



## Kevin Cooley's latest exhibition at Laney Contemporary is pure fire

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Kevin Cooley's latest exhibition, "Exploded Views," is about to detonate at Laney Contemporary.

The Los Angeles-based photographer's new show opens on July 1, and chronicles the explosions he creates with the help of a pyrotechnics expert.

"My work looks at nature in the form of the classical elements," Cooley explained during this week's episode of Art on the Air. "So I've done projects about water. I've done projects about air. A little bit of wind. And of course more recently, I've been looking at fire."

On initial viewing, the work in the show definitely hits on that primal, "explosions are awesome" part of the brain that I think most of us possess. Cooley himself admitted that there is something about what he's doing artistically that connects back to his boyhood.



“As a kid, I grew up in Colorado, and my mom would drive us over the border into Wyoming, where anything, any kind of firework, was legal,” he recalled. “And come back with a trunk full of stuff, of loot.”

“So I definitely have some pyromania tendencies that stem from that early age.”

But to stop at that visceral reaction to his beautiful blow-ups is a disservice to how much more we can get out of the images if we dig a little deeper. Even the title of the exhibition implies that the work is multi-faceted.

“The show is called ‘Exploded Views,’ which ... is a way of referring to how mechanical parts work together,” Cooley said, relating how patent drawings of things like car transmissions take the image of the object and “blow it up,” allowing the person looking at the drawing to “see all the internal workings of that piece.”

“So I kind of think that relates to these explosions in the sense that you’re seeing them unfold moments after they’re ignited,” he noted. “I’m shooting these explosions at a very fast shutter speed, so it’s capturing just a quick moment of them before they morph into more of a fire.”

From that starting point, Cooley invites the viewer to explore the philosophical underpinnings of his work.

“I’m hoping that people will see the human connection to the element of fire, and how there is this inherent duality,” he said. “Fire is the one element that we can control. We use it to power our cars and to blast off into space. All of human history, you could argue, can be told through our use of fire, back through the cave days.



“And at the same time, it’s also something that’s completely out of control. Dry lighting causing all these fires in California last year; wildfires in general encroaching in human development. What is our role in that balance?”

“Exploded Views” could be thought of as the spiritual successor to his earlier series “Controlled Burns,” in which the artist created smoke plumes, mostly in his studio, that were equally beautiful and as thought provoking as the current works. The exhibition at Laney includes 14 photographs from this new collection, as well as a set of three videos that will be showcased in the gallery’s unique mirrored room.

“I think it’s really interesting because you can’t really tell what the relationship is between them and the background,” said Cooley of the pieces in the show. “Sometimes they’re just in black space, where you can’t tell whether it’s something that’s a macro look at something at a cellular level, or whether it’s looking at a nebula deep in space through the Hubble telescope.



“And then there [are] other ones where there is a direct relationship between the environment. I didn’t try those ones inside structure[s] until I got a really good handle on what I’m doing. From a technical point of view these things are quite small. They don’t even hit the ground. They disappear pretty rapidly. And that’s something that’s hard to tell in the photographs. But when you get to the back room in the show, the mirrored room, and see these three videos, you’ll really get a sense of how they react with the environment. They’re just happening in mid air.

“And that’s kind of what interests me the most: Creating some sort of relationship that’s unknown,” added Cooley. “I feel like the explosions are a way to create these mesmerizing images and I would hope that they would jumpstart a conversation in thinking about that relationship.”

Still, explosions are pretty cool, whether you’re drawn into the philosophy behind the work or not.

“I think there’s this very ‘boy’ element to my work, and just wanting to see what happens with fire,” he admitted. “I mean, who doesn’t?”

Learn more about the work of Kevin Cooley at [kevincooley.net](http://kevincooley.net) and on Instagram [@kevincooley](https://www.instagram.com/kevincooley).

“Exploded Views” runs from July 1 through September 18 at Laney Contemporary at 1810 Mills B Lane Blvd. A reception with the artist will take place on Thursday, July 1 from 5-9 p.m. and will include a walkthrough with Lisa Jaye Young at 5 p.m.

*Art off the Air* is a companion piece to the radio program “Art on the Air” hosted by Rob Hessler and Gretchen Hilmer. The column can also be found at [savannahnow.com/entertainment](http://savannahnow.com/entertainment).

The show airs Wednesday from 3-4pm on WRUU 107.5 FM Savannah and at [WRUU.org](http://WRUU.org).  
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