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For LA Artists, Getting Back to Work Means Playing the Long Game

By *Jack Lowery*

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An aerial view of Altadena, Calif., showing surviving trees and new greenery amid homes destroyed by the Eaton Fire, March 2025.
Photo Mario Tama Via Getty

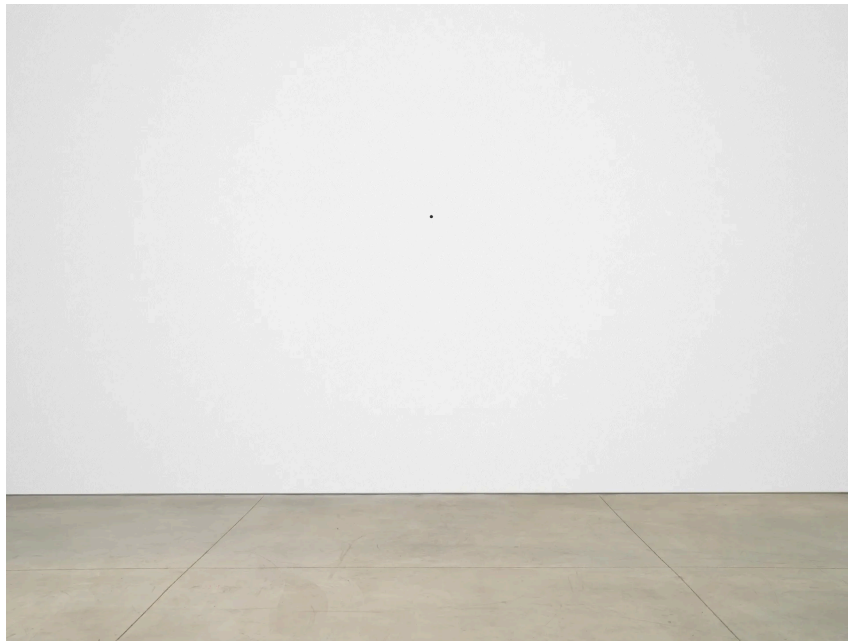
In the time between the January fires and February’s Frieze week, **Los Angeles** (<https://www.artnews.com/t/los-angeles/>) galleries and museums seemed intent on supporting affected artists directly, and on commemorating the immense loss the city suffered. Emergency grants and mutual aid efforts sprang up everywhere, and every other gallery seemed to host a benefit show or a panel about Altadena’s storied Black artistic legacy.

Most of these efforts dissipated after Frieze week. The benefit shows have all come down. And while the mutual aid and other volunteer-led efforts are ongoing, attention is shifting elsewhere. Meanwhile, little has changed for artists who lost their homes or studios. Driving through Altadena two months out, burnt-out cars still lined the streets, and traffic lights were still not working.

None of the debris seemed to have been cleared either. For those most affected, rebuilding is still a hypothetical.

“I’m on my fifth place,” Kathryn Andrews said more than eight weeks after, having lost her rented Pacific Palisades home. It was the second time she’d lost a home to fire, the first being the Bobcat Fire in 2020. This time around, she has a better idea of what to expect from rebuilding. “It hits you over time,” she said.

Andrews contributed a piece to one of the city’s many benefit shows. Her untitled contribution was a small, pea-size dot painted on the wall at eye level. It harkens to ’70s Minimalism yet is very much of the fires: She stenciled the dot directly on the wall using ash and soil from the home she lost.



A work with no title by Kathryn Andrews, donated to the “One Hundred Percent” benefit exhibition, 2025.

Though Andrews had volunteered her artwork to the show, she told me she felt uneasy about participating. She appreciated that the show was conceived to benefit artists directly, but still “felt that there was something a bit perverse about mounting an exhibition and attempting to represent the crisis so quickly. It’s a catastrophe that’s hard to represent, that exceeds representation in a way.” A lot of other artists seem to be facing this crisis of representation too.

THOUGH THE PALISADES FIRE burned more acreage and received more news coverage, the Eaton fire disproportionately hurt the area’s artists: 73 percent of those served by Grief and Hope, a mutual aid group cofounded by Andrews that has raised over a million dollars for affected artists and arts workers, referenced a single zip code, Altadena’s 91001.

The area has long been a hub for LA artists. Kenturah Davis, whose family history in Altadena goes back to the 1950s, told me that her parents moved there as part of the Great Migration. Like artists Charles White and John Outterbridge and writer Octavia Butler, her parents were drawn to Altadena because middle-class Black families could buy homes there before that was feasible in other parts of the country. After growing up in Altadena and completing her MFA at Yale, a teaching position at Occidental College drew Davis back to the neighborhood.



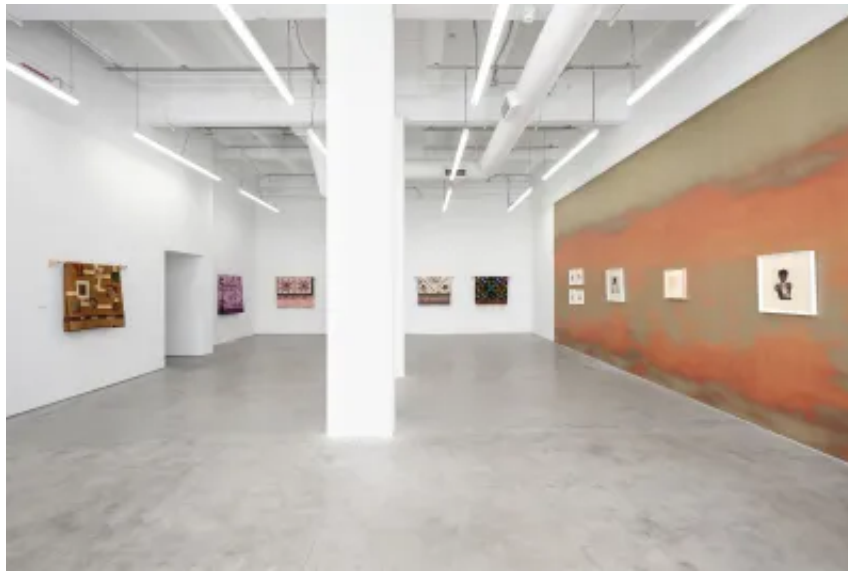
Keni Arts: *Home BFA (Beauty For Ashes)*, 2025.

Courtesy Keni Arts

Her studio survived the Eaton fire, but her home did not. She learned this when her father, a plein air painter who goes by Keni Arts, hiked over to Kenturah's house. "He FaceTimed me so I could see," Davis said. "And that's how I learned the house was gone."

Keni had brought his painting kit with him on this hike, and that day, he began a new series of paintings he dubbed "Beauty For Ashes." As Altadena continued to burn, he painted the lot where his family's home had once stood.

I asked Davis if she shared this impulse to make work about the fires so immediately in their aftermath. "Not in the same way," she replied. "Part of the reason why I've been struggling with getting back to work is that I feel like I need to account for what's happened. But I'm not going to all of a sudden start doing landscape paintings."



View of the exhibition "Tactile Memory," 2025, at Matthew Brown, Los Angeles.

Photo Paul Salvesson

Instead, Davis is returning to materials that have newfound significance after the fire, such as weaving. Her mother, Mildred, is a quilter, and in the fire's aftermath, Davis's gallery, Matthew Brown, organized a show benefiting her group, Alta/Pas Quilt Circle, an extension of the African American Quilters of Los Angeles. She also returned to working with scented incense paper, noting that the lingering fragrance feels like an apt metaphor for the loss of her home to fire.

ALTADENA'S ARTISTIC LEGACY has more recently been a draw for other artists, among them Kelly Akashi. Until January, Akashi was living and working in a home once owned by artists Jim Shaw and Marnie Weber, who had built a studio with a kiln in the backyard.

When she evacuated, Akashi wasn't able to take much besides her cat. She thought about going back to retrieve more of her belongings, but decided against it—for her own safety, and to avoid seeing the fire, worried she might become afraid of flames, which are essential to her work in glass and metal.



View of Kelly Akashi's 2025 exhibition at Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles.

©Kelly Akashi/Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles.

She lost much of the work that was slated to debut January 31 in a show at Lisson Gallery. Some of what appeared in the show, which was pushed back to late February, was spared by being offsite at the time of the fire. Several bronze sculptures had been in Akashi's studio during the fire and managed to survive, but she had to remake much of the work. One such piece shows the lower half of Akashi's face; another two resemble seedpods. "I didn't clean off what they went through," she said. "I could have sandblasted and completely stripped them. But the patinas you see were created by the fire."

Christina Quarles is also trying to figure out what to do with work damaged by fire debris. She and her family lost their home for the second time in nine months in the Eaton fire: In April 2024, an electrical fire destroyed their home. Also lost in the Eaton fire was the rebuilding progress they had made since then, as well as the Airbnb where they had been staying during the reconstruction.

Quarles said that after the first fire, she and her wife felt compelled to rebuild as quickly as possible. But they've decided to rebuild more slowly this time. "It's just too painful to feel like everything is replaceable," she said. They had just replaced all their young daughter's books from the first fire when the second one hit. "I don't want to buy *Goodnight Moon* again," Quarles said. "I've already bought it twice."



Kelly Akashi: *Witness*, 2024–25.

©Kelly Akashi/Courtesy Lisson Gallery, Los Angeles.

Quarles's backyard studio survived both fires, and she joked that she couldn't tell whether this was a good or a bad omen. In the Eaton fire, it was the only structure on their block that survived, though the four paintings inside were damaged. Quarles treats all her canvases with PVA size, which melts at a low temperature. In her case, the emulsion melted and became porous, then readhered after being dusted with debris blown in through an open window.

Quarles must now decide what to do with these four paintings. Two of them formed a diptych—she started one panel right before the 2024 fire, and the other the week after; Quarles said she finds the debris damage interesting conceptually, which echoes how Akashi and Andrews are trying to represent the fires and their damage. The debris adhering to the canvases might age the paintings faster, so she could make an insurance claim for their total loss. She described this as the more financially practical route: She'd be paid for them as if her gallery had sold them; however, the insurance company would own them.

“The thought of that made me so sad, even if it’s financially maybe a better move, because I don’t know if I can sell them or not,” she said. The gamble is whether or not a collector would see the value in this debris-affected diptych.

DECIDING WHETHER OR NOT to rebuild is personal for every artist. Anecdotal, it’s said that older folks are tending to sell, while younger homeowners seem more inclined to rebuild. Artist Paul McCarthy is turning 80 this year, and after he and his wife, Karen, lost the place in Altadena they had called home since 1989, he told me that he has no interest in rebuilding: “I don’t want to spend the next four or five years building a house.”

“Overnight, you become a minimalist,” he said, referring less to his art than his life. “How many pairs of shoes do I need, two?” This quip echoed other artists who said that losing their homes or studios gave them clarity about what’s important to them.

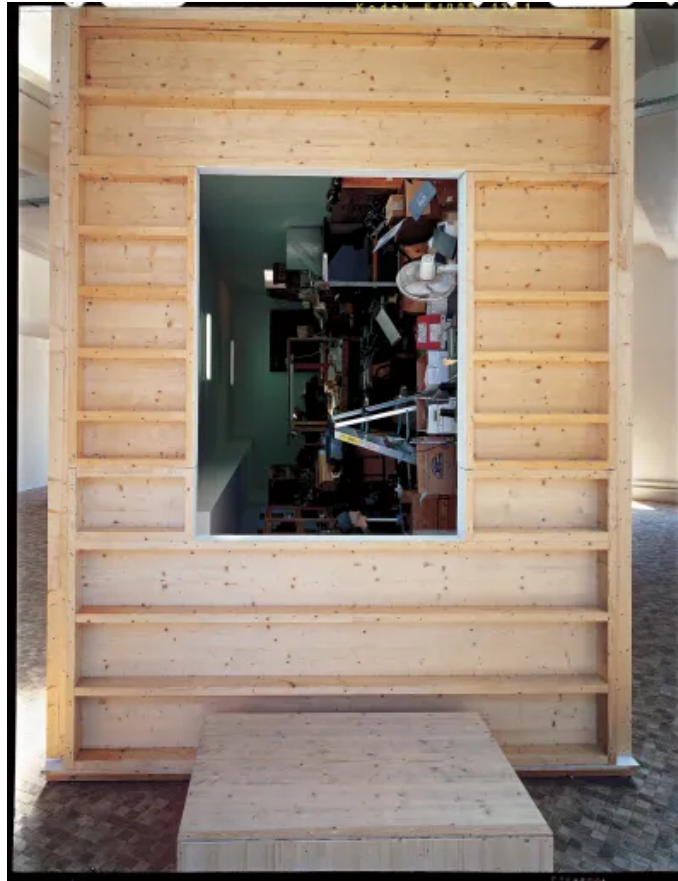


View of Paul McCarthy's *The Box*, 1995, at the IBM Building, New York in 2001.

Photo Dennis Cowley

McCarthy said his experience of the fires reminded him of his 1995 sculpture *The Box*, a piece he made after walking into one of his home studios, and getting the idea to turn it into a sculpture. McCarthy instructed his studio assistants to take everything out—every paper, journal, notebook, piece of furniture, every work in progress; he then built a wooden-crate replica of his studio to scale, and

glued or bolted to its floor every one of these items precisely where they had sat in the original before turning the box on its side. Like much of his work, it has no trace of a Minimalist sensibility. After he shipped it out, his studio was empty. “It’s strange how I lost that room twice,” he said. McCarthy had a similar impulse about a week after the fires, when he started to try drawing everything that had been in the house from memory. He first drew a washing machine, then a stove, and then a couch, and plans to continue this series and see where it goes.



View of Paul McCarthy's *The Box*, 1995, at the Hauser & Wirth Collection, St.

Gallen, 1999.

Photo A. Burger

Some artists lost personal archives in addition to their homes, studios, and works-in-progress. This is especially difficult for artists later in their careers, like video installation artist Diana Thater and her husband, T. Kelly Mason. Part of what makes this loss so devastating is that it included some of Thater's most well-known pieces, of which there was only one copy. Paintings and sculptures get sold and go out into the world, but video artists more often have to steward their own work in obsolete technologies, she told me.

Thater is now trying to reassemble her archive by contacting the museums and collectors who have acquired her pieces over the years, asking them to loan her her own work so she can make duplicates. She hopes to digitize her pieces, a

process especially important for older video works in formats like laser disc and Beta tape. Thater's works all come with instructions for how to update them, but she has little confidence that museums or collectors have followed them.

More immediately, the biggest logistical and practical hurdle artists are facing is finding space. Thater had to offer \$600 a month over the asking price to secure an apartment in Montecito Heights. "People think that I'm rich because I show with David Zwirner, or that David will buy me a house now," Thater said. "But it doesn't work that way." She and her husband are still sleeping on a mattress on the floor; she said she feels like she's in college again. Kenturah Davis's parents thought they had found a rental, until the realtor asked them to prove they had a million dollars in assets, even though their insurance company would cover the cost of renting the place.

Something that's always been appealing about Altadena is its proximity to nature, and I noticed that a number of artists living there have consistently made work about the relationship between humans and the planet, and more specifically about climate change. Thater and Akashi both said that they plan to double down on this strain of their work. "People are so focused on the loss, but that misses the bigger point, that we're collectively and mindlessly destroying our planet, without reflecting upon the fact that we have agency in this," Andrews said. "We're burning our own houses down."

