

Art Review | Mount St. Helens: Photographs of Frank Gohlke, MoMA, New York

## Force of Nature

By Daniel Rothbart  
September/October 2005

On May 18, 1980, Mt. Saint Helens erupted with the power of a nuclear explosion, expelling volcanic ash fourteen miles into the sky. Images of ghost forests, fuming plains and blackened ash-choked skies dominated the news. Ash, in the form of a fine gray dust, later rained down on the Pacific Northwest from Seattle, Washington to my hometown of Eugene, Oregon.

Fifty-seven people who were near the eruption died, some of them campers, lost in the woods, who couldn't escape the lethal cascade of ash. Around that time, I was working as a ceramist, and like other potters in the area, I used ash from Mt. Saint Helens to glaze ceramic vessels. In the fires of a kiln this ash turned a deep, rich brown, like the essence of old-growth timbers that were felled in its conflagration.

Frank Gohlke visited the volcano five times between 1981 and 1990 to photograph the 250 square-mile swath of land devastated by the eruption. His work documents both the immense destructive forces of nature and her ability to adapt and renew in the face of her own mean streak. Curators John Szarkowski and Peter Galassi have collected Gohlke's series of photographs together for the first time in an exhibition currently up at MoMA.

One striking photograph, taken shortly after the eruption, shows a downed forest near Elk Rock, about ten miles from Mt. Saint Helens. It calls to mind images of the bombed-out and fire-scorched forests of Europe during World War I, but here the destruction is more complete, as if by design. During the eruption, trees fell against the wall of heat in a single direction, and here lie parallel as far as the eye can see. Stripped of their foliage, these massive trunks resonate in some deep primal way with our innate fear of and respect for nature.

Another photograph captures the intermingling of ash and snow on the east flank of Mt. Saint Helens two years after the eruption. The day after 9/11, I walked to Battery Park City and remember the ash that seemed like a blanket of snow on the trees and buildings. In Gohlke's photographs these two kindred elements create an effect like marbled 19th century endpapers. On closer examination, the viewer comes to appreciate the bizarre landscape they define, punctuated with lava flows and lilliputian tree trunks that lie lifeless at their feet.

Gohlke also photographed Mt. Saint Helens crater and lava dome from the air, capturing its most minute details. A plume of ash and vapor wisps gently into the sky from the mysterious vent in the center of the dome, belying the latent pressure beneath the earth. Lava, ash, hot vapor and snow populate this strange netherworld at the summit of the volcano. Gohlke's sensitivity in framing both grand vistas like this one and intimate environments conveys a sense of nature's infinite complexity, and a paradoxical order in chaos.