairies—and Jane, who had always had an interest in the mysterious qualities of smoke and fires, saw within the flames the birth of her new collection: The Burn.

To Jane, watching the prairie burn was particularly poignant because it also marked the first day of

her sister’s chemotherapy. “When I went on that burn, I kept thinking about her going through the chemotherapy and how the doctors were putting these chemicals in her to try to burn off the cancer cells to make room for the healthy cells,” she remembers. “It really impacted the way I experienced the burn, and now every time I go out there to watch, it’s dedicated to her. I think about the idea of the life cycle, how out of destruction and death comes new birth.”

Jane continued photographing the burns on her next stay at Ragdale—and she was so affected by the environment and experience that she even brought a bit of the Ragdale prairie into her backyard by planting milkweed and Queen Anne’s lace. In this mini plot of prairie behind her home, she was lucky enough to find a few Monarch eggs. The transformation of insects has also been the subject of her photographs—in one of the photos in The Burn collection, she even superimposed a butterfly among the burning brush, as a surprising element of juxtaposition. This past Memorial Day, she took pictures of just-molted dragonflies near her other home in Northern Wisconsin, and one summer years prior she watched the whole process of a caterpillar going into a chrysalis. “The miracle of life is so interesting to me,” she says.

Jane’s newest work is a protest against people meddling with Mother Nature. The ever-growing collection, called Crude Awakening, has received a great deal of attention—not only for its fascinating beachside images, but also because of its timely subject: the oil spill. For the project, she photographed a diverse collection of families on our beaches who are covered in a murky, oil-like substance. Jane hopes her photos will raise local awareness about the disaster by bringing it home, to our far more pristine coast. “This work is coming out of a deep concern for Louisiana and our country. Seeing those pictures of those birds covered in crude oil was heartbreaking,” she says. “I saw some mothers with their young children by the water’s edge here and I thought, ‘We’re so lucky to have that and it hasn’t been mucked up by oil drilling.’”

Ultimately, Jane just wants this project to be seen and absorbed by the public. “It’s been so hard to listen to all the finger-pointing and the blaming. I believe we’re all part of the problem, so we’ve got to all be part of the solution,” she explains. One thing’s for certain: Her work—in all its raw, natural glory—will definitely make us think.

*The Burn No. 2 is \$1,675 for a 15"x 30" in an edition of 7; other Burn photographs are \$950 for a 15" x 15" in an edition of 10. For information about the Crude Awakening series, or to contact the artist, visit [janefultonalt.com](http://janefultonalt.com). For more information about Ragdale, or to apply for a residency, visit [ragdale.org](http://ragdale.org).*

—Evangeline Politis

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