

Artillery Magazine  
Gallery Rounds  
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Richard Ehrlich  
*27 Miles: Abstract Truth*,  
June 8 – July 27, 2019  
Rose Gallery (at Bergamot Station's B7 Space)

By Jody Zellen



Richard Ehrlich is a photographer and a long time Malibu resident whose exhibition “27 Miles: Abstract Truth” is presented, in part, as a way to raise awareness and support for the California Community Foundation’s Wildfire Relief Fund. Included in the sprawling exhibition of more than 80 images are pictures of the fire’s aftermath as well as photographs from Ehrlich’s series, “Las Flores Canyon” and “Homage to Rothko” (both 2016) and selected images from previous related bodies of work.

Ehrlich’s documentation of the November 2018 Woolsey fire alludes to the scope of the destruction. His images range from objective pictures of the scarred earth, burnt-out cars and demolished homes to the marvel of nature’s rebirth. What also caught Ehrlich’s eye were the abstract patterns and textures of melted metal and dilapidated paint. In these images Ehrlich focuses on the glitter and shimmering surfaces scarred by the fire’s intense heat. As abstractions, they appear to be otherworldly—celestial or cell-like wonders—many with an ambiguous scale and overlapping metal shards. The images are both confounding and spectacular as Ehrlich can’t help but aestheticize the destruction.

The black and white photographs of “Las Flores Canyon” are long exposures (ranging from a few days to many months) taken with a stationary pinhole camera that tracked the arc of the sun across the sky. These evocative images look like solar flares against a darkened hillside. While the photographs from “Las Flores Canyon” are layered images created in the camera, “Homage to Rothko” are composited from multiple photographs of Malibu skies becoming striations of soft colors—shapes that echo the paintings of Mark Rothko. *Homage to Rothko 13* is a composition of deep grays that reference a stormy night sky whereas *Homage to Rothko 22* evokes the colors of a sea at dusk. Ehrlich’s homages to Rothko are representational and abstract simultaneously and, like the paintings, are atmospheric works that reflect a range of moods and emotions.

Together, Ehrlich's images of the fires destruction, the movement of the sun and his abstract skies reflect the many ways of picturing the landscape and are intimate as well as impactful representations of the changing environment. While works like *Malibu Fires #23* and *Malibu Fires #12* are formal pictures that indulge in the beauty of found colors and textures that mute the impact of the devastation in favor of kaleidoscopic patterns, Ehrlich's project is not about favoring beauty over objective documentation, but rather functions as a reminder that beauty can arise from destruction and detritus.

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