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Book Review: On Fire

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On Fire. By Larry Schwarm. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003. 128 pp. Photographs, index. \$39.95.

Larry Schwarm grew up on a farm in southcentral Kansas, received an M.F.A. degree from the University of Kansas, and since 1988 has taught photography in the art department at Emporia State University, located in the Flint Hills of eastcentral Kansas, a remarkable geographical and topographical feature, where rolling hills extend for miles at a time, with no trees, fences, roads, or structures to impede them. On these hills is the largest remaining stand of the tallgrass prairie that once covered the eastern Great Plains. This land is now used for grazing, and each spring ranchers light fires to the dead remains of the last season's grass, burning it off to keep back trees and weeds, while creating fertile conditions for new growth grass, whose tender shoots will nourish cattle grazed there.

Since 1990, Schwarm has been photographing this annual ritual of the spring burning of the prairie. Sixty-eight of these pictures are assembled, with an introduction by photographer Robert Adams, in this eloquently designed and exquisitely printed book, the inaugural volume of a series dedicated to publishing the work of the biennial winner of the Center for Documentary Studies/Honickman First Book Prize in Photography.

These pictures, all in color, are stunningly beautiful, displaying flames moving across vast open spaces of prairie, often as the sole link between earth and sky, photographed at day, night, and twilight, under blue skies, clouds, and the moon. Schwarm uses prairie fires as a focus for meditation on the subtle beauty of

the Plains, constructing where others might see nothing an aesthetic we might call the “minimalist sublime”: Schwarm himself writes of the “sublime and mystical character of the burning landscape, where images are at once both sensuous and menacing.”

Schwarm’s cogent afterword positions the fires as one of the four elements, along with earth, air, and water, to underscore the mythic quality of the pictures and their subject: the burning of the prairie is a cycle of renewal and rebirth, found first in natural fires and in the practice of Native American dwellers of the Plains, only later adopted by European settlers. In this short essay the photographer links his work to the color-field paintings of Mark Rothko, an apt choice, for in both artists’ work subtle hues of color intersect to become grids hovering between spumy abstractions and actual landscapes.

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