

Erin Wiersma

AFTER THE BURN





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Drawings from Konza Prairie



Feuer ist das Ende und Feuer ist der Anfang

Eine leicht hügelige Graslandschaft von atemberaubender Schönheit, der Reichtum einer weitgehend noch unberührten Natur in ihrer Vielfalt aus Gräsern und Wildblumen mit über 500 Pflanzenarten, das ist die Konza Prairie. Die im nördlichen Teil des US-Bundesstaates Kansas gelegene Prärie ist heute eines der vielfältigsten Ökosysteme der Welt und in ihrem Artenreichtum und ihrer historischen Bedeutung weltweit einzigartig.

Ursprünglich reichte diese Graslandprärie von Kanada über die Mitte Nordamerikas bis hin zum Golf von Mexiko und umfasste eine Fläche von 170 Millionen Hektar. Die Great Plains waren ein vielfältiges Ökosystem mit Gräsern, Blumen, Millionen von Bisons und anderen Tieren. Sie waren die Heimat mehrerer indigener Völker, darunter die Kaw, Osage und Pawnee, die von einer ausgeprägten Nutzung der Prärie lebten. Die Besiedlung des Landes in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts und die damit einhergehende Kultivierung des Bodens sowie die Zurückdrängung der großen Bisonherden bedeuteten ein Ende der großen Graslandprärie.

Im Bereich der Flint Hills konnten etwa vier Prozent der ursprünglichen Prärie erhalten werden. Hier forscht seit 1971 die Konza Prairie Biological Station (KPBS) der Kansas State University mit dem Ziel der langfristigen Erhaltung der Grasland-Prärie und des Ökosystems. Im Fokus stehen dabei Feuer, Beweidung und Klimaschwankungen. In Anlehnung an die Praktiken der Ureinwohner werden noch heute nach Sektoren eingeteilte, gezielte Abbrände als Instrumentarium der Landwirtschaft gelegt. Sie kontrollieren unerwünschten Buschwuchs, verbessern die Bodenqualität und fördern damit den Nachwuchs von Gräsern und Wildblumen, welche wiederum Nahrung für die neuangesiedelten Bisons sind.

Erin Wiersmas künstlerische Praxis ist aus dem Interesse an der Historie der Prairie als Ort seiner früheren Bewohner, seiner Flora und Fauna entstanden und Ausdruck einer tiefen Verbundenheit mit dieser Landschaft. Ausgangspunkt ihrer künstlerischen Arbeit ist seit 2017 der unmittelbare Moment nach einem gezielten Abbrand der Graslandschaft, bis über ein Jahr danach, wenn der gesamte Lebenszyklus der Vegetation zurückgekehrt ist. Ihre *Konza Prairie Drawings* entstehen während einer Performance in und mit der Prairie. Auf den zuvor verkohlten Landstrichen der Prärie und nicht selten nah am Feuer, arbeitet sie mit dem leicht brennbaren Material Papier.

Die Künstlerin selbst ist das Medium, das unter Berücksichtigung der Naturelemente Wind, Temperatur und Feuchtigkeit etwas vollkommen Neues und Gegenwärtiges schafft. In einem von ihr entwickelten künstlerischen Verfahren zieht, hebt und schlägt Erin Wiersma großformatige Papiere über und auf den abgebrannten Boden. Diese Arbeit ist Ausdruck ihrer skulpturalen Auffassung von Papier, die in der neuesten Technik mit einer selbst konstruierten Walze, um die das Papier gespannt wird, resultiert. Erin Wiersma schiebt diese Walze über das mitunter frisch abgebrannte Gras und addiert so fortlaufend Abdrücke der Natur, die in bewegte Frottagen der Landschaft resultieren.

Erin Wiersmas *Konza Prairie Drawings* sind abstrakte Porträts der Landschaft in mitunter stark verdichteter Strichführung in Grau, Schwarz, Grün und Erdtönen mit eng gesetzten Akkorden von Linien, Spuren und Kratzern. Deren all-over Prinzip ist Ausdruck der Weite der Landschaft, in

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der sie entstehen. Mehr noch: hier zeichnet die Natur selbst ein aderreiches Craquelé! In ihrer Vielschichtigkeit erreichen Wiersmas Arbeiten auf Papier eine bemerkenswerte Bildtiefe. Sie haben die Kraft dieses Bodens, seine Geschichte, seine Ursprünglichkeit und Erneuerungsfähigkeit aufgenommen und sind den Spuren der hier vormals lebenden indigenen Stämme gefolgt. Entscheidend für den Aggregatzustand jedes ihrer Kunstwerke ist der Faktor Zeit, ihre Entstehung wird von den geplanten Abbränden in den jeweiligen Sektoren der Prärie bestimmt. Erst im Endzustand begreift die Künstlerin ihre Werke als zweidimensionale, fragile Arbeiten auf Papier.

Feuer ist ein Zivilisations- und Kulturträger. Als Quelle von Wärme und Licht wie auch von Zerstörung und Tod ist es für Mensch und Natur ein durchaus ambivalentes Element. Das Spektrum von Assoziationen reicht vom romantischen Lagerfeuer bis hin zu unkontrollierbaren Waldbränden, vom wärmespendenden Ofen bis zur tödlichen Feuersbrunst. Im Feuer wurzelt der Mythos von Tod und Wiedergeburt. In der Kunstgeschichte des Feuers sind Gemälde der Renaissance, wie Boschs *Heuwagen* (1512-1515), des Barock, wie Rubens *Prometheus* (1636-37) und der Romantik, wie Turners *Brand des Parlamentsgebäudes* (1835) herausragend. Insbesondere seit Ende der 1960er Jahre haben sich neue verbindende künstlerische Positionen von Landschaft, Feuer und Körper entwickelt. Wie die Land/Body Art von Judy Chicago, die mit der Intention, die Landschaft zu feminisieren und männliche Strukturen durchzubrechen, diese mit weichen pinken Rauchwolken auskleidete und politische Statements in Rauchschrift aufsteigen ließ. Für ihre *Smoke Bodies* (1972) bemalte sie Frauenkörper und lichtete sie vor der kargen Wüstenlandschaft ab. Herausragend sind die *Feuerfontänen* (1961) und *Feuerbilder* (1961/62) von Yves Klein, der mit

einem Industriebrenner auf schwedischem Karton arbeitete und den Brand von einem Feuerwehrmann löschen ließ. Auch er sah sein Werk im Zusammenhang mit der Weite der Natur: "Fire for me is the future without forgetting the past. It is the memory of nature." David Nash wiederum legt seine Holzskulpturen, wie die *Oak Menhire* seit 1975 in einen Feuerofen, in offenes Feuer oder bearbeitet sie mit einem Flammenwerfer.

Im Vergleich dazu geht Erin Wiersmas Arbeit von einem kontrollierten Feuer mit Signifikanz für die Umwelt aus. Im scheinbar leblosen Zustand der Natur nimmt sie mit großformatigem Papier, Kohle und andere Überreste verbrannter Gräser und Wildblumen auf und macht deren erstes Stadium der Erneuerung mit ihrem Werk sichtbar. Ihre faszinierenden *Konza Prairie Drawings* zeigen uns diesen kurzen, scheinbar unsichtbaren Moment des Übergangs vom leblosen zum neu aufblühenden Zustand. Als Performerin durchschreitet Erin Wiersma die Zeitebenen und geografischen Gegebenheiten. Als Zeichnerin macht sie den Moment der Verjüngung sowie des Vergehens und damit den gesamten Kreislauf der Natur sichtbar: Feuer ist das Ende und Feuer ist der Anfang.

Es freut mich sehr, dass wir die Einzelausstellung und den begleitenden Katalog *After the burn, Erin Wiersma, Drawings from Konza Prairie*, erstmalig in Europa zeigen können. Wir danken der Stiftung Kunstfonds, die dieses Projekt mit den Fördergeldern im Rahmen des Neustart Kultur II unterstützt.

fire is the end and fire is the beginning

Gently-rolling grassy hills of breathtaking beauty, the richness of a largely untouched natural environment in its diversity of grasses and wildflowers – this is the Konza Prairie. Officially known as the Konza Prairie Biological Station (KPBS), the Konza, is a hub of research dedicated to maintaining prairie grassland ecosystems, located in the plains of the north central United States. This Great Plains region was a diverse ecosystem of grasses, flowers, millions of bison and other animals and fire. It was the home to several nations of indigenous peoples including the Kaw, Osage, Pawnee. These elements thrived on a balanced use of the prairie. The settlement of the land, the tilling of the soil and the elimination of the bison ended the great tallgrass prairie.

The tallgrass prairie originally stretched from Canada across the midsection of North America all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, covering an area of 170 million acres. With only about four percent remaining, the Konza is a site for continuing research to assure a long future for the remaining prairie. In its biodiversity and historical significance, this landscape is unique in the world. Since 2017, Erin Wiersma has been working in this land. Her practice involves creating drawings with the earth itself, through many hours walking the Konza working in the land using the biochar as medium during and after prescribed burns.

Following many of the practices of the native nations who preceded them, today the Konza Prairie is maintained by prescribed burns as one of the more significant methods of land management. Established in 1971, the Konza Prairie Biological Station is managed by Kansas State University. KPBS has been conducting research on the ecosystem, specifically fire, grazing, and climate variability. To maintain the grasslands and improve

the quality of the soil there, targeted burnings divided by sector – set for research purposes. The burns are an instrument to control the growth of invasive shrubs, improve soil quality, and thus promote the replenishment of native grasses and wildflowers.

Erin Wiersma's artistic practice is informed by the history of the prairie: its former inhabitants, its flora and fauna, and the contemporary working of the land. Her drawings express a deep connection to this landscape. The starting point of each drawing is the moment immediately after a deliberate burning of the grasslands up to over a year after, when the full lifecycle has returned vegetation. Her *Konza Works on Paper* are created during a performance, both in and with the prairie. She closely follows the topography of the land, either after the fire has moved across the land or in previously charred patches of prairie. The artist takes into account the natural elements of wind, temperature, and humidity when making each work.

Wiersma pulls, lifts, and drags large sheets of paper over and onto the burnt ground. This work is an expression of her sculptural conception of paper, which through the use of a roller (around which the paper is wrapped) or moving the material by hand, allows for specific interaction with the land. The artist moves the paper over the burned grass, continuously adding imprints of nature that come together as moving frottages of the landscape. Equally decisive for the aggregate state of each of her artworks is the factor of time, dependent as her practice is upon the scheduled burns in the respective sectors of the prairie

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preserve. Fragility speaks to the notion of time, and only in the final state does the artist conceive her works as two-dimensional, fragile works on paper.

In the end, Wiersma's *Konza Prairie Drawings* are abstract portraits of the landscape in at times highly condensed strokes of gray, black, green, and earth tones with tightly placed chords of lines, marks, and scratches. Their all-over principle is an expression of the vastness of the landscape in which they are created. Not only that – nature itself can be said to add its veiny craquelure to the artist's composition! In their complexity, Wiersma's works on paper achieve a remarkable pictorial depth. They have absorbed the power of this land, its uniqueness, its deep history and capacity for renewal, and have followed in the footsteps of the indigenous tribes that once lived here.

Fire is a vehicle of civilization and culture. As a source of warmth and light, as well as of destruction and death, it is a thoroughly ambivalent element for both humans and nature. The spectrum of associations ranges from romantic campfires to uncontrollable forest fires, from heat-producing stoves to deadly conflagrations. The myth of death and rebirth is rooted in fire. In art, the spectrum ranges from Renaissance paintings such as Hieronymus Bosch's *Hay Wagon* (1512–1515), Baroque paintings such as Peter Paul Rubens's *Prometheus* (1636–37) to William Turner's *Burning of the Houses of Parliament* (1835). Especially since the late 1960s, new unifying artistic positions of landscape, fire, and body have emerged, such as the Land/Body Art of Judy Chicago, who, with the intention of feminizing the landscape and breaking through masculine structures, lined it with soft pink plumes of smoke and let political statements rise in smokey letters. For her *Smoke Bodies* (1972), she painted women's bodies and

photographed them against the barren desert landscape. Of particular note are the *Fire Fountains* (1961) and *Fire Paintings* (1962–62) by Yves Klein, who, for the latter series, worked with an industrial blowtorch on Swedish cardboard and had the fire extinguished by a fireman. He, too, saw his work in the context of the vastness of nature: "Fire for me is the future without forgetting the past. It is the memory of nature." On the other hand, since 1975, David Nash has been placing his wooden sculptures, such as the *Charred Oak Menhirs*, in a furnace, in open fires, or working on them with a flamethrower.

In comparison to this artistic lineage of fire in art, Erin Wiersma's work proceeds from controlled burnings with significance for the environment. In the seemingly lifeless state of nature, she collects traces of charcoal and other remnants of burned grasses and wildflowers with the sensitive paper and, with her work, giving visibility to the renewal. With her fascinating *Konza Prairie Drawings*, Erin Wiersma shows us this brief, seemingly invisible moment of transition from a state of lifelessness to a new blossoming. As an artist with a practice of walking, she traverses temporal planes and geographical variations. Her works on paper visualize the moment of rejuvenation as well as of decay and thus the entire cycle of nature: Fire is the end, and fire is the beginning.

I am very pleased that we are able to realize this exhibition and the accompanying catalog for the first time in Europe with the support of the Stiftung Kunstfonds as part of Neustart Kultur and would like to express my gratitude for the generous support.

*Working directly in the land,
I use paper which I drag, push,
and pull across the ground. The
marks made on the paper are of
the land itself: charred grasses
from prescribed burning, soil,
rocks, chlorophyll and pollen
from new growth, and the
changing water content in the
air and the ground.*

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Transect 2018 000 KPBS (return) | 84 x 52 in





Transect 2018 213 SuB (DJR) | 84x55 in





Transect 2021 101 K1B (JPW II) | 52x84 in





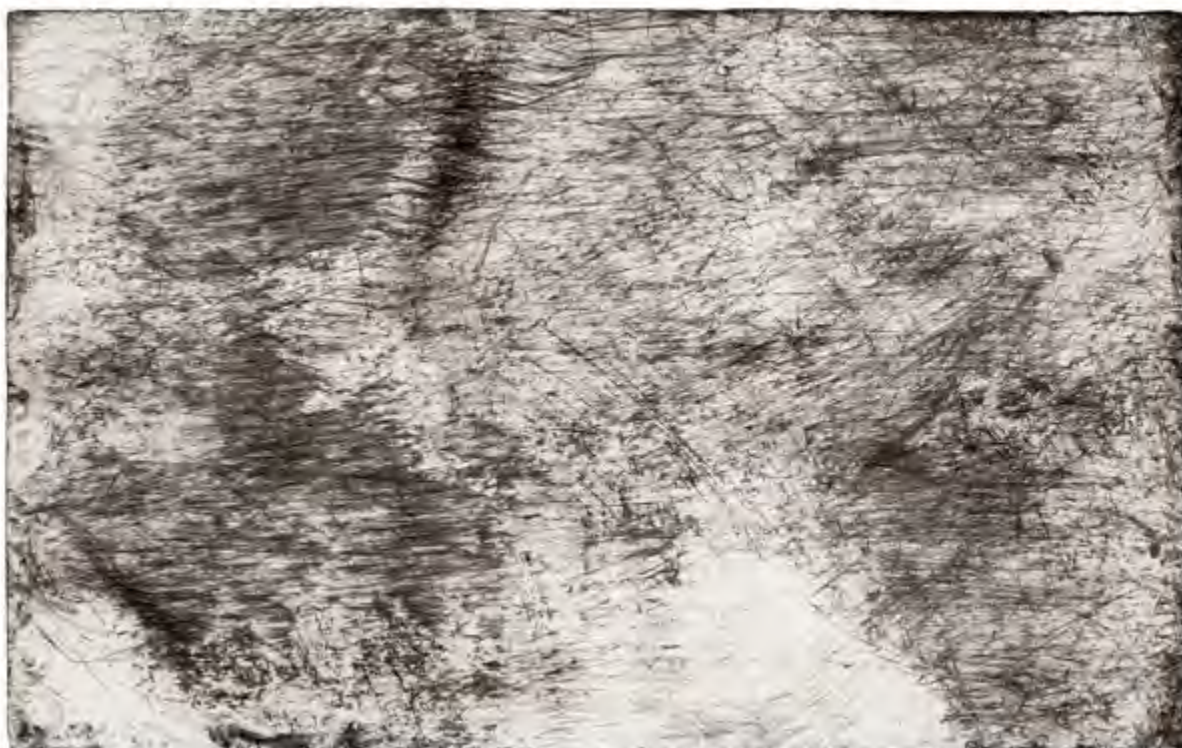
Transect 2021 112 SpA (southwest) | 84 x 55 in





Transect 2020 106 K1B (upland prairie) | 52 x 84 in









Transect 2019 041 WB (return) | 84x52 in





Transect 2018 084 SpB (deep) | 55 x 83.5 in





Transect 2021 312 FB (windshift II) | 69x52 in





Transect 2021 112 KPBS+2C (welkin) | 84x52 in





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Transect 2019 099 C3A (SDW two elms) | 26 x 26 in





Transect 2020 086 C3SA (Konza sea) | 26 x 26 in

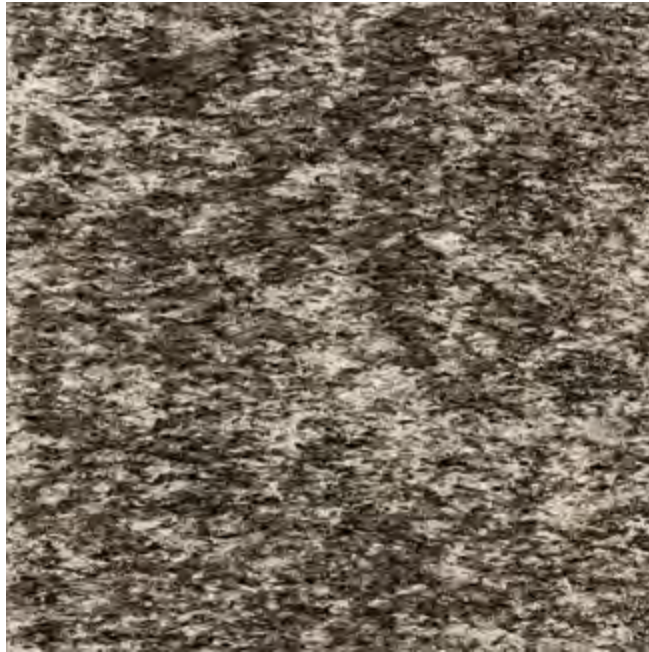


Transect 2020 086 C3SA (swell) | 26 x 26 in

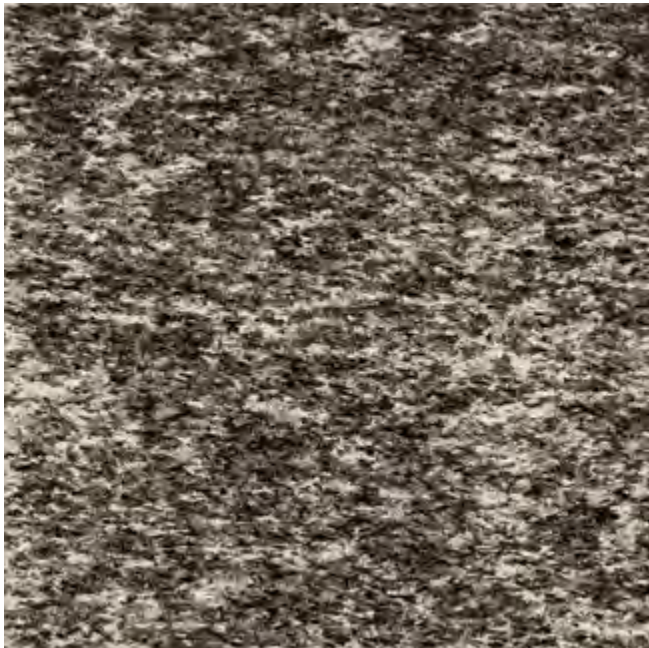








Transect 2019 123 2C (incline) | 26x26 in



Transect 2019 123 2C (rainfall) | 26x26 in





Transect 2021 139 R20B (lowland prairie I) | 48x45 in



Transect 2019 124 2C (JPW) | 26 x 26 in



Transect 2019 123 2C (precipitation) | 26 x 26 in



Transect 2019 342 FB (sea level) | 26 x 26 in



Transect 2019 342 FB (arroyo) | 26 x 26 in



Transect 2020 121 1B (open sky) | 26 x 26 in





Transect 2021 139 R20B (lowland prairie III) | 48x45 in



Transect 2021 139 2C (lowland prairie IV) | 48x45 in





By traversing the land, I become attuned and deeply present to the shifting ecology of the tallgrass prairie. Each year brings a new set of conditions, depending on the atmosphere in the changing climate. I witness time through the lense of the land's varying elements and how the ecology's systems are deeply interconnected.

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Transect 2018 000 KPBS (#121) | 60x60 in









Transect 2018 095 2A (#89 JPW) | 60x60 in

















Transect 2021 000 WA (known underfoot) | 26 x 26 in









Transect 2019 208 K1B (Brase) | 48×45 in



Transect 2021 110 WA (KPN snowfall II) | 48×45 in





Transect 2021 139 R20B (lowland prairie II) | 48×45 in



Transect 2021 021 FA (graze I) | 48×45 in









The process for creating these drawings is immersive. After the burn has passed, I am able to observe that the ecology is intertwined with the geology. The striation of layers of limestone and patterns of shale become visible on the surface of the earth. When I am in this space, I contemplate deep time and become aware of my brief visit here on earth.

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Transect 2021 065 C3C-2D (deep time II) | 26 x 26 in



Transect 2020 080 WA (Nesse) | 48x45 in



Transect 2021 091 R1A (flint constellation) | 26x26 in







Transect 2020 066 R1A (seabed) | 26 x 26 in



Transect 2020 066 WA (green) | 26 x 26 in





Transect 2019 359 FB (dusk) | 26 x 26 in







Transect 2020 114 1B (cloudburst) | 48x45 in



Transect 2020 001 FB (new year) | 48x45 in



Transect 2020 062 C3SA (3-year vegetation) | 48x45 in





Transect 2020 087 WB (sun shower II) | 48x45 in





My relationship with the land is complex. The making of these drawings has allowed me to become highly sensitive, present, and aware. The prairie is a living, diverse ecosystem; with me creating directly in this place.

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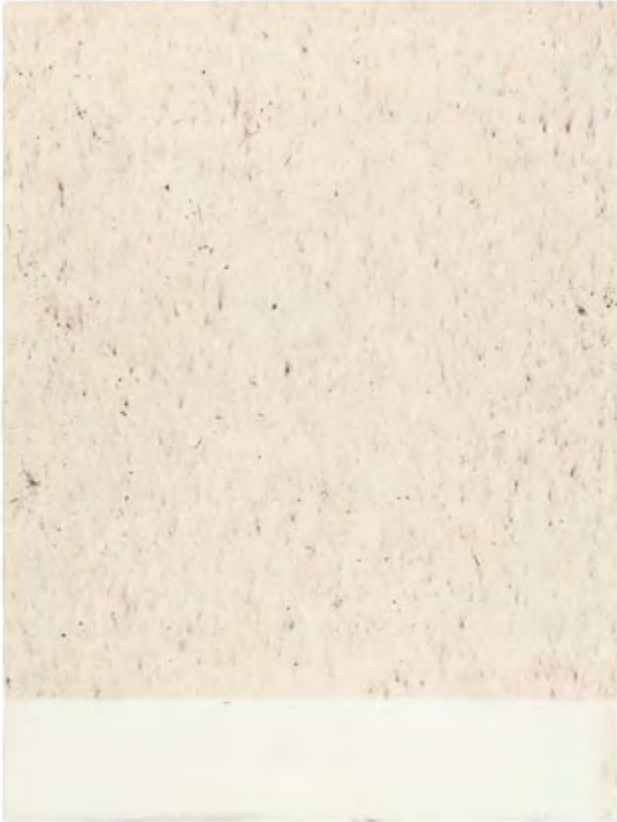




Transect 2018 342 SuB (#298 JPW) | 60x45 in









Transect 2018 342 K1B (#310 northward) | 60x45 in



Transect 2019 180 SpA+2B+SpB
(la Rocca Ripesena di Konza) | 60x45 in





Transect 2021 296 2C (autumn) | 60x45 in





Transect 2021 021 FA (graze II) | 60x45 in





Transect 2018 348 FA (#299 sundial) | 60×45 in



Transect 2019 005 SuB (southern point) | 60×45 in





Transect 2021 133 2C (remembering I) | 60x45 in





Transect 2021 129 2C (interior II) | 60x45 in





Transect 2019 105+123 2C (ERN) | 60x45 in



Transect 2018 349 SuB (#315 JPW) | 60x45 in









Dragging through the fire

Fire is primordial and eternal. It attracts us and burns us like moths but heats us and gives us life. The core of our planet burns, and the center of our solar system does, too. As the planet heats up, fires become more prominent and more dangerous, reminding us of our beholden existence to Gaia. Their remnants of ash and char point to something volcanic and ancient. These materials gave humans our first medium for drawing, seen throughout countless caves across Europe, Turkey, Western and Southeast Asia, Africa, and Australia – soot and spit mixed, among other earthy pigments, then drawn with fingers and sticks. The drawings expressed lives lived on the land and possibly triggered hallucinatory visions as moving images. We utilize fire but respect its boundaries; we harness it and at times lose control. The indigenous people knew it well, as poet Gary Snyder aimed to remind us:

Fire is an old story./I would like,/with a sense of helpful order,/with respect for laws/of nature,/to help my land /with a burn,/a hot clean / burn....And then/it would be more/like,/when it belonged to the Indians //Before.¹

We think of fire as being inside us, too – as driving us to move, to act, and to create. We connect to it in ceremonial and symbolic ways. Erin Wiersma, with *Konza Prairie*, brings her body to the land as an active matrix in an expanded field of drawing. She uses her self as a conduit for past and present time, as internal desire and external reality. As a body of work, it takes its name from, and

engages with, the Konza Prairie Biological Station, particularly the controlled burns there that investigate prairie regrowth or restoration. Sitting in the Flint Hills of northeast Kansas, the Konza Prairie Biological Station is part of the largest remaining expanse of tallgrass prairies in the world, stretching across 3,487 hectares of uncultivable hills. Shifts in landscape position and soils are revealed by the plants in this region; the balance of grasses and forbs (wildflowers) changes with topography and fire frequency, and the edges of benches are often marked by the woody plants, including the invasive sumac. The plant compositions differ based on whether the prairie is grazed by bison or not, creating differing experiences visually. During a prescribed burn, the fire moves along a sweeping demarcated yet jagged line that crawls along the ground, devouring the vegetation under billowing plumes of smoke. The winds of the land send signals up into the sky.

The fire line in the prairie does not become a border but a moveable site of regeneration and re-creation. One side consists of the current and past season's growth in light browns and greens; on the other is the blackened terrain. The line moves along changing the landscape, preparing it for a future of new growth, in real time. The blaze follows the contour of the land, slowing as it moves downhill and accelerating when it moves uphill, shifting according to the dynamism of this place and its elements (wind direction and speed). In this recently burned space, Wiersma drags large sheets of paper across the charred ground – a primeval landscape that some might confuse with a wasteland – etching and scraping the soot across the cotton paper, marking it and scarring it. The duration of dragging, her trajectory through the landscape, and the speed at which

1. G. Snyder, "Control Burn," *Turtle Island* (New York: New Directions, 1974), 19.

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she moves build up the surface of the paper with layers of bio-char that create dense yet subtle images for the eye to navigate and the mind to travel. Wiersma's own immersion in this place is a slow transection of material and immaterial fields and processes that promotes the attainment of an intimate knowledge of the place. The works vary in hues of brown and black, like early sepia-toned photographs or charcoal drawings, some more subtle than others. These colors are generated by the interactions of fire with plant composition, the amount of dead plant matter in a given burn, rainfall during a growing season and current precipitation, and the time at which Wiersma puts paper to ground. Thus, the works become both abstractions *and* representations, both of which are bound to the natural and man-made processes of the prairie. In *Transect 310 K1B (Northward)* (2018), lines appear vertically like meditative strokes that resemble individual grass stems and a snow-covered prairie. Her fleeting yet conscious movement across the land dictates the resulting image, which references her body and its interaction with the Earth's processes at particular times and places. This reflexivity in other works, such as *Transect 315 SUB (JPW)* (2018), appears speckled and hazy from edge to edge and reminds one of the aerial footage of the process itself while provoking a densely rendered cosmos. These drawings mark Wiersma's process and labor through their images and titles while denoting the prescribed burns and human interaction with nature; as such, they are a record of the land and its renewal through fire as matrices of a complexly nuanced and beautiful world.

Inherent to Wiersma's process are the fleeting nature of both temporality and labor. What binds them, and the meaning of her work, is walking (and running). To walk the line between the body, the land, and history, the artist must overcome obstructions to her movement, to be the impetus to spark the process from idea to object, from head to hand. This action requires her to drag the works through the burned fields and as such, they exist somewhere between drawing, photography, and printmaking. Traditionally, the painter or drawer sets the substrate or base material on a wall or easel, chooses their medium (graphite, charcoal, oil, acrylic, and so on), and puts it in hand, marking across the surface in movements of varying speed, pressure, and layering. The resulting artwork, then, is the result of the mind's decision, the extension of the body, and its impact onto a static surface. In Wiersma's case, this traditional process is subverted and made more immediate by the artist's giving agency to the land itself. Here, she engages her entire body in a radical act that allows the land itself to do the drawing itself² – the charred grass is put into direct contact with the cotton paper in movement, a partnership between the artist and the Earth.

2. *Industrialism and manufacturing provided artists an immediacy they had never had before. With the invention of tubes of paint, a variety of graphite and charcoal made readily available, they were no longer required to source their own materials, mix their own pigments or deal with the locations of these processes to make art; they only had to find a manufacturer they liked and go from there. This also placed yet another boundary between them and the land itself, the materials they used were packaged, clean, and of a utility cut off from the ecology of its homeland. Today, we experience this more intensely than ever before. Wiersma's process is then a return to the land and understanding of a particular place's ecology; it is not lost on many artists in the 21st century that their materials are tied to a cultural and environmental epoch that has caused so much harm and ultimately placed us, as a species, in a state of possible extinction. See the work of photographer and artist Matthew Brandt for another example.*

DRAGGING THROUGH THE FIRE

Like Mary Corse's *Black Earth series*,³ works molded directly from earth into large, glistening-black ceramic tiles that are then exhibited on the wall like a drawing or painting – Wiersma utilizes the land and the Konza as a specific site to realize the artwork's final form.

Labor is essential to this connection and puts her within the legacy of conceptual artists Agnes Denes and Mierle Laderman Ukeles. Denes is most known for her "environmental installations" such as *Wheatfield – A Confrontation Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan* (1982), a two-acre, fully harvestable wheat field cultivated in downtown Manhattan on a landfill.⁴ As a critical art installation, her gesture commented on the industrialization and capitalization of the modern environmental world, a direct counterpoint to Wall Street a short walk away. Ukeles, on the other hand, sought to draw a connection to the artist as an author of acts, particularly in utilitarian terms and according to stereotypes of gender and labor roles.⁵ Initiated by her *Manifesto For Maintenance Art 1969!* she began documenting the process of daily tasks like dusting or changing diapers. She recorded these acts photographically and displayed them serially. The photographs provided evidence of the artistic act, and eventually, she would turn these into large performances, such as washing the steps of the Wadsworth Atheneum, at times wielding a mop like a painter does a brush.

Wiersma's labor practice with the Konza Prairie series exercises this history of the artist as laborer and the artist's role in how a work is made. Her movement across the ashen terrain becomes a line in the landscape in which she is an agent for each strand of smoking grass, allowing them to make marks as the hand might. "*The primordial movement, the agent, is a point that sets itself in motion (genesis of form),*" wrote Paul Klee. "*A line comes into being. The most highly charged line is the most authentic line because it is the most active. In all these examples the principal and active line develops freely. It goes out for a walk, so to speak, aimlessly for the sake of a walk.*"⁶ Wiersma's walking through the land becomes a reflexive state whereby the land marks the paper by way of her gesture, her action. She is the dot that goes out for a walk.

3. M. Corse, *Untitled (Black Earth Series)*, 1978, WikiArt.org, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/mary-corse/untitled-black-earth-series-1978>.

4. K. Jacobs, "The Woman Who Harvested a Wheat Field Off Wall Street," *New York Times Style Magazine*, June 14, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/14/t-magazine/agnesdenes-art.html>.

5. J. Steinhauer, "How Mierle Laderman Ukeles Turned Maintenance Work into Art," *Hyperallergic.com*, February 10, 2017, <https://hyperallergic.com/355255/how-mierle-laderman-ukeles-turned-maintenance-work-into-art/>.

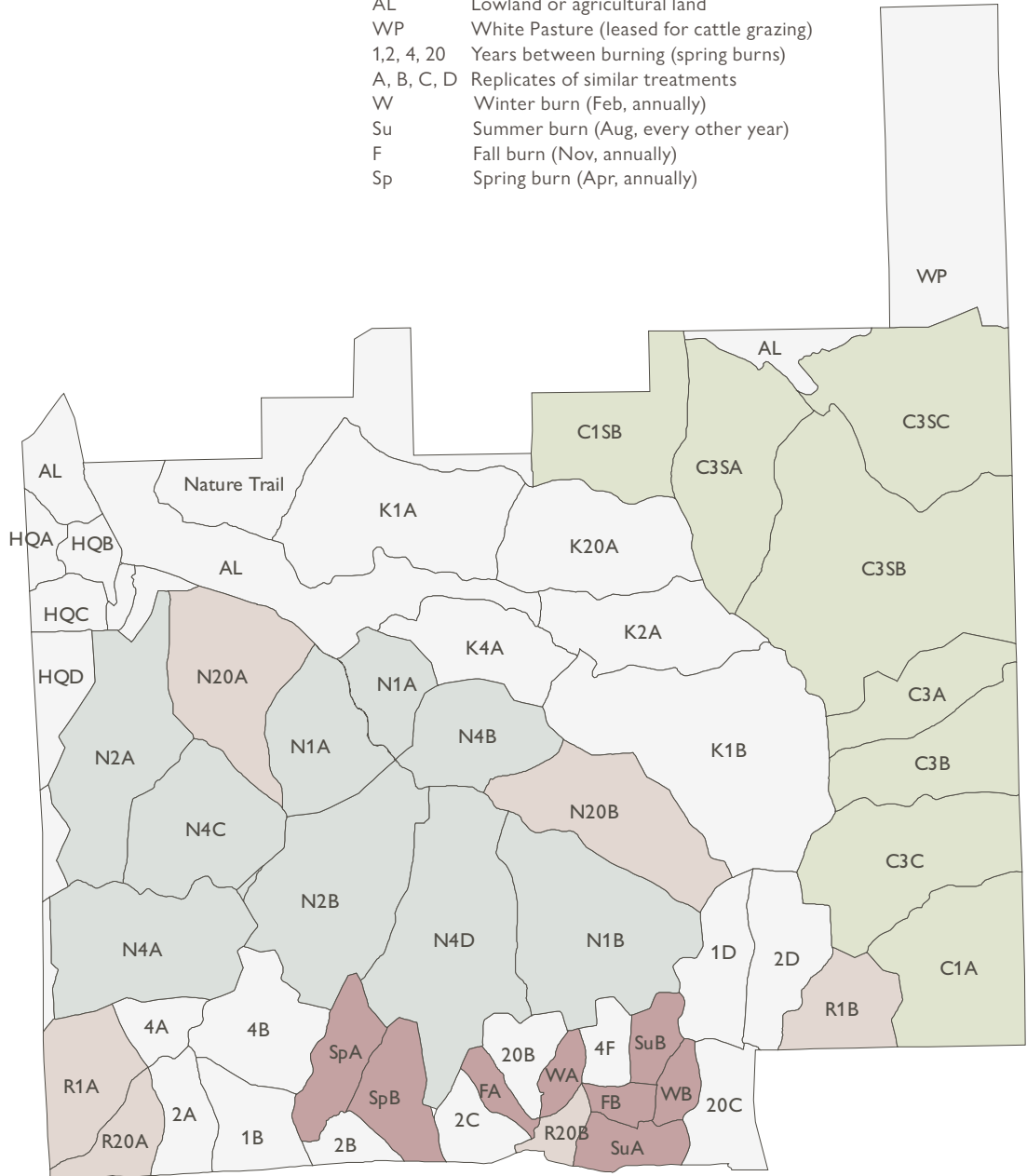
6. P. Klee, *Notebooks, Vol. 1: The Thinking Eye*, ed. by Jürg Spiller, trans. by Ralph Manheim (London: Lund Humphries, 1961), 105.



- Fire Reversals
- Seasonal Burns
- Grazed by Bison
- Grazed by Cattle

Research Treatments

- N Grazed by native herbivores (bison)
- K King's Creek north branch (ungrazed)
- C Grazed by cattle (May–October)
- HQ Headquarters area (experimental plots)
- AL Lowland or agricultural land
- WP White Pasture (leased for cattle grazing)
- 1, 2, 4, 20 Years between burning (spring burns)
- A, B, C, D Replicates of similar treatments
- W Winter burn (Feb, annually)
- Su Summer burn (Aug, every other year)
- F Fall burn (Nov, annually)
- Sp Spring burn (Apr, annually)



DRAGGING THROUGH THE FIRE

Each work marks a specific duration of time and so becomes something like a photograph, too. Like light, here the natural process – of fire converting into bio-char – results in an image on paper that recalls its source: the Konza Prairie. The works then become evidence of the burning that took place and of Wiersma's tract through the land. Photographs, or "light writings," build an image over a duration of light and the reaction of sensitized material. The image is an index of the thing it recorded, like smoke to a fire. Wiersma's drawings also display markings scratched into the paper not unlike prints resulting from etchings into copper in printmaking techniques. The limestone soils of the Flint Hills further this connection to printmaking through lithographs, or "stone writings," which require a large lithographic limestone, along with the incongruous relationship of oil-based ink and water, to transfer an image from the plate to a sheet of paper. The bio-char, only existing from the prescribed burn, needs a matrix (the artist) to transfer its medium to a substrate. I think of these works by Wiersma then as *Fotiágraphs*, if we're to use the Greek language as per custom – they are not light writings, not stone writings, but, under the expansive umbrella of drawing, are "fire writings" – works born out of an ancient yet very present activity.

With *Konza Prairie*, Wiersma gives the land agency, and her process becomes a method of expressing its ecology as well as the act of creation. The historically incorrect idea that the environment is a stage for human drama, that it is only for human fulfillment or entertainment, is thus rendered false. Instead, her drawings become works that mark duration, change, creation, and destruction – all essential processes of the Earth

and life. They point to the long and changing relationship of humans to their specific locations, their rooted place. The drawings demonstrate the artist's slow discovery of the immensely diverse prairie in which these works were made. The humility of laboring for the land and for the particular site that is the Konza Prairie becomes an extension of the site and, as she writes, is a testament to her "body's capacity to absorb and respond to the environment." Her body becomes our body. This dialogue between body and land reminds the viewers of that ancient and unbreakable bond we share with the Earth, and our ultimate reliance on its sustainability. In the words of Rebecca Solnit, each work expresses "the rich potential relations between thinking and the body; the way one person's act can be an invitation to another's imagination; the way every gesture can be imagined as a brief and invisible sculpture; the way walking reshapes the world by mapping it, treading paths into it, encountering it; the way each act reflects and reinvents the culture in which it takes place."⁷ The recollection of ritual as part of her experience is embedded in the process, and so into the works themselves: her sensing of a peregrine falcon, traversing the ancient cattle paths, or her own unique ritual of dragging through the fire.

The images as an index of the process are then conduits between body and land, idea and image, and connect to the primordial existence of fire,

7. R. Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 276.

the ancient peoples in the cave painters and the Kaw, or “the people of the south wind,” who once inhabited that region. A charge exists that aims to conjure imaginative awareness, laborious process, ecological mindfulness, current issues in environmental effects, and wonder. After the death of Jackson Pollock, painter Allan Kaprow described the former’s “diaristic gesture” and breaking with tradition in his drip paintings: “Pollock’s near destruction of this tradition may well be a return to the point where art was more actively involved in ritual, magic, and life than we have known it in our recent past.”⁸ In a way, Wiersma reminds us that ritual can co-exist with science in meaningful ways that can reverse our degraded relationship with the terra we call home. Ritual, or magic, are tied to very real processes in the environment, connecting the human beyond cultivation and economy, beyond sustenance and exploitation, but in pure spirit and livelihood. Wiersma has compounded all of this into images that appear at first to be simple, but which are in fact as diverse and complicated as the lands she trekked across, if one looks long enough. The mind, the heart, and the blood become the engine that drives the fire inside us that moves us to action and with these *Fotiágraphs* are evidence akin to the soot on the walls of caves made thousands of years ago.

Colin Edgington is a visual artist and writer currently living and working in the greater New York area with his wife Jennifer and dog Jasper. He holds a BAFA in studio art from the University of New Mexico, and an MFA in studio art from the Mason Gross School of Arts, Rutgers University. His visual work has exhibited internationally and won the Iowa Review Photography Prize in 2012. He also holds an MFA in Art Criticism and Writing from the School of Visual Arts, NYC and has written for The Brooklyn Rail, MOMUS, Afterimage, among others and has written several essays for artists catalogue’s and books including a meta-fictional interview for Patrick Nagatani’s Buried Cars (Museum of New Mexico Press).

8. A. Kaprow, “The Legacy of Jackson Pollock,” ARTnews, October 1958, quoted in “From the Archives: Allan Kaprow on the Legacy of Jackson Pollock, in 1958,” ARTnews.com, February 9, 2018, <http://www.artnews.com/2018/02/09/archives-allan-kaprow-legacy-jackson-pollock-1958/>.





Erin Wiersma



- 1982 Born in Somerville, New Jersey US
Lives and works in Manhattan, Kansas
- 2009 University of Connecticut, M.F.A.
- 2004 Messiah College, B.A.
- 2003 Istituto San Lodovico, Orvieto, Italy

Solo Exhibitions

- 2022 After the Burn, Galerie Fenna Wehlau, München, Germany
- 2021 The Land Institute Prairie Festival Artist, Salina Art Center, Salina, KS
- 2019 Tracing Watersheds: Konza Prairie, Featuring Grassland Interview (voices) by Katie Kingery-Page, Salina Art Center, Salina, KS
- 2019 Wester: Works on Paper from the Konza Prairie, Culture Lab, Mid-America Art Alliance, Kansas City, MO
- 2018 Main Gallery at University of Central Missouri of Art & Design, Warrensburg, MO
- 2017 Robischon Gallery, Denver, CO
- 2017 Gestural Mapping, Hand-Rudy Gallery, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO
- 2015 Jacqueline B. Charno Gallery, Kansas City Artist Coalition, Kansas City, MO
- 2015 Mapping Chaos, Clayton Staples Gallery, Wichita State University, Wichita, KS
- 2015 Liminal Territories, Tony Hungerford Memorial Gallery, College of Southern Maryland – LaPlata, MD

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- 2014 The Theory of Line, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2014 Traced Time, Johnson Gallery, Jackson State University, Jackson, MS
- 2013 Rebecca Randall Bryan Art Gallery, Coastal Carolina University, Conway, SC
- 2012 Momentary Traces, Gallery at Three Rivers Community College, Norwich, CT
- 2012 Intervals of Time, University Gallery, Pittsburg State University – Pittsburg, KS
- 2010 One Week in November, Sarah A. Coyne Gallery, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY
- 2007 Redemption Form, Hampden Gallery, University of Massachusetts – Amherst, MA

Recent Group Exhibitions

- 2022 art KARLSRUHE 2022, Galerie Fenna Wehlau, Rheinstetten, Germany
- 2021 Earthly Observatory, School of the Art Institute of Chicago Galleries, Chicago, IL
- 2020 Art and Nature I, Galerie Fenna Wehlau, München, Germany
- 2020 All Terrain, Spartanburg Museum of Art, Spartanburg, SC
- 2020 art KARLSRUHE 2020, Galerie Fenna Wehlau, Rheinstetten, Germany
- 2020 Prairie. River | Lisa Grossman and Erin Wiersma, The Volland Store, Alma, KS
- 2019 Catch the Shadow: International Contemporary Drawing, Bo-ai Gallery, National Dr. Sun Yat-sen Memorial Hall, Taipei, Taiwan
- 2019 Material Differences, Birke Art Gallery of Marshall University, Huntington, WV
- 2019 Paper Positions, Galerie Fenna Wehlau, Berlin, Germany
- 2019 Line | Poetry, Galerie Fenna Wehlau, München, Germany
- 2019 Rocket Summer – Temperature Curatorial Project Series, Neon Heater, Findlay, OH
- 2018 Here and Now, Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Manhattan, KS
- 2018 Marking Presence, McMahon Gallery, Dairy Arts Center, Boulder, CO
- 2017 Natural Instincts, The Jewish Art Salon hosted by the Charter Oak Cultural Center Hartford, CT
- 2017 100 Works on Paper Benefit, Kentler International Drawing Space, Brooklyn, NY
- 2017 Gathering Differences, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2017 Infrastructure: Land, Mind, Country, AICAD Seminar Gallery, New York Artist Residency Program, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 With/drawn: Nancy Morrow & Erin Wiersma, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 New Art in Old House, Governors Island, NY
- 2016 Wish You Were Here, Interstate Projects, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 In the Secret Garden, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
- 2015 Line & Space, Martin Museum of Art, Baylor University, Waco, TX
- 2015 Summer National Juried Exhibition, Marin Museum of Contemporary Art, Novato, CA
- 2015 Transformed Viewpoints, A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

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Publications: Blogs | Exhibitions in Print

- 2021 Kerry Cardoza, "Ways of Knowing: A Review of Earthly Observatory at SAIC Galleries," Newcity Art, Chicago, IL
- 2021 Mána H. Taylor, "Our Earth Bodies, Ourselves 'Earthly Observatory' Examines the Ways in Which Humans See the Rest of the World," Chicago Reader, Chicago, IL
- 2020 Timothy A. Schuler, "On-Ramps, On Time," Landscape Architecture Magazine, May 2020 Issue, Washington, DC
- 2019 Colin Edgington, "Stories From the Fire on Tracing Watershed | Konza Prairie, featuring Grassland Interview (voices)," Salina Arts Center, Salina, KS
- 2019 Colin Edgington, "Dragging Through Fire: On Erin Wiersma's Konza Prairie," Minding Nature Journal, The Center for Humans & Nature, Fall Issue, Chicago, IL
- 2018 Jennifer J Rhodes, "After the Burn – Making Art Out of Grassland Fires," LTER Stories
- 2017 Sharon Butler, "Two Coats Resident Artist Erin Wiersma Returns From Kansas," Two Coats of Paint, Brooklyn, NY
- 2017 Sarah Handcock, "Drawing in Place," Seek Magazine. Vol. 7: Issue 2, Manhattan, KS
- 2017 Sharon Butler, "Infrastructure at Seminar in DUMBO," Two Coats of Paint, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 INDA 10, Manifest Gallery and Drawing Center, Cincinnati, OH
- 2015 Sharon Butler, "Quick study: Art Bus, Rauschenberg as Bad Parent, Sexism in Arts Writing, Abelow, Two Coats Residency, Stanley Whitney, Stella Retrospective, More," Two Coats of Paint, Brooklyn, NY
- 2015 Jacquelyn Gleisner, "Still Points in Erin Wiersma's Drawings." Art21 Online Magazine – Sincerity Issue, New York, NY
- 2015 Sharon Butler, "Two Coats of Paint Artist Residency Program kicks off This Week," Two Coats of Paint, Brooklyn, NY
- 2014 Danielle Fallon, "Lines and Layers: Erin Wiersma's 'The Theory of Line,'" On-Verge, CUE Foundation, New York, NY
- 2014 Sharon Butler, "Erin Wiersma: What's Left of Our Lives," Two Coats of Paint, Brooklyn, NY
- 2014 Marsha Levin-Rojer, "Erin Wiersma: Dynamic Exploration," A.I.R. Gallery, Brooklyn, NY

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Grants, Residencies & Invitations

- 2022–2023 Digital Projects for the Public: Discovery Grants, "The Ellis Trail to Nicodemus: Revealing Stories in the Landscape of Black Westward Settlement," led by La Barbara James Wigfall with Angela Bates, Erin Wiersma, Katie Kingery-Page, Kristin Epps, and Robert Alexander, National Endowment for the Humanities, Washington, DC
- 2022 Annual Prairie Festival Artist, The Land Institute, Salina, KS
- 2021 The Drawing Center, Viewing Program 20/21 Artist, New York, NY
- 2021 "Material Thinking: Earthly Observatory, Panel Discussion with Curators Giovanni Aloï and Andrew S. Yang with Artists Rena Detrixhe, Erin Wiersma, and Nandipha Mtambo," School of the Art Institute of Chicago Galleries, Chicago, IL
- 2021 Visiting Artist Series Panel Moderated by David Ouellette, Cleve Carne Museum of Art and College of DuPage, Glen Ellyn, IL
- 2021 "Contemporary Art and the Prairie: Julie Farstad, Keli Mashburn, and Erin Wiersma," Kansas City Artist Institute and Missouri Prairie Foundation, Columbia, MO
- 2020 Commission for the University of Kansas School of Medicine and School of Nursing, Salina, KS
- 2019 Visiting Artist Lecture, 11th Annual Drawing Discourse, University of North Carolina Asheville, Asheville, NC
- 2019 University Small Research Grant, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS
- 2019 AIP Grant, "Grassland Interviews," Co-Principal: Katie Kingery-Page, Kansas Creative Arts Industries Commission and the National Endowment for the Arts, Topeka, KS
- 2019 Engagement Incentive Grant, Co-Principal: Katie Kingery-Page, Center for Engagement and Community Development, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS
- 2018 University Small Research Grant, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS
- 2017 Two Coats of Paint Residency, Brooklyn, NY
- 2016 University Small Research Grant, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS
- 2015 Two Coats of Paint Residency, Brooklyn, NY
- 2015 Draw International Residency, Caylus, France





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<https://kpbs.konza.k-state.edu/index.html>

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