



■ From left: *Painting of Birds* (2014); Chilean artist Fernando Prats; and *Bird Painting* (2016).

Simply winging it

Lisa Kao

It may sound like bird-brained but instead of using a brush and paint, Fernando Prats draws using soot and feathers – attached to live birds.

The Chilean artist uses canvases specially created to catch the smallest movements of nature.

“I burn wood in a smoking oven, and put paper above it to capture the smoke,” Prats said. “The paper will then become completely black. When anything touches the paper, that part of the soot will be erased, and that is how images are ‘drawn’ on the canvas.”

The darkness of the soot is based on the wood used and the time it takes to burn. “I create different soot densities according to the effects I want to bring to my works,” he said.

For Prats, fire represents the primitive stage of human history and is in line with his wish to capture the unedited part of nature.

Finding the best way to capture the natural processes wasn’t easy. Prats spent five years experimenting before discovering his method.

“The works primary to this technique are all mistakes,” he said, recalling they were all black where the materials didn’t work.

It wasn’t until he came upon a seismogram from the 1960 earthquake in southern Chile that he was inspired. “The largest ever recorded earthquake in history has its record on smoked paper,” he said, adding this discovery marked his start to his technique 20 years ago. “The traditional painting doesn’t interested me.”

The signature series Prats created from the smoke canvases are the bird paintings. “I use a cage to limit the space in which birds can be active. One side of the cage is the canvas so the wings will hit it.”

He has experimented by varying the types of birds used, canvas sizes and the periods they get to make their mark. Even given similar time frames and the exact same birds, the works turn out different each time. “I want nature to manufacture the paintings themselves,” he said. “I never imagine what I would get, the birds do the design.”

Prats would, most of the time, leave it to the whims and fancies of the birds themselves, but he would sometimes guide them.

“The paintings have a certain degree of randomness,” he said.

For his Hong Kong debut, Prats is presenting a solo exhibition. Entitled *Nature Paintings*, the exhibition showcases his *Painting of Birds* series until January 25 at *Puerta Roja* gallery in Sheung Wan.

On a recent trip to Hong Kong, the artist demonstrated his technique before a crowd at the *Asia Society*. He put four palm-sized



Java sparrows and parakeets into a small cage and let them fly freely around. After five minutes, he covered the cage with a black cloth and allowed them free rein for seven minutes.

The final painting will be auctioned off by Sotheby’s at The Nature Conservancy Gala Dinner for charity in March.

The 52-year-old’s journey is not limited to birds and black canvases in the studio – he always goes out to be with nature. “There are two aspects that cannot be planned, the destructive power of events like earthquakes and tsunamis, and the energy in the people who experience them.”

So Prats would make a special effort to places at the epicenter of such events. One example is *Accion Chaiten* series in 2009.

After the Chaiten volcanic eruption in Chile in 2008, the population there was evacuated and the area remained uninhabited until 2009. Prats brought his smoked canvases to the region and let representative items leave their marks on the canvases.

“I used soaked clothes, sand, dust and water that I found in the houses to make an impression on the canvases,” he recalled.

He also visited an area that was affected by earthquake in Chile in 2010, tracing the marks of the earthquake, like broken tiles, a dilapidated highway, water and the people there. “I asked children there to jump on the canvas,” he said.

With his embrace of the power of nature, Prats is planning weightier projects. “I have thought about capturing the imprint of elephants to raise awareness of the ivory trade,” he said.

And he wants to engage people’s memories. Already he is planning his next project – “maybe it will be calligraphy in Hong Kong.”



■ For the live performance in Hong Kong, Prats uses four Java sparrows and parakeets to create a painting that will be auctioned off for charity in March.