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For years, these artists painted L.A. on fire. Now life is a charred canvas.

“It’s easy as an artist to work in metaphor,” says artist John Knuth. “But when those metaphors become realities ... ”

BY MAURA JUDKIS

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Los Angeles artist John Knuth has been setting fires for 20 years, in his paintings. He has painted hot orange flames in Mylar and enamel on wall-size canvases. He has covered a globe in red, making it into a ball of fire. He has set thermal blankets ablaze and used their burned remnants to create landscape paintings for a 2017 solo exhibition called “Lake of Fire.” His work is a commentary on what he believes to be the most important issue of this era: climate change.

On Jan. 7, Knuth watched from his Altadena home as the Eaton Fire traveled “across the mountain range, across the foothills,” he says. “And then, at 2 in the morning, we saw that it was about a mile from our house. And that’s when we decided to leave.”

Knuth, his wife and their 5-year-old son fled to a friend’s house elsewhere in the city. By the next day, their home — along with “hundreds of artworks of my own and dozens of artworks from other artists” — was embers and ash.

“It’s easy as an artist to work in metaphor,” Knuth says. “But when those metaphors become realities — ” He paused. “It’s devastating.”



John Knuth's "El Nino" appeared in the 2019 exhibition "L.A. on Fire" at Wilding Cran Gallery. (Ian Byers-Gamber)



Knuth painted these flames in 2024 in his Pasadena studio. Months later, he lost his home to the Eaton Fire. (Ed Schadt)

Joan Didion wrote it best — “The city burning is Los Angeles’s deepest image of itself” — but L.A.’s artists have all depicted it differently. They’ve been painting, photographing and sculpting fire for as long as it has been a part of the landscape. And now, they’ve experienced the uncanny horror of watching scenes from their art come to life, and consume their city.

“Fire is eternal in this city,” says Los Angeles curator Michael Slenske, who organized a 2019 exhibition titled “L.A. on Fire” at the Wilding Cran Gallery near downtown. “It’s so real and ever-present. And it’s also this kind of metafictional construction.”

A West Adams neighborhood gallery called the Landing hosted an exhibition titled “🔥,” a showing of two East Coast artists, Michael Handley and Greg Lindquist, who paint fire in abstraction and in landscapes, respectively. It opened in November and closed Dec. 21. Seventeen days later, the Palisades Fire ignited.

“Clearly our show was too on-point,” says Gerard O’Brien, the gallery’s owner, in an email. When fire appears in the paintings of Conrad Ruíz, whose work was included in Slenske’s show, “it serves as a signal that something’s not right,” Ruíz says.

Ruíz has painted Los Angeles buildings on fire from arson and riots, cars consumed by flames, and even people self-immolating. The paintings are not always about death, he says, but rather heightened emotions and intensity, “the peak of existing,” he explains.



Francesca Gabbiani painted incarcerated firefighters in the 2020 work "Inmates Saving Our Lives (Women Inmate Firefighters)." (Francesca Gabbiani)



An inmate crew works near power lines on Jan. 22 as smoke from the Hughes Fire fills the sky in Castaic in Los Angeles County. (Robyn Beck/AFP/Getty Images)

For Francesca Gabbiani, painting the fiery landscape of Los Angeles — including its incarcerated firefighters, whom she painted six years ago — manifests her views on ecofeminism.

“We’re being told something by the land,” she says. “It’s like Mother Earth is telling us with anger, you know, more and more and more: ‘What’s going on? What are you doing?’”



Gabbiani's "Mutation XLV" (2023). (Francesca Gabbiani)



A firefighter standing on a ladder watches embers rise from a building caught in the Eaton Fire in Altadena on Jan. 8. (Fred Greaves/Reuters)

Perhaps the most famous painter of L.A. on fire is Gabbiani's father-in-law, Ed Ruscha, whose “Los Angeles County Museum on Fire” is one of the city's iconic works of art. (It lives in D.C., in the Hirshhorn Museum.) The oil-on-canvas painting — about 4.5 by 11.1 feet — is a commentary on the city's institutional gatekeepers. In his other works that engulf various locations in L.A. —

Norm's Diner, a Standard gas station — the flames symbolically torch the norms and standards of art, critic Dave Hickey wrote in 1982.

Or maybe it's more basic than that.

"I'm not lighting fires," Ruscha told *Believer* magazine for a 2006 piece. "It's a way of attaching an additional meaning to the painting that would otherwise not have fire — if I can be so simple to say. And it's fun to paint fire."

Artist Alex Schaefer thinks so, too.

Fire "lends itself to the substance of paint," Schaefer says, in the same way that other natural phenomena do. "You know, that's why [J. M. W.] Turner painted seascapes and raging storms and clouds. ... Fire works great with paint."

The fires Schaefer paints roar out of various banks in Southern California and symbolize financial crisis and capitalism run amok. He paints them en plein air — out in the open, by the banks themselves — and police have interrogated him for suspicious behavior.

"I suspect it was someone from the bank that notified authorities that they are 'threatened' by my painting," Schaefer told *Artbound* in 2012. "And that was the exact word the police used when first confronting me. Someone was 'threatened' by my art and called them."

During the Eaton Fire this month, a Bank of America in Altadena caught fire, and it looked eerily like one of Schaefer's works. People began posting his paintings and photographs of the burning bank side by side on social media.



Alex Schaefer began painting burning banks as a metaphor for financial crisis. (Alex Schaefer)



Flames engulf a Bank of America building in Altadena during the Eaton Fire on Jan. 8. (Chris Pizzello/AP)

They posted Ruscha's "Los Angeles County Museum on Fire" painting in response to reports that the fire was near the Getty museums.

They posted Gabbiani's red-hot palm trees, which matched the towering, burning vegetation in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood.

Life was emulating art emulating life.

"It was kind of strange and incredible, because everything looked like my work," Gabbiani says. "From my balcony, it looked like one of my paintings."

Schaefer, whose social media accounts were pinged from people tagging him in the photos of the burning bank, watched with concern.

"This is not the first time that people have been like, 'My God, this looks just like your painting,'" says Schaefer, citing the arson of a Wells Fargo during the 2020 protests in Minneapolis after George Floyd's murder. "A broken clock tells you the exact perfect time twice a day." And a bank on fire — whether from arsonists outraged over a civil rights injustice, or because climate change is an accelerant to wildfires — remains a symbol that all is not well in America.



People posted Schaefer's paintings on social media as real-life banks burned in California. (Alex Schaefer)



The remnants of a Chase bank branch in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood of Los Angeles. (Jae C. Hong/AP)

L.A.'s fire artists now find themselves at an uncanny crossroads.

“What is the path forward for someone who paints fire, who now sees fire all around me?” Ruíz asks.

They will continue to depict the force that has scarred their city forever, they say, but they're sure their work will change, because they have been changed by this disaster.

“Because of why I was compelled to do it in the first place — to signal that something was wrong — it means the project can't stop,” Ruíz says. The vastness of the destruction, the political infighting that has resulted: It's all a “signal things are even more wrong.”

Gabbiani, who lives in Los Feliz, an area of the city that was not damaged, says she will continue to incorporate fire imagery in her work.

“I feel it's almost in my DNA,” she says. “I work with damaged landscapes. It's my way of calling for healing.”



Gabbiani's "Hot Panorama III" (2022). (Francesca Gabbiani)



Palm trees burned during the Palisades Fire are pictured on Jan. 8. (Eric Thayer/Getty Images)

And artists are supporting one another. Numerous fundraisers have been organized for the city's arts workers; one is co-founded by the senior director of a gallery called Various Small Fires, after a Ruscha book.

Schaefer, who lives in San Diego, is selling one of his Bank of America fire paintings and plans to donate part of the proceeds to the Los Angeles Fire Department Foundation.

As for Knuth, whose Altadena home was destroyed: He has found a place for his family to stay. His studio space in Pasadena was spared, so some of his more recent work is intact. He is mourning his neighborhood, a tight-knit enclave of artsy folks who are all processing the losses in their own ways.

"That this trauma and destruction happened where all the artists live will forever change the way that my generation of artists makes artwork," he says. But he's not going to stop painting fire.

"The idea that reality landed on my studio and burnt my house down and burnt my artwork down," he says, "only makes my work more important."