

ON SITE

## THE FIRE THIS TIME

A critic reckons with the ravaging of Los Angeles

By [Andrew Berardini](#) [✉](#)

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Altadena, California, January 21, 2025. Photo: Mario Tama/Getty Images.

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**THE HOT WINDS BLEW OVER** the mountain passes and the fires came with them.

At first, people posted cute quotes by Didion and Chandler about the Santa Anas. Then they stopped.

The ash rained. I kept refreshing the app on my phone that told me about the fires, checking the news anywhere I could get it. Information and

misinformation, mid-catastrophe public mourning and off-putting blame flickered across screens while the city burned.

I watched the dry fields astride my house. My neighbors kept texting, all of us worried. Watching the fields, the ash raining down. I checked the app again.

In the distance I could see the fire licking the sky, the plumes of smoke. I checked the app again.

Haunted, angry, few of us in Los Angeles slept well that night.

**I'M FROM HERE.** This is where I fell in love with art, where I became a writer. I raised my kid in these hills and valleys. This is my place and these are my people. And it was on fire.

It's still a bit too hard to talk about what was lost. If you'll forgive me this slant, I can talk about what has been. A cosmopolitan city with a deep and weird art history, a huge community of support, dozens of museums and nonprofits and dozens of commercial galleries, where still, if only barely, one can mostly afford to live as an artist. Smog-smothered sunsets spectacular over the glow of a messy city, filled with an improbable magic and countless problems. But this was ours, and we loved it more when others didn't.

The nature next door is a regular inspiration. Red manzanita branching over mountain sage, hills covered after the spring rains with thousands of yellow flowers. All of that is what fed the burn, and those who lived next door to its grandeur learned too late how fickle and dangerous nature can be.

**AND THEN** the reports started streaming in. Hurried evacuations, block after block eaten by firestorm. I watched the dry brown field next to my house. I checked the app again.

The Palisades were burning. Altadena was burning. Hollywood was burning. Tongues of fire and a spreading red stain on a map on my phone.

Some taped their doors shut. We dusted off the N95s in the back of the closet, remnants from the quarantine, and strapped them on again.

Those who had to, fled. Those who could, took flight.

I stayed on. Faraway friends wrote to ask if I was OK. Some pleaded with me to flee the toxic air. Somehow it felt important to stay with my city, in whatever solidarity I could offer it. Even indoors, the stress and ash triggered my chronic illness. Flat on my back in bed, I kept refreshing the app.



Malibu, California, January 17, 2025. Photo: David McNew/Getty Images.

**THE TRAGEDIES KEPT PILING.** An artist I knew, another, another . . . curators, gallerists, gallery workers, writers, editors, friends, and colleagues, posting in real time as they guessed that their houses were probably gone. Consumed. They weren't sure, and then they were.

Artist Kathryn Andrews lost her home. She began a list online of all those artists and art workers who also lost their homes. It kept getting longer. And then longer.

Some houses got miraculously spared by chance or some heroic actions by a neighbor, or always those firefighters doing whatever they could to hold the line.

We wrote notes of support to the afflicted that started with "No need to respond as I'm sure it's all fucked, but you've got friends out here."

I could see the fires and yet I still couldn't picture it. It was outside and on my phone at the same time. Somehow the news, the apps, and social media made the enormity of it even more real, even though it was just a screen. A kind of realness that exists between or under or beside the real.

**THE ASH EVERYWHERE**, descending, faintly falling into black-gray drifts. What fragment was the forest? Which was an artwork, which were books left on shelves, blankets and clothes and cribs and photographs and homes?

A pack of coyotes, dusted, confused, gathered in front of my house.

**I STARTED TO THINK** of an artist I know in their seventies, their house gone, their collection of their most precious artworks from friends and loved

ones gone, archives lost. Burned away. I still couldn't picture it.

Recently passed writer Gary Indiana's archive was delivered to Altadena the morning the fires came, hundreds of beloved books and notes, the precious history of just one writer, gone. Along with the house of the editor and artist and their family that received them. I still cannot fathom even this. The scale in person, in pictures, is too much to see.

Going through a pile of unopened mail, I saw a notice that my fire insurance had been canceled.

**THE PALISADES** had palaces with art collections overlooking the sea, along with old-time surfers and workaday families and artists of lesser means. All up in smoke.

For generations, Altadena has been a haven for those artists and art workers who wanted to start a family. A whisper of stability for a precarious profession. Up until not so long ago, it was affordable. And until the fires burned it, a place with a working class and renters, a place with a historically Black community. Gone, all gone.

One artist I know visiting the home of another in Altadena wrote me today, "It's unbelievable in person. Melted fences on empty lots. Looks like an atom bomb went off. . . . Every artist I talk with is as zombified as we are. Deep communal grief." The house was spared, rotten food in the fridge, no electricity, sludge coming out from the pipes. They won't likely be able to live there soon, maybe ever. And they were lucky.

**THOSE WHO DIED**, two dozen at least, marooned in their illness, or defending their homes, garden hoses in hand. Their neighborhood became their crematorium. We who stayed behind, those who could or had to, became mourners doused in ash.

Amid the ruins of Altadena, blackened trees hung with brilliant oranges, dangling globes of color frosted with ash. Someone sent me a video of a fawn tripping through the smoking ruins.

**THIS WAS HARDLY** the first fire in Los Angeles.

From *Artforum's* Summer 2024 issue: "Tomashi Jackson remembers palm trees burning when she was a child in Los Angeles during the 1992 uprisings."

I have seen the ash rain on Los Angeles more times than I can count. I had classes in college and grad school canceled because of wildfires and noxious smoke.

Jackson Arn reviewing Ed Ruscha's retrospective in the *New Yorker* in October 2023: "In a past life, he was an arsonist. A bold accusation, I realize, but nobody makes *that* many paintings, drawings, and photographs of fire without some buried lust for the real deal."

"Fire has always been part of the LA unconscious," the film critic Peter Wollen wrote, also about Ruscha, "whether it takes the form of wildfires in the hills or riots and uprisings in the flatlands."

And Ruscha torched a lot of buildings in LA—a Standard Gas station, a Norm's diner, and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.



Malibu, California, January 16, 2025. Photo: Mario Tama/Getty Images.

**MY COLLEAGUE AND** fellow Angeleno Jonathan Griffin wrote a book about artists' studios burning down in 2016, called *On Fire*:

"For each of these artists there was an instant when time spun on its axles, when they realized that the tiny refuge of safety and freedom that they had won for themselves was gone. It would take months and years, resources and resolve to claim it back. But in the process, something unexpected and valuable—career-altering, in many cases—was revealed to them about the stakes and the possible rewards of their lives as artists."

Artist Ross Simonini, reviewing the book in *Art in America* in March 2016: "Griffin explained that many of the artists he approached for the book, including Josh Smith and Ann Craven, declined to participate, either because they didn't want to psychologically return to the devastation, or because they didn't want their victimhood to define their art. They simply wanted to move on."

Somehow, lingering on any one artist is almost to mark them somehow, take away their privacy. As Ross wrote about other artists who lost their studios, I don't want their victimhood to define their art.

Last week, Ross's house burned down.

**THE EMBERS** still smoldering, I talk to a few artists who lost their homes.

I read their conversations and appeals online. As I've needed them my whole life, I need artists and their work now too. Maybe more than ever.

Some are fierce. People must come to the art fair next month. We must not punish all the artists who didn't lose their studios, or the ones who did and still need to make a living. Los Angeles and its artists need gallerists and collectors not to turn away. Not now, next month, not next year.

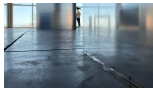
Some artists I talked to who lost everything are trying to bury their grief with lightheartedness. It's just things and we're alive.

Some are too shell-shocked to say much at all.

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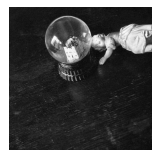
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