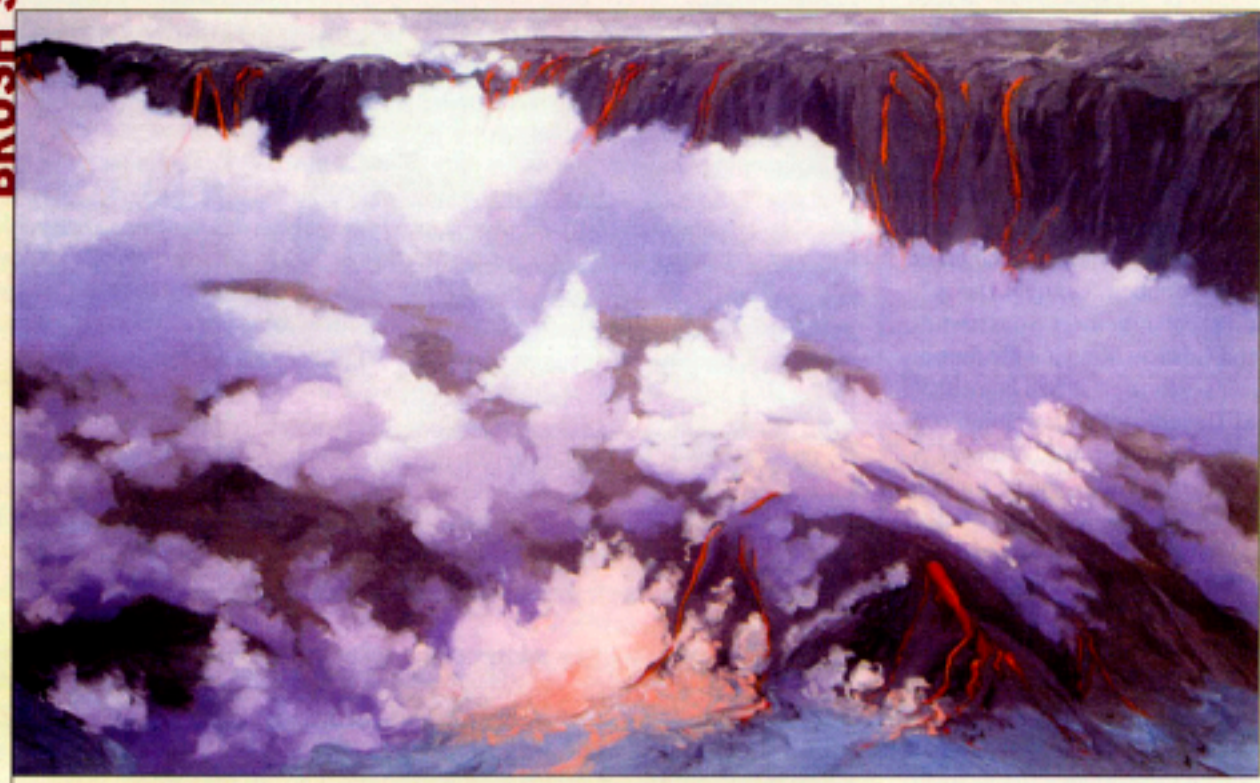


The Fire Within

Molten lava erupting from the earth's core creates new land and inspires new art.



"Palami Pali #2" by Diane Burko. Oil on canvas, measures 60x96 inches.

By
Martha
Ledger

The helicopter, a silvery 4-seater with a toylike cuteness, lifted off from a narrow asphalt yard outside a hangar in Hilo, Hawaii. The pilot, David Okita, had removed all four doors so that Diane Burko, a landscape painter from Philadelphia, who had hired the flight, could photograph more easily. Burko and her Nikon sat up front with Okita. I, with Burko's second Nikon, sat in the back seat with Jenda Johnson, a local videographer whose specialty is volcanic activity and whose husband, David Sherrod, is the chief geologist at the National Volcano Observatory (NVO) on Hawaii.

It was an Oh-my-God! kind of flight—for me, anyway. We all wore headphones and mikes because the rush of air outside the copter—Okita warned it was hurricane force—made it impossible to hear one another. But more unnerving was the realization that there was nothing between us and the ground except an airline-type seatbelt, the kind that releases so easily when you lift the buckle. More

than once, I imagined falling from the plane, feeling the wash of air, knowing split-second that this was IT. Through my headphones, I could hear Burko's excitement: "Wow!" "Fantastic!" "Look, look! Over there!"

Trees and shacks sped by us. The planted fields below were yellow-green, achingly beautiful, in the late afternoon light. Then, suddenly, the ground beneath us was black and shiny and barren—not just here and there or in one blighted place, either. We were flying over lava fields, and the ground was barren everywhere, for as far as we could see.

We soon homed in on a massive steaming cone. Click. Click. Click. Called Pu'u 'O'o, it is an eruption site connected by nature's underground plumbing to Kilauea, the mother volcano about 10 miles away. In 1983, lava from Pu'u 'O'o blasted 1,542 feet into the air, "sounding like a jet taking off," according to Sam Kahoohaulana, a ranger working in the Hawaii Volcanoes National Park at the time. Active almost

52 INSIDE • FALL 2001

BRUSH STROKES

actually 400 feet deep at the time] level-floored, and 10 miles in circumference! Here was a yawning pit upon whose floor the armies of Russia could camp, and have room to spare." After dark, he found the scene even more spellbinding. "Imagine it—imagine a coal-black sky shivered into a tangled network of angry fire!" He hiked into the crater where jets of spouting lava "fascinated the eye with . . . unapproachable splendor."

When Burko and I arrived at Kilauea, there were no visible fires. Even Halemaumau, a crater within Kilauea's caldera and home of the goddess Pele, had a solid floor and only scars of past eruptions. In the chill air of dawn, however, steam from cracks in the earth's surface could be seen all around the crater.

Burko came to Kilauea with cameras, not brushes. Her paintings begin with photographs. She shoots slides which she then projects onto canvas to lay out the structural elements of her paintings. Her paintings, even the most dramatic, start with an actual landscape. She had two weeks to make her own photographs or find usable slides archived at the NVO.

She has worked in this manner for three decades, painting landscapes from the Delaware Water Gap to the Grand Canyon to the northern coast of France. Her paintings have earned her 18 solo exhibitions; a presence in more than 25 group shows; two National Endowment for the Arts fellowships; two residence fellowships abroad; a Public Art commission (1,500 square feet of her canvases hang in the rotunda of the Marriot Hotel at 12th and Market streets in Philadelphia); and most recently a Leeway Foundation grant that is financing her travel to volcanoes.

Kilauea wasn't her first volcano. In 1998, while searching for interesting landscapes, she visited Irazu, Poas and Arenal in Costa Rica. She was immediately hooked. "I liked the whole phenomenon: nature, beauty, power," she explains. She quickly planned a series of trips that took her first to Alaska's Valley of Ten Thousand Smokes and to the waters off the Kenai Peninsula. She made several paintings, but the colors and forms were not exactly what she wanted to paint.

Kilauea was more to her liking. It's approachable in a physical sense, even while almost unfathomable intellectually. Believers still hang flower leis at Halemaumau to pay homage to Pele. Others live right near the crater; Jenda Johnson lives virtually on its rim. We lodged in Volcano, a town only two miles away.

An always intense and upbeat person, Burko was enthralled by Kilauea. A stranger overhearing her in the visitor's center of the park asked if she was in love with volcanoes. An overstatement maybe, but describing her affinity as mere interest would miss the mark much more. She has read guidebooks, essays, fiction, scientific studies—anything related to volcanoes—and watched documentary videos until she knows them by heart.

Part of her response is intellectual: "I'm fascinated by the fact that this has been going on since the beginning of time." But there's also an emotional and sensual connection: "They're raw and visceral; you can't stop them from coming. They're the opposite of the [ordered] technological world we live in," she says.

They match her own intensity. Jane Takahashi, archivist at the NVO, was astonished when, after many phone calls, she met Burko. "I can't believe you're so short," Takahashi, who herself is short, exclaimed with some relief. "I pictured you six feet tall." Burko (who measures exactly 5 feet) is a dynamo—organized, focused, driven. She describes even photographing source material as a form of the hunt. "I get this rush," she confesses.

She's very clear, however, about the differences between photography and painting. "Photography is about being there. Photos are interesting to look at or to use as source information, but why would I want to realistically reproduce the eruption of 1959? I create my own moment."

She's selective about which photos she uses. Some scenes are "too flashy, like a woman with too much makeup. Some night photos of lava entering the sea are fantastic, but I would never want to make a painting from them," she explained. "If the landscape gets too dramatic, that's all that it is. Like fireworks. I'm looking for something that has potential, so I can take it and develop it into something.

I'm looking for lights against darks, warm to cool colors, edges of interest."

What this amounts to is a relatively normal landscape, or as matter-of-fact a scene as is possible with what Robert Louis Stevenson, a visitor to the Big Island in 1889, described as "debris from the workshop of some brutal sculptor." Any speck of color in such a landscape is riveting, and if the sun passing between clouds reveals a streak of green in an otherwise brown and grey crater wall, that could be the starting point of a Burko painting. Back in her studio, she will recall the emotions she felt in the landscape, and these will get heightened by the excitement she derives from the very act of applying colors, one against another. In the end, the painting will evolve into something dramatic, romantic and intensely felt.

As Clemens had long ago discovered, flowing lava is best seen at night. So, after two weeks of photographing long-dormant craters, cinder cones, steam vents and Maui's Haleakala—a crater large enough to envelop all of Manhattan—Burko arranged a hike on which she could see lava entering the ocean against a night sky. Paul Buklarévich, an educational administrator and an astroflowtographer (a word he himself coined to explain how he photographically combines astronomical and volcanic events) and his wife, Arlene, a nurse, were our guides. We set out in a 4WD over three miles of lava field, parked where the roughly bulldozed road ended, then hiked some more miles to Kamokuna, where lava flowing underground from Pu'u 'O'o was entering the sea. It was the same place we had photographed from the helicopter. Ranger Kahoohaulana liked the idea of the hike, despite its danger: "It's more personal when you're on the ground," he said.

We started walking an hour or so before sundown. Far off, we could see the vapor plume. But because we would hike back after dark, with only our flashlights and moonlight, we marked our direction with a compass.

Sharp-as-glass lava covered the entire landscape. It had crusted in some places in swirling folds and ripples, and else-

54 INSIDE • FALL 2001

continuously for the next 18 years (as of July 2001, there were 55 distinct eruptions), the flow from Pu'u 'O'o has blanketed much of the land between it and the sea, some 6 miles away. That afternoon, only vapors rose from the cone. Click. The lava was flowing, but it was underground.

Okita pointed a short distance away to a skylight, a place where the surface crust had collapsed and exposed the molten flow. We flew over it. Its lava was yellow and orange, thick, dimensional, roiling. Click. Click. We could feel its heat.

We flew toward the ocean. A plume of vapors in the distance marked the place where flowing lava entered the water, where land and sea met, where molten lava and cold ocean collided. Click.

When we reached the coast, everything was in turbulent motion: sea and foam; steam and gray-tinted vapors; oozing tongues of blackening matter; and, most spectacular of all, orange lines of viscous lava cascading down the sea's black overhanging cliffs. Click. Click. Click. Click. Okita—the only pilot allowed to land, or even dip below 500 feet, in the national park—flew around the vapor cloud and close to the orange ribbons of lava. The noise of the helicopter, of rushing air, of lava-water explosions, was deafening, even under the headphones. Click. Click. Click. Click. The entire ride—which cost Burko \$525—lasted an hour, but every minute of it was intense. We had shot about four rolls of film.

For the past three years, Burko has been painting volcanic landscapes. She came to Hawaii, also called the Big Island, to get source material for yet more paintings. It was a natural for her, because Kilauea is the world's most active volcano. Since 1983, when its current eruption started, approximately 40 square miles have been coated with lava that has fountained and pooled and overflowed the banks it created. Entire towns have been buried under as much as 40 feet of it.

For the Big Island, now is its time. Now began possibly a million years ago, when a rupture in the tectonic plate let molten rock escape through the earth's crust. The eruption occurred in separate

places, eventually creating a multi-mountain island the size of Connecticut. Among the island's five mountains is the earth's most massive, Mauna Loa. Directly to the north of the Big Island are seven other islands—including Oahu and Maui, more familiar to tourists—all created in the same way. Their volcanoes are unlikely to fire again and their land mass is eroding. To the south of the Big Island is Lo'ihi, still forming beneath the ocean's surface. Its time will come in another 100,000 years.

The Big Island is remarkably dense with all kinds of extravagant foliage and, where lava has flowed, woefully barren. It climbs from beaches at sea level to Mauna Kea's snow-capped peak at 13,796 feet, in the snow-ranged through 21 of the earth's 23 climate zones. On Mauna Kea, the earth's highest mountain (most is in the ocean), are some of the world's most important observatories from which scientists study the galaxies; at the NVO, on Kilauea's rim, geologists study what is happening inside the earth.

But nothing quite surpasses Kilauea itself. Despite having claimed victims—though very few—Kilauea is known as a user-friendly volcano. When it erupted in 1983, there were 20 guests staying at Volcano House, an inn beside the crater. Within hours, thousands of people had arrived. The traffic from Hilo 30 miles away was unbelievable, according to an employee at Volcano House at the time. But there's an audience for even less dramatic lava events: "When there's surface flow happening that you can get close to, it's hard to stay away," Jenda Johnson, the videographer, explained. Burko couldn't, lured, also, by such powerful wordsmiths as John McPhee and Samuel Clemens, each of whom captured the primordial grandeur of the place.

Clemens's trip to the Big Island in 1866 was part of several years of vagabonding, which he later turned into a lengthy tome of anecdotes called *Roughing It*. He was astounded by Kilauea's immensity: "Here was a vast, perpendicular, walled cellar, 900 feet deep in some places, 1,300 in others, [it was

where in sharp, jagged pieces, and we had to decide where to place each step. Lava plates, heaved from beneath after they had hardened, made huge obstacles that we had to navigate around. We wore gloves to protect our hands in case we fell and ankle-high boots because the jumbled surface could give way. We wore hats, too, because airborne glass particles posed yet another danger. Arlene had gotten particles in her hair once that worked their way down into her eye. The doctor who treated her counted 23 discrete scratches on her cornea.

It was almost dark by the time we came within 100 yards of the now rose-hued plume. The lava surface there was new and still warm, and we had trouble finding a place cool enough to sit. A large, black outcropping of land jutted into the ocean, and down its side ran three luminous orange ribbons of lava. New land was being formed, which is a large part of the joy associated with Kilauea.

We women sat watching, fixated, as people are by fire. Paul shot some long exposures, then packed up his gear and sat watching, too. Suddenly, a piece of the outcropping—volcanologists call it a bench—broke off into the sea. There was a huge, crashing explosion. Bits of molten lava shot through the air like welding sparks. There was a second collapse with yet more vapor and smoke and airborne worms of fire. Through binoculars, all we could see was fire. For an instant, there was no border of safety between us and the inferno.

There won't be a Burko painting of this moment. She made no slide of it, and also the Halloween, black-and-orange scene was too gaudy, too spectacular. But the realization that we pass our entire lives on the earth's thin crust, a few scant miles above an ocean of magma, will find its way onto her canvases. Such an extraordinary moment will infuse her art.

Burko (www.dianeburko.com) will exhibit Kilauea paintings at the Locks Gallery, 600 Washington Square South, in Philadelphia, from Sept. 7 to Oct. 6. ■

Martha Ledger, managing editor of Inside, photographed professionally for 15 years. She has been friends with Diane Burko for 32 years.