

NEW EDITIONS

Serena Perrone: Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell

By Sarah Address



Serena Perrone, from the suite *Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell* (2012), photolithograph and screenprint.

Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell (2012)

20 photolithographs and screenprint with colophon in a linen box, 11 x 15 inches each (11 inches x 26 feet 5 inches installed). Edition of 6. Printed by the artist and published by the artist and Cade Tompkins Projects, Providence, RI. \$16,000.

The eruptions at Mt. Etna in February are the type of event one might expect to catch Serena Perrone's attention. The St. Louis-born, Philadelphia-based artist, who spent many childhood holidays visiting Sicilian family in Etna's shadow, has been depicting volcanoes in her work for the past five years, most recently in the expansive print series *Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell* (2012). The 20-part work revisits some of the sites pictured in the artist's earlier series, *A Volcano Pilgrim in Exchange for Fire* (2009), in Italy, Peru, Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and Japan, but views them from new perspectives, formally and thematically.

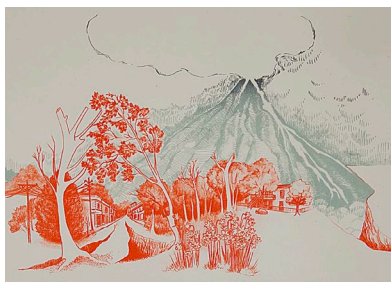
The 2009 work was inspired by the poet Craig Arnold—the self-dubbed “volcano pilgrim”—whose disappearance and presumed death were reported that year. Arnold had been in Japan in search of volcanic inspiration; footprints found after he went missing indicated he had fallen from a steep cliff. Perrone began reading his poetry and the blog Arnold had kept in the days leading to his death. *Volcano Pilgrim*, which incorporates intaglio, monotype, silkscreen and letterpress, also exists in 20 parts, one for every day the poet blogged from his trip. Each print offers a landscape in blues, blacks and occasional reds. The volcanoes are depicted from a great distance

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so that even the dramatic scenes of eruption evoke meditation rather than fear. Each is printed with excerpts from one of Arnold's entries and the post's date and time, in red, in the upper right corner. These stamps tie the work to one of its clear antecedents, Hiroshige's *Thirty-Six Views of Mount Fuji*, which bear a red imprint in the upper right corner, but they are also reminiscent of snapshot time stamps. Now as outmoded as film cameras, time stamps were once a tourist's badge of having actually been somewhere, in real space and time; of being close to something image-worthy yet still a safe camera-distance away. The dichotomy between venturing out and remaining within, between proximity and distance, fascinates Perrone.

Arnold offered his life in exchange for the experience of geologic drama that inspired him, and he paid. If *Volcano Pilgrim* was a carefully articulated questioning of that exchange from afar, *Maintaining a Safe Distance* is Perrone's multi-faceted answer. Despite the title, it ventures into situations that feel more threatening. In several places the distant volcanoes have been upstaged by what is happening in the foreground. Structures yanked from their real settings—the St. Louis Art Museum, a circus train cart, domestic homes, a tree house—crop up out of nowhere to merge with the volcanoes. They are the stuff of dreams: one apparent volcanic eruption is, on closer look, a house fire; downed trees spark an electrical fire that billows sky-high; an uprooted tree is moments from toppling onto a house, having revealed an eerie, lone chair in the earth in which it grew. In some images the earth seems to be opening up to swallow the scene; in others, manicured homes and gardens sit obliviously at the foot of active eruptions.

Scenes of destruction are countered with scenes of regeneration and growth. Trees abound. The prints of *Maintaining a Safe Distance* are more overtly imaginative constructions than those in *Volcano Pilgrim*, but they are also more grounded in reality. They depict significant places



Serena Perrone, four from the suite *Maintaining a Safe Distance and Living to Tell* (2012), photolithograph and screenprint.

and events from Perrone's own life, transformed into geologic metaphors for experience. A daunting leap is required to venture into one's past.

When *Maintaining a Safe Distance* was exhibited at the Editions/Artists' Book Fair earlier this year in New York, the artist installed it alongside a poem by Emily Dickinson, "Volcanoes be in Sicily." Perrone had encountered the poem after completing the series and was struck by its relevance to her Sicilian connections and her use of the volcano as metaphor. The poem ends with a paradox: geography had taught Dickinson about distant volcanoes but she can contemplate "the Vesuvius at home." While the poet's famously secluded life marks a stark contrast to Arnold's adventuring, Perrone told me that for her Dickinson's "ability to access things remotely" and to communicate experience so powerfully "dissolves the boundaries between the physical and the cerebral."

As it happens, at the time of Mount Etna's eruptions Perrone was in Iceland, another geological hotspot. Her visit was part of a yearlong multi-artist collaboration for the exhibition "Due North" for Philagrafika in 2014. As a metaphor, Iceland can be seen as the inverse of Etna—in place of an icon of destructive power it offers a vision of what Perrone describes as the earth "in the process of creating itself." Perrone has described making art as a process of discovery comparable to discovering new terrain, and she exhibits both daring and control in wrangling the power of the earth into print. ■

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