

ART

## Artistic Eruption

Diane Burko's paintings of volcanoes burst into Locks Gallery.

By Robin Rice

I'm not the first to remark that Diane Burko's recent paintings of volcanoes, currently at Locks Gallery, are more exciting in real oil on canvas than in print. I've heard at least three people comment on this phenomenon. It isn't merely a matter of scale, though some of Burko's paintings in this, her first solo show in five years, are well over 7 feet in one dimension. It's not entirely the application of pigment either. Burko is a direct painter, and her fluid brushwork is easily visible. Nevertheless, the marks of the brush, which vary from dabs of scarlet edged with yellow following trails of molten lava in *Halema'uma'u Crater #3*, to the white-hot impasto center in *Kilauea's Overflow, Hawaii #1*, to whorled plumes of steam where hot lava hits the water in *Palumi Pali #4*, do not call attention to themselves as, to take an obvious example, van Gogh's deeply furrowed brush strokes do.

Perhaps it's mostly something to do with color, which, though accurate in reproduction, is more subtle when seen in real life. For this series, which she plans to continue, Burko works hard to find colors that approximate the materials she is representing, "to equate," she says, "on a visceral level the feeling of contacting with that basalt and lava." She tackles dense, light-absorbing basalt, compacted or powdery layers of ash, serpentine igneous rivulets or a cooled friable silicon-rich crust that crunches into glassy shards underfoot ("like walking on toast"); as well as flat, blue, mirrorlike water, turbulent boiling waves and distant moss green hills. To represent some mineral-based surfaces, she sometimes adds an almost invisible bit of reflective metallic pigment.

Burko's interest in the specific character of surfaces seems to be heightened since the completion of her major 1998 mural project, *Wissahickon Reflections* for the Marriott Hotel. That panorama certainly takes account of the way materials respond to light. In fact, reflections in water occupy about half the surface of the paintings. Still, the *Wissahickon* walls are painterly paintings, a symphony of juicy brushwork that is as much about paint on canvas as it is about representation. "Watch me paint!" they say with appealing verve.

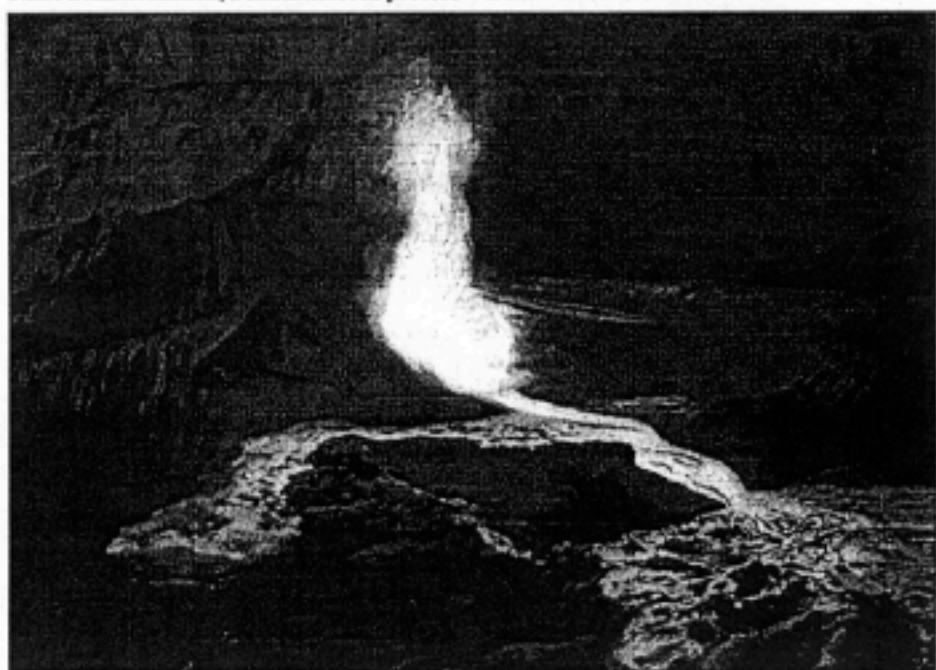
Burko's volcano paintings develop more of a dialogue between abstraction and representation, but, in addition, their intrinsic drama is intellectually distanced. On the one hand, they are obviously linked in subject and method to an earlier geological series Burko did in the 1970s in which she flew over the Grand Canyon in a small plane and

took photographs that she later translated into paint. But visually, they seem to be direct descendants of 19th-century landscapes by Romantic painters like Frederick Church and Albert Bierstadt, in which the artist acts as a witness to phenomena that are inaccessible to ordinary people. Traveling to the Andes (Church) or on a mapping mission to Yosemite (Bierstadt), the painter made sketches and notes and translated them into paintings on his return. Burko's process is similar, using photography — her own or sometimes images taken by volcano observatories — as her recording tool.

She has a similar sense of mission, too. She wants to share her geological knowledge and vision of the earth as an entity in constant transformation, a simultaneous process

She visited more volcanoes in Costa Rica and started studying the subject both from the geological and historical standpoint. The Internet provides information from volcano observatories all over the world. She reread John McPhee as well as Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*, and studied geological surveys and maps.

A 2000 Leeway Foundation Grant allowed Burko to travel in Hawaii. A dark painting, *Halema'uma'u Crater #3*, might depict a young planet before life has evolved. The vast, dusky sweep of stone curves sharply into shallow ridges, all streaked with ribbons of glowing lava bleeding through the earth's crust as pale steam drifts across a horizon lit not by sun or moon but by heat from within the earth itself.



Diane Burko, *Kilauea's Overflow, Hawaii #1* (2000), oil on canvas.

of destruction and creation. Her approach is Romantic in its respect for the scale and force of natural phenomena. It acknowledges awe, but dispassionately, without exaggeration. A volcano, she believes, "personifies the power of nature and the powerlessness of us — even with all our technology and Internet communication.

"The volcanoes I'm attracted to are user-friendly," Burko insists, but she acknowledges that even the most closely monitored ones are dangerous. "In Hawaii I walked on 40 feet of lava covering houses. It moves slowly, but you never really know. Think of Mount St. Helens; they were monitoring it like crazy, and then it was too late. When I was at Etna [a week before the recent eruption], everybody said, 'Be careful of the north flank,' but the eruptions came out of the south flank."

"I have to be stimulated by a landscape to paint it," she says. When she found volcanoes, she was looking for stimulation. After the *Wissahickon* murals, a major three-year project, she needed a change. A friend invited her on a trip to the Costa Rican rainforest. "The rainforest depressed me," she recalls. "The butterflies and monkeys were nice but not interesting." Then they visited the Arenal volcano observatory. She watched the volcano for a whole day and was hooked.

Another grant allowed Burko to rent a helicopter to fly over volcanoes in Italy. Yellows dominate much of *Volcano from the Air*. Clouds of vapor rise from several points on the island while an irregular crater yawns cavelike in the foreground. In the distance, the delicately painted rocky coast and sea have a hazy, strangely primeval quality.

From the same trip, *Stromboli from the Air #2* is one of the most effective works in show with its sweep of cool gray-green mountains behind the dynamic foreground action. Burko also took a ferry to Stromboli and climbed it. At the crest, she says, "You

can look into three or four active craters, which produce minor eruptions every eight or 10 minutes. You wear a hardhat to protect you if a little lava bomb hits."

One might expect Burko's smaller studies to be about "lava bombs," loose and expressive, but they are diagramlike compared to the finished paintings, which combine the formalism of linear lava flows with effective atmospheric and spatial effects. Iceland, a volcanic country famous for its clear light and treeless horizons, is the next territory on this artist's list. Volcano lovers and fans of landscape painting, brace yourselves (but see the Locks show first).

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**DIANE BURKO: THE VOLCANO SERIES**  
Through Oct. 6, Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, 215-629-1000