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Review Simon Norfolk writes with fire in latest photographs

By LEAH OLLMAN

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Simon Norfolk's latest photographs, at Luisotti, earn their designation in the strictest sense: The images are quite literally written in light.

Two other more specific if more unusual terms also apply: stratographs, for these pictures record a layering of time; and pyrographs, because the light that sears through them is made by fire.

Whichever name they go by, the images are stunning. They drive home an environmental point about climate change more persuasively — and far more viscerally — than a ream of statistical data.

For 18 days last fall, Norfolk camped at a mountaineering hut high on Mt. Kenya, where the Lewis Glacier has been receding with measurable finality. In the dark of night, carrying a makeshift torch made from a garden rake, he walked numerous recorded former boundaries of the glacier, making long exposures that captured the flame's path.

Ribboning through the cool, craggy landscape, the fiery line marks Norfolk's individual trail (as stones or flattened grasses marked the singular passages of Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, fellow walkers upon the land), but it also chronicles the collective impact of a petroleum-based civilization. Embracing the irony, Norfolk lit the torch with gasoline.

For more than a decade, Norfolk has been making still images that convey time's passage, and particularly the destructive change incurred by human conflict. In this breathtaking new body of work, he turns to the unpeopled landscape yet remains a photographer of ruin.