



JANUARY 2016

Burning Issues

Larry Schwarm | *Wheat Stubble Fire, Eastern Colorado*



VISIT THE BMA
and see *Wheat Stubble
Fire, Eastern Colorado*
in the Front Room of
the Contemporary Wing
through March 27, 2016.

Larry Schwarm (American, born 1944).
Detail, *Wheat Stubble Fire, Eastern Colorado*.
1992, printed 2004. Chromogenic color print.
29 x 29 inches. The Baltimore Museum of Art:
Gift of Nancy and Tom O'Neil, Baltimore,
BMA 2013.348

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On the great plains of the American Midwest, wheat fields stretch out as far as the eye can see. Come harvest time, the wheat is cut down, leaving orderly rows of stiff, useless stalks, or "stubble." On a clear day in 1992, a wall of orange flames lit up the horizon where land meets sky. The fire advanced across the flat fields, consuming everything in its path while making the blue sky dirty with smoke. Photographer Larry Schwarm was out on the prairie that day, recording the sight with his camera.

On open land, a terrifying fire can be surprisingly beneficial. Some prairie fires occur naturally after a lightning strike, but others are set purposely by farmers looking for a quick and inexpensive way to clear stubble from their fields before a new planting season begins. Scorching flames rid the fields of decomposing stalks and dead leaves that would block the sunlight required by new green shoots. Carefully controlled fires also destroy weeds, pests, and diseases that attack a farmer's crops.

Is intentional burning a good idea? Some people say no. They believe that wheat stubble should be plowed back into the ground, allowing nutrients to be returned to the soil, even though the process would cost farmers considerable time and money. Others worry that billowing black smoke causes dangerous air pollution and low visibility—a double threat to people working outdoors or traveling in the vicinity. And there is always the fear that fires will rage out of control despite laws that prohibit burning when strong winds are forecast.

Larry Schwarm calls attention to these environmental and agricultural issues with a photograph that is dramatic, alarming, and beautiful.

CHALLENGE FOR STUDENTS

Schwarm has photographed many prairie fires, some at very close range. See more of his work at larryschwarm.com. Describe what you might feel or hear if you were standing in his place. Listen to Schwarm discuss fire at vimeo.com/28431682.

Learn about prairie fires at 1.usa.gov/1Ov8l4z and the pros and cons of burning at bit.ly/1JtUAao.

Find a photograph that draws attention to a current issue—environmental, social, or economic. Research the issue and explain how the photograph illuminates or dramatizes the topic. Or make your own photograph that poses questions about an issue of concern to you.

PRINT THE IMAGE ON PAGE 2 FOR YOUR STUDENTS.



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