

A ARTS

Burnt Out

Kendall Messick documents his shell of a home

BY AMY STOCKWELL MERCER

Kendall Messick: Impermanence

Opening reception Nov. 11, 5:30-8:30 p.m.
Rebekah Jacob Gallery, 169 King St.
(843) 937-9222

**Artist lecture/book signing
of *The Projectionist***

Nov. 10, 7 p.m.
Room 309, Simons Center for the Arts,
54 St. Philip St.
(843) 953-HICA

There was just one room left to complete in the restoration of Kendall Messick's Victorian house in Jersey City when a fire broke out, caused by a worker stripping varnish too close to a live electrical outlet. A documentary filmmaker and photographer, Messick's studio and much of his equipment were destroyed on the second floor. When he arrived at the house after the fire, he walked through the charred rooms, and he began taking pictures. Outwardly calm, he used the camera as a shield, while inside his emotions were raging. Messick says his camera helped him make sense of the devastation. However, it took over a year before he developed the negatives. The resulting images, all titled "Conflagration," reveal a mixture of horror and beauty, death and rebirth.

Messick's body of work focuses on vanishing places and people. "My work is always about preserving an experience," he says. Mark Sloan, director of the Halsey Institute, commissioned Messick to create a documentary film about the artist/savant Richard McMahan in 2008. Sloan says that Messick "works on an emotional level that is uncommon in the art world." The Halsey also exhibited *The Projectionist*, a documentary and series of photographs based on the life of Gordon Brinckle (1915-2007) and his miniature, fully functional basement theater "The Shalimar." A book based on the project was recently published. Corapeake, an earlier project, captured "a town that time forgot" through photos, audio recordings, journal entries, and film. Messick says his process is a meditative reflection on a way of life in America. "When work has a story, it transcends," he says.

After decades of turning the camera on other people and places, Messick has turned it on himself. He says *Impermanence* is his most personal project thus far. His time-intensive projects don't start out with a plot line. The process is evolutionary, and he figures out how all the pieces will come together as he works. With *Impermanence*,



Provided

EACH WORK IN *IMPERMANENCE* IS TITLED "CONFLAGRATION," LIKE #66, SEEN ABOVE

the more he worked, the more he started noticing patterns and textures. He became aware of a certain beauty. Different layers of testimony seem to parallel Messick's recovery process, from close-up abstract images to recognizable rooms to specific objects. It's as if he allowed himself to come closer to what was lost over time.

The project consumed him. He became obsessed with documenting the ruins of his burned home, and he delayed the reconstruction, much to the dismay of his family, insurance company, and contractor. Everyone wanted him to move on and clean up, but Messick wasn't ready. He says now he can see the fire as a positive experience, because it birthed this project.

The series of large-scale images are about finding beauty in the worst places. A self-

described purist, Messick says Photoshop was not used and that the process wasn't easy. In "Conflagration #37," an abstract image is created through the smoke and shadows on a close-up of three panels of wood. On closer inspection, figures emerge as if caught and trapped permanently by the fire. "Conflagration #31" reveals the complete destruction of a room, the ceiling exposed, ash and soot spread across the floor like snow. "My goal in all my work is to elicit emotion from my viewer. If it makes you feel something, it's successful," he says.

Messick is currently working on the Swann Song project, featuring Elaine Swann, a 91-year-old actress who lives on 42nd Street in New York. "She was in everything with everyone but never made it big," he says. "My goal is to make her famous." 