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Francesca Gabbiani: 'Mutations'  
*Capturing These Odd and Unsettling Times*  
Wilding Cran Gallery  
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by Jody Zellen



Francesca Gabbiani is best known for her cut paper works— images created by collaging and layering precisely cut bits of colored paper into compositions that draw from both the natural and urban landscapes. Her subjects have included surfers, interiors, spaces that are overlooked and forgotten, as well as the effect of wildfires on the environment. For *Mutations*, she combines her iconic cut paper collaging with ink, gouache and acrylic to create works that focus on devastation — inflamed palm trees and forests, off colored seascapes and skies — calling attention to the beauty and the horror simultaneously. The standout in this exhibition, however is the seven-minute stop-motion film *Sea of Fire* (2022) that tracks the movements of a giant black spider accompanied by a pulsating sound track by Eddie Ruscha.

The film is an exciting extension of Gabbiani's studio practice. The hand-made qualities of her works on paper beautifully translate into stop-motion animation and this gives the film its charm. Gabbiani does not try to hide the puppet-like motion of these elements, but rather ingeniously combines fragments from her paintings and collages with actual footage of flames and their destructive aspects. The film “stars” a large black spider that careens through the landscape on a journey to the sea— a place spiritually and metaphorically far from the encroaching flames.

In conjunction with the film are new large-scale paper pieces dated from 2020-2023 that isolate and capture spectacular moments like flaming silhouetted palm trees blowing in the wind against a surreal orange sky as in *Mutation XLVIII*, *Hot Panorama III* and *Hot Panorama V*. In *Phosfluorescence VIII* (2022), Gabbiani presents the setting sun as a large orange-yellow ball hovering above the horizon where night sky meets the sea, its glow spreading out across the ocean and illuminating a bank of phosphorescent waves.

Gabbiani's individual works are time consuming masterpieces— a combination of hand cut papers and painted grounds that reference the environs of Los Angeles: specifically when there are fires in the distant hills that cause the sky to turn gray and the sun to become a ball of fire that casts an eerie aura across the city. Gabbiani perfectly captures these odd and unsettling times. Seeing the works on paper in conjunction with the film infuses Gabbiani's project with a sense of urgency that looks at the vulnerability of the landscape and the dangers of climate change coupled with a sense of humor and narrative sophistication.

The film opens with an image of a funky, hand-made stage upon which the title of the film appears as cut-out letters attached to vertical strips of paper emerging from the bottom of the dark state. Once the letters fade out, the semi-circle is filled with bright orange flames from which a black spider emerges and fills the stage only to disappear. It's replaced by a series of other cutouts in silhouette — two coyotes, a naked woman and then an owl that traverses the

stage, which disappears to reveal aspects of Gabbiani's drawings, now cleverly animated as stop-motion works. Throughout the film, the stage-set reappears and disappears as does the image of the spider.

As the spider weaves its way through the landscape, ambling, as well as skateboarding away from fire-filled skies toward the magical salvation of the ocean, it is transformed from "animal" to "athlete"— a surfer riding away from the flames balancing on majestic blue waves— an image of hope amongst the devastation. The use of stop-motion animation seems like the perfect next step for Gabbiani. In both the film and the static works, she successfully explores how the fragility of paper parallels the vulnerability of the environment.

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