

Star-Telegram F O R T W O R T H

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Five artists, and Mother Nature, pull together nicely

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Untitled (Ghost #2) (2006) by Andrew Bennett,
residue from kitchen matches and epoxy on aluminum panel

Not to overstate the obvious, but most of us find ourselves living in a world increasingly made over in our own image. Few people among the planet's rapidly multiplying billions can open the door-flap of their yurts and walk out into a landscape not reshaped by civilization.

Art now is often about the tensions caused by this evolutionary success, and the inevitable sense of loss we feel despite our newfound comfort and longevity. Not just loss of species and the like but subtle psychological effects and the daily efforts to reclaim our native connection to earth, wind and fire (and I don't mean those fine disco-era hit-makers).

"Elemental," at Marty Walker Gallery, brings together five artists under a timeless conceptual conceit. Every early culture developed a cosmology based on the forces most apparent in the natural world, including the human body (think Europe's medieval "humors," Indian Ayurvedic "doshas"). The five elements of East Asian philosophy and their specific applications in traditional Chinese medicine are becoming increasingly familiar in the West. That system of earth, fire, metal, water and wood provides the conceptual and material content of this show.

From its small side room, Robert Boland's video infiltrates the gallery with the sound of a crackling fire. In the darkened space, you see a figure carefully tending it, though the fire itself is off-screen, as are any identifying characteristics of the fire-keeper. You're quickly swept up in the mysterious, primordial activity and are warmed somehow, despite the remove.

Rupert Deese's monochrome paintings are topographical, their lit geometric elevations and depressions acting as tonal shifts enlivening the surfaces. They mysteriously conjure Jasper Johns' targets as much as they do the terrain of the American West, and that's a real feat: works of almost pure formalism that remain so evocative of place and larger space.

Tom Orr follows his excellent Dallas Opera set designs and recent solo show with a commanding postminimalist arrangement of his signature sculptural stripes-in-space. Informed by his well-honed optical strategies, a rectilinear metal conduit seems to bend and flow like water. It's a small sculptural coup.

Jay Shinn's seductive tracings of wood grain physically act out the mesmerizing fantasy many of us know from meditatively gazing at the whorls in plywood, or at water stains on ceilings. Andrew Bennett abandons the paisley patterns, if not his signature burnt-surface shtick, with more measured and symmetrical explorations of incidental carbon mark-making.

It's a sound, handsome show that grounds the viewer firmly in relation to the material works yet also in the context of the much larger forces of nature we will always move in.

Elemental: Through Feb. 10 at Marty Walker Gallery, 2135 Farrington St., Dallas. Free Open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday and by appointment.

214-749-0066 or www.martywalkergallery.com.