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Finding balance: Burning violins explore impact of a diminishing culture

MacKenzie Chase Jan 11, 2018

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Prelude by Julie Comnick, 2012, oil on canvas, 80" x 95" Courtesy photo

When Flagstaff artist Julie Connick began collecting discarded violins to light on fire in 2009, it was with the idea of exploring the impact growing technologies can have on our cultural heritage. She grew up with musical parents and played the violin from ages 8 to 18, before attending to a college without a music program and putting the instrument down.

Her project, *Arrangement for a Silent Orchestra: 451° F*, uses the violin as a metaphor for a diminishing culture in contemporary society and what impact its loss might have.

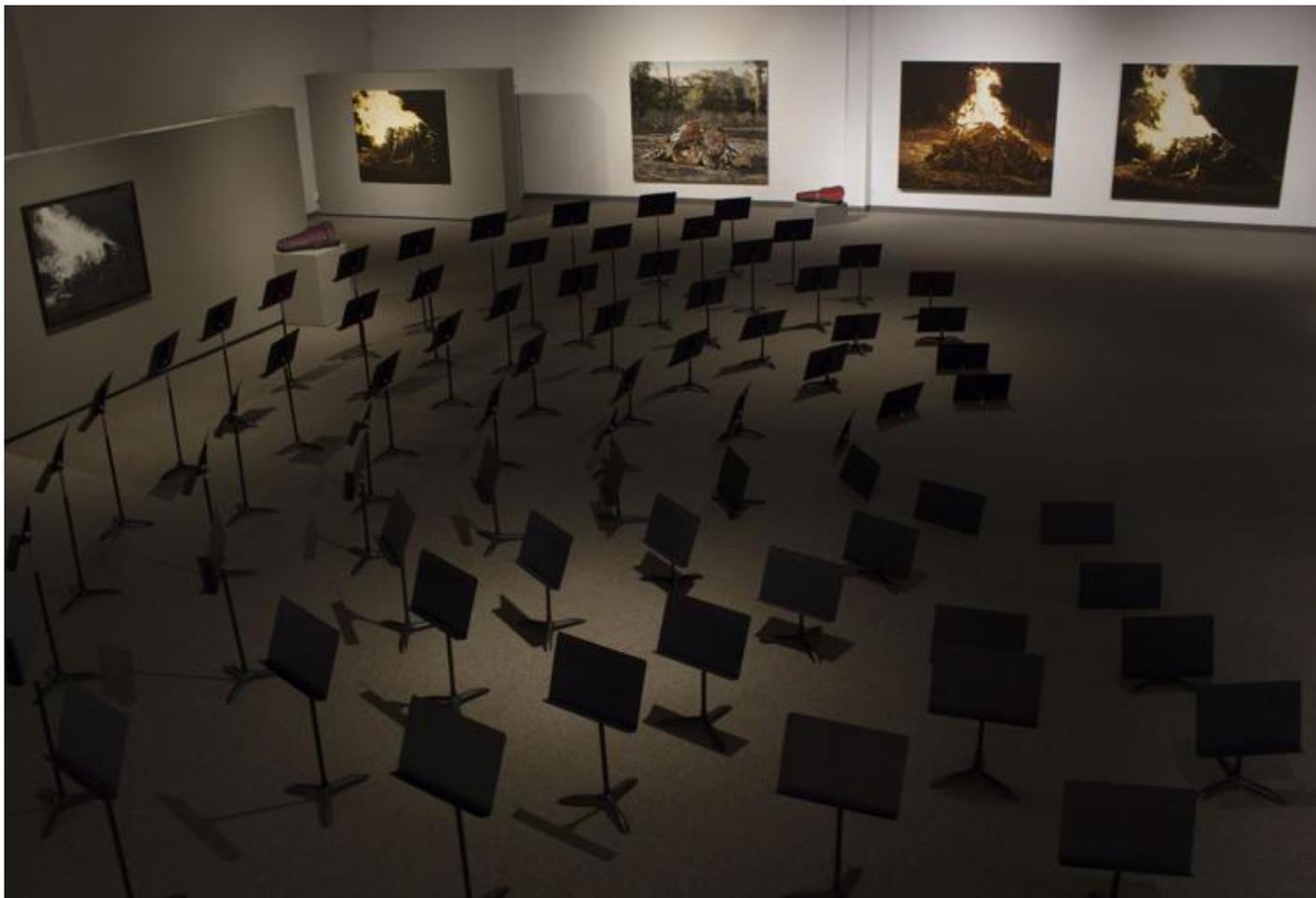
Music education has been shown to help students excel in other fields by improving memory, math skills, coordination and more. However, as fewer schools set aside funding for the arts, fewer students have the option of learning an instrument and benefiting from the multifaceted skill.

Connick was haunted by her unrealized pursuit in the years after giving it up, so in preparation for this project, named after the point at which wood catches fire, she decided to take violin lessons to relearn the familiar skill: “I really felt it was important to decide, if I’m destroying this object, this instrument, what’s my own relationship with that?”

Similarly, if kids don’t have a music program in their school, “what are we at risk of losing?” she asks. “On one hand it could be learning how to play an instrument, but it’s also about passion and values.”

Now, after almost a decade of work, the first part of her project is complete.

“Going into this project I didn’t have an idea of how to paint fire, so it was a matter of studying the behavior of fire, figuring out what elements of it to retain to make it feel alive yet not stylized,” she says of those initial stages. “It was important to me to really observe a traditional painting process so I didn’t take shortcuts; I did underpaintings in black and white and then developed the images from there.”



The finished installation. Courtesy photo

The end result is a series of a dozen large-scale oil paintings that depict the fiery destruction of nearly 100 violins over a 12-hour period, from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. In the middle of the gallery, an installation titled “Decrescendo” displays 100 music stands arranged as though for a full orchestra performance except they shrink as they move toward the invisible conductor’s podium until all that’s left is half of the tray. A video component adds ambient pops and crackles as it shows the process of the fire devouring the wooden instruments. It also serves to represent how important the relationship between technology and art is to society.

“I’m very interested in that balance,” Comnick says. “I’m not at all trying to say that technology should take a secondary role, but how do we work with both and make sure that we have access? The role of arts in innovation is huge, so how do you have successful innovation in STEM if you leave out the arts?”

Currently in progress is a variation on the theme, *Arrangement for a Silent Orchestra: 28° F*, which counters fire’s quick destruction with the gentle accumulation of snow on a pile of orchestral instruments. Comnick will explore the relationship between heritage and natural circumstances as opposed to technology with her next venture and was named a recipient of the Arizona Commission on the Arts’ Artist Research and Development Grants last year in support of her work.

Ahead of the final reveal, Comnick has exhibited different phases of *451°* ever since she finished the preliminary five paintings that show the full range of the fire, from the pile of violins illuminated by the setting sun to the inferno at night and the charred remains left behind as the sun comes up, as well as two in-between stages. The reception thus far has been positive she said, and she feels a sense of accomplishment to have it finished.

“There are always questions asked and I think that’s what makes it art,” she explains. “There are a number of ways to interpret it and I think people understand, by the time they come into the exhibit and see how long I’ve devoted myself to this, it’s not just one painting that comes out of this destruction, it’s years of work and a lot of ways of looking at it.”

Arrangement for a Silent Orchestra: 451° F will open with a public reception at the Coconino Center for the Arts on Saturday, Jan. 13, from 6-8 p.m. Admission is free and Connick will also give a solo performance of Beethoven's Romance for Violin in F Major Op. 50. The exhibit runs through Feb. 10. For more information on the artist, visit www.julieconnick.com/.

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