

“An exploration of how positive and negative connotations can be derived from the symbolic use of fire”

Fire is the phenomenon of combustion manifested in light, flame, and heat. It is also one of the four natural elements along with air, water and Earth. Fire is a symbolic reference to many concepts for people of different cultures. It is recognised as a purifier, a destroyer and as the generative power of life, energy and change. It is quite fascinating how one element can be associated with such contradictory ideas. I wish to explore this range of positive and negative connotations attached, and how artists have used fire to symbolise different human emotions.

Wolfgang Stiller is a German installation artist who is inspired by Gothic art and uses the element of shock in his sculptures to capture horrific situations. In his ‘Matchstickmen’ series, Stiller assembles several extinguished mounted heads to symbolise the aftermath of an event. While living in Beijing, Stiller acquired head moulds and various large pieces of wood. After experimenting with the different components the artist struck on an idea to create several large-scale burnt matches, where the charred remains of each tip appeared as the face of a human. The Matchstickmen series was displayed at Python Gallery in Zurich in Spring 2013 as part of the show ‘Burntout’¹.



Figure 1A - Matchstickmen series

Stiller uses real wood and charcoal in this installation in order to create an authentic model. This is significant because using genuine materials adds to the sense of realism portrayed in the piece, through the colour, textures and shape. The unmistakable resemblance of the figure to a matchstick is central to conveying the message of it.

The sticks lie in different orientations around the exhibition hall, some balanced against the wall in rows, some lying randomly on top of each other on the floor, and some in giant matchboxes. With reference to the composition, the artist states “*the installation can appear like a battlefield or just like some playground where someone played around with matches and dropped them.*” While Stiller leaves the meaning of the artwork open for interpretation, the pieces exist in a surprisingly strange state between morbid and humorous. At a distance each match seems almost laughable in its appearance like a toy bobblehead, but up close the somber, lifeless faces often resting in coffin-like matchboxes are quite



Figure 2 - Matchstickmen series

¹ Matchstickmen by Wolfgang Stiller - <https://www.thisiscolossal.com/2013/03/matchstickmen-burnt-matches-resembling-charred-human-heads-by-wolfgang-stiller/>

disconcerting². If it weren't for the frown, and the wrinkle textures that are formed on their foreheads, one would think them dead. The exhausted and sorrowful countenance of these men, who are lying around the room with their eyes closed, builds up the sinister atmosphere in the room that grows as one spends longer taking in the careful details of the installation.

The title of the piece, 'Burntout' contains its own connotations. According to the Urban Dictionary, the term is determined as a "*state of physical and/or mental exhaustion*". The artist has captured the distressed facial expressions of the subject, reflecting this extreme pain. However, it seems that the composition of an isolated head without a body could suggest that the pain is not physical. The head creates an enhanced focal point on the extreme facial feature, which could emphasise the disconsolate and hopeless state of emotional burning out and exhaustion, rather than a physical battle.

Building upon the idea of a mental struggle, in official psychological terms, "*burnout is defined as a state of chronic stress and frustration that leads to:*

- *feelings of cynicism and detachment; and*
- *a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment.*"



Figure 1B - Matchstickmen series

Parallels are often drawn between the build up of an anxiety attack and the process of burning because they are both "*sudden, catastrophic and difficult to manage*". Therefore the artist has captured the essence of the term in his installation as the lack of limbs and closed eyes emphasise the figures' incapability to fight back or alter their situation, as though they are trapped in their own mental struggles and are "*frustrated by the perpetuity of it*". Being symbolically stripped of basic senses like touch and sight makes them significantly more vulnerable and inadequate. The artist's use of material perhaps encourages this element of vulnerability, as the neck of the figures are suggestively ashy and powder-like. With some of them inclining slightly from their wooden base, it almost feels like they are on the verge of collapsing.

This state of mental instability is also metaphorically referred to as being "*trapped in the dark*" which seems to juxtapose the idea of 'burning'. However the metaphor is used because when bright burning flames are extinguished, they result in a darkness that encompasses the space. Similar to the aftermath of a sudden, uncontrollable panic attack, when "*one is stuck among dark and sometimes detrimental thoughts*". Stiller captures this juxtaposition through his use of colour.

As seen in Figure 3, the heads have a uniform black colour to them, which is the first thing one notices when looking at the charred faces. However they end in bright orange and yellow hues when meeting the untouched wood. This



Figure 3 - Matchstickmen series

² Wolfgang Stiller's Matchstickmen - <https://mymodernmet.com/wolfgang-stiller-matchstick-men/>

not only creates a contrast in colour but also in tone and focal point. With the black as the dark colour, and the background and wood as mid-tones, the highly saturated yellow and orange form the highlights of the photograph and create tonal balance³. Based on the rule of thirds in photography⁴, the colour also lies along the bottom third division of the image, which makes it significantly more noticeable in this image than in Figure 1.

Stiller has included the suggestion of the now blown out fire in his matchsticks, to perhaps create a narrative or timeline⁵. He shows the transition of the wood into flames, and then the darkness that proceeds it. It is also notable that the height of each section is relative to the duration of the phases. The short burst of colour shows the quick ignition of emotion, while the remarkably long ashy neck could possibly be the more permanent pain that it leaves behind. Alternatively, the idea of matchsticks themselves could be cleverly interpreted as the limited time each person has before they completely burn out.

Vocabulary such as 'darkness, sorrow, hopelessness and pain' used to describe the sculpture carry a heavy weight to them, and are often associated with Gothic literature⁶ which, as mentioned earlier, Stiller has a profound interest for. This genre emerged as one of the eeriest forms of Dark Romanticism, and is characterised by "*expressions of terror, gruesome narratives and dark, picturesque scenery*". Traces of these are all visible in the Matchstickmen, however instead of impassioned language, the artist has used visual



Figure 4 - Matchstickmen series

communication to convey the panic and terror inherent in the characters. Where Gothic writers "*use melodrama or high emotion to convey a thought*", Stiller has used emotive imagery such as in the countenance of the men. Another defining element of Gothic literature is mystery and ambiguity⁷. Stiller utilises this technique in his own way through the indistinguishable series of heads that he has created which leave the viewer thinking 'Who are these men?', 'What happened to them?', 'Who did this to them?', 'Are they even alive anymore?' ... The lack of identity portrayed through their nameless coffins and closed eyes hyperbolises the catastrophe of the fire as it seems to have taken their humanity along with it and left nothing but the suggestion of a human behind. In structural terms, Stiller seems to have also been impacted by Gothic architecture and sculpture, evident in his elongated figures (specially in the neck) and hyper-realism evident in the facial features.⁸

³ Bae, S. Paris, S. Durand, F. (2006). *Tone Management for Photography* [online]. Boston, Massachusetts: Boston University Press. ISBN: 1-59593-364-6. Pages 637-645

⁴ Meech, S. (2007). *Contemporary Quilts: Design, Surface and Stitch*. Sterling Publishing. ISBN 0-7134-8987-1

⁵ Artist Wolfgang Stiller's "Matchstickmen" Are Hauntingly Captivating - <https://www.contemporist.com/artist-wolfgang-stillers-matchstickmen-are-hauntingly-captivating/>

⁶ Gothic Art - <https://www.britannica.com/art/Gothic-art>

⁷ Elements of the Gothic Novel - <https://www.virtualsalt.com/gothic.htm>

⁸ Gothic Art - <http://www.visual-arts-cork.com/history-of-art/gothic.htm>

Stiller has portrayed fire as a source of destruction, and while the fire is not present at the scene, it is the remains of it that show the extent of its destructive nature. On the other hand, Leonid Afremov paints a very different image revolving around fire, which in many ways contradict Stiller's interpretation.

Leonid Afremov is a Russian-Israeli modern impressionist painter who works mainly with a palette knife and oils. Struggling with his individuality and artistic freedom in the earlier years of his career, Afremov has now managed to create his own style based on inspiration from another notable impressionist artist, Van Gogh⁹.

Although he experimented with different techniques throughout his life, Afremov "*fell in love with painting with oil and palette-knife,*" as it gave him the freedom to build colours and textures without losing the richness and luminosity of each colour. This gave way to the dazzling atmosphere of his paintings and allowed him to manipulate and control the effect of light in his work. Referred to as 'impasto', this is a common technique among impressionist painters, and is characterised by the thick application of paint, with a visible paint-stroke finish. The subject matter is painted with a series of shorter strokes, eliminating distinctive lines, thereby reflecting human perception, rather than an extremely precise depiction of reality¹⁰. Therefore Afremov not only paints a scene, but more so captures a feeling of enthusiasm along with it, represented in vibrant colours¹¹.

In his 'The Dance of Love' painting, Afremov has portrayed the suggestion of an airborne female figure as though mid-jump, with her hands and feet kicking back in full force. "*You can see a naked danseuse performing a difficult and passionate move. Her body is very expressive and light as though she is trying to fly like a bird.*" Her posture resembles energy and invigoration, both positive characteristics associated with fire itself.

The fiery colours that encompass her are primary and secondary pigments in their pure form, that resonate well with her exhilarating pose. As though "*her limbs are scattering the variegated mosaic of colourful splashes around her hovering body in excitement*". There is a wide tonal range in the background, however each colour is neutralised with its complimentary counterpart, which creates a balance that is calming to the eyes, evoking comfort and delight¹². The figure is enwrapped in a fierce array of colours. The energy released by the composition, and the direction of the mark-making has many visual resemblances to that of a fire. The fiery brush strokes release positive



Figure 5A - The Dance of Love

⁹ Afremov, D. (2017). Leonid Afremov - The Artist. ASIN: B07PCHDWF9 <https://www.amazon.com/Leonid-Afremov-ARTIST-Dmitry-ebook/dp/B07PCHDWF9>

¹⁰ Impasto Techniques - <https://impressionisttech.wordpress.com/the-technique/>

¹¹ The Fusion Of Colors In Leonid Afremov's Nostalgic Oil Paintings - https://www.boredpanda.com/colourful-oil-paintings-leonid-afremov/?utm_source=google&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=organic

¹² Computer analysis of Van Gogh's complementary colours - <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0167865506002078>

connotations as the warm colours appear to bring life to the image, as though rejuvenating the her.

The dancer's body forms an implied diagonal line which starts from the tips of her finger to her toes in the bottom left corner. This line leads to the focal point of the painting, which is the dancer herself¹³. As mentioned, the fiery colours neutralise each other in the viewer's mind, and so the dancer is left as the centre of attention. Dmitry Afremov says about his father's composition "*If he is painting a human figure, he completely concentrates on it*". The harmony of curves and straight lines in the piece create an organic and dynamic posture. As though it wasn't choreographed and is an authentic expression of the dancer's 'love'. "*The dance on this painting is more metaphysical than a real dance. She embodies the sensation of anyone at the moment of falling in love.*" [also 20] The spontaneity of the move bears a pleasant resemblance to fire, in that they are both natural beauties, inspired by vehemence.



Figure 5B - The Dance of Love

Afremov has captured an instantaneous high degree of emotion, yet there is a tranquility within the composition, one cannot help but cherish. In a 2004 article, Afremov's paintings were declared "*relaxing and calming by a group of notable psychologists and psychiatrists who made use of his paintings in therapy procedures*". This oxymoron perhaps takes shape due to the nature of the fire symbolised in the piece. A study has been carried out which demonstrates that the relaxation response that humans have to fire is in fact an evolutionary adaptation¹⁴. The ever unique motion of the fire flickers, the crackling sounds, warmth and distinctive smell provoke sensory neurones in the whole body, as though awakening it and breathing life into it. Perhaps this is the concept Afremov is suggesting through his masterpiece. The 'love' he has emphasised could possibly be the strong and affectionate bond that we hold with the Earth and its elements. This hypothesis would also correspond with the bare skin of the dancer, as Afremov doesn't seem to have wanted any barriers or restraints between the figure and the flames that hug her. The artist also notably blends the boundary of the woman's body with the colours in some places to perhaps propose that they are inseparable¹⁵. The warm tones that seep through her fingers and toes suggest that the energy is limitless and absorbed



Figure 5C - The Dance of Love

¹³ The Visual Language: The Elements of Art - <https://resources.saylor.org/wwwresources/archived/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Module-3.pdf>

¹⁴ Why Fire is Relaxing? <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/seriouslyscience/2014/11/13/evolutionary-explanation-sitting-fire-relaxing/#.XLzgAhMzaog>

¹⁵ Leonid Afremov: Artistic Philosophy - https://afremov.com/Leonid-Afremov-bio.html#Artistic_philosophy

by the figure.

At first sight, Stiller's *Matchstickmen* and Afremov's *Dance of Love* seem to hold contrasting connotations in relation to fire. Where one is a celebration of life, the other is mourning the exhaustion of life altogether. This is evident in the artists' reference to colours of the fire. Afremov uses a harmony of warm tones to create an image that brings warmth and comfort to the viewer, while Stiller strips back the colours to black in order to create an aura of distress.

Furthermore, where one uses the subject matter's limbs to portray her boundless freedom, the other is deprived of limbs all-together. Therefore each artist's portrayal of the human form through body language (or lack of it) is also a key juxtaposition. Afremov paints an amiable and refreshing picture of a girl bursting with love, surrounded by the fire that feeds her passion, but Stiller portrays miserable expressions of dark, ashy faces on sticks. He creates an optical-illusion that is skilfully designed to mess with the mind.

Their use of media also forms alternative interpretations of fire. Afremov's impressionist painting technique portrays a sense of fluidity and captures the dynamic essence of the fire through directed brushstrokes. Through seeking to capture an emotion (rather than a visual reality), Afremov's paintings seem as though from a dream. This is emphasised by the heroic posture of the subject and the heavenly glow built around her graceful move. While Stiller's three-dimensional men, with uncomfortably realistic features don't seem from a nightmare, but rather a dark reality. Being in the form of an installation, the viewer is forced to recognise the faces and interact with them as they walk around the scene, viewing each head through different perspectives as though they are real people lying around the room. While Afremov shows one romanticised snapshot, where the viewer can close their eyes and envision themselves dancing to the rhythm in their imagination.

"Fire consumes, warms, and illuminates, but can also bring pain and death; thus, its symbolic meaning varies wildly, depending upon the context of its use". Despite the contradiction on the surface, both artists have used fire as a metaphor for the intensity of human emotion. Fire and emotions are both multifaceted phenomena that are subjective and ever-changing. They are fundamental to our lives, but can also be the cause of our downfall¹⁶. The fine line between the positive and negative effects of human emotions is what makes our lives dynamic, they seize our attention by magnifying aspects of our atmosphere, thus forcing us to see the world through different lenses¹⁷. Therefore Afremov and Stiller have both been successful at capturing the juxtaposing nature of human psychology through their personal interpretations of fire.

In my personal investigation, I wanted to explore the Persian New Year celebration of Nowruz, which revolves around the idea of natural elements and our bond with them. Delving into the symbolism of these natural elements I learned about the high esteem Persians have for fire - the most superior element. Symbolisms of fire in the Persian culture are derived from an old Persian religion called Zoroastrianism. *"Fire is considered a medium through which spiritual insight and wisdom is gained, it therefore brings enlightenment and happiness through it's vigour and warmth"* [29]. Hence it no doubt bears positive

¹⁶ Nature of Emotions - <https://explorable.com/nature-of-emotions>

¹⁷ Sense and Understand the Thin Line Between Feelings and Emotions - <https://psychologenie.com/feelings-vs-emotions>

implications, which I try to portray in the countenance of the figure. I have learned from studying Stiller's work what a strong tool the expression of the face can be in conveying an emotion visually. However I chose to capture a tranquility through the face, that juxtaposes the energetic jump of my figure - creating the same harmony evident in Afremov's painting.

Based on the symbolism of fire in the Persian culture, I was inspired by the way Afremov has portrayed the fire as a source of life and rejuvenation for the figure. Carrying out a second shoot capturing a jumping figure, I went on to explore different layering and exposure techniques to match the posture of my model to the unique flickers of the fire. Drawing parallels between the two, my intention was to not only capture the bond between them that is honoured, but to also convey the concept of the Persian fire ritual of Charshanbeh Suri. This is a prelude to Nowruz where bonfires are lit, and people jump over these fires. This interaction is believed to exchange their sickly pallors and weakness, for the brilliance and exuberance of the fire. In conclusion, I used the work of both artists to inform my final piece. I used the three dimensional aspect of Stiller's work to create more depth and interaction between the viewer and the piece, giving them more to visually explore. However in terms of composition and concept, my work resembles Afremov's Dance of Love more. Inspired by him, I use a direction of movement to portray the burst of life that is celebrated in the Persian New Year.

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<i>"Burnout - A state of emotional and physical exhaustion caused by a prolonged period of stress and frustration"</i>		Urban Dictionary	2010	https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Burnout
<i>"burnout is defined as a state of chronic stress and frustration that leads to:</i> • <i>feelings of cynicism and detachment; and</i> • <i>a sense of ineffectiveness and lack of accomplishment."</i>	Sherrie Bourg Carter Psy.D	Psychology Today	2012	https://www.psychologytoday.com/intl/blog/high-octane-women/201205/where-do-you-fall-the-burnout-continuum
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When one is <i>"trapped in the dark"</i> , it is often difficult to fight these thoughts.	A.T Beck G. Emery & R. L. Greenberg	Anxiety disorders and phobias: A cognitive perspective	New York, NY, US: Basic Books	2005
<i>"One is stuck among dark and sometimes detrimental thoughts"</i>	A.T Beck G. Emery & R. L. Greenberg	Anxiety disorders and phobias: A cognitive perspective	New York, NY, US: Basic Books	2005
I tried different techniques during my career, but <i>"I especially fell in love with painting with oil and palette-knife."</i>	Dmitry Afremov	Leonid Afremov - The Artist	ASIN: B07PCHDWF9	2017
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