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DIARY

AFTER THE FIRES

Seeking out signs of recovery during Frieze Week LA 2025

By Andrew Berardini | March 13, 2025



Frieze Los Angeles 2025. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh/CKA.

AT THE BOTTOM OF the Tropicana Pool at the Hollywood Roosevelt, David Hockney's waves of rich blue paint danced under the unbroken cyan of the water, the striped chaise longues reclined toward them. The VIP preview of the Felix Art Fair fluxed and churned. The sun shone, the speakers blared an upbeat if semi-anonymous dance track, the pool was closed.

All of the locals, myself included, put on a good face for the sundry visitors and far-flung friends who had traveled to Los Angeles for the fairs this past February, but when we bumped into each other in dazed pairs and trios, we talked about the fire. Or the surreal

nature of ash in our hair as others shopped. Or the feeling of wanting/needing the energy, commerce, and opportunity of the fair, but not actually totally being in the mood to perform for it. In hushed voices many of the artists and art workers of Los Angeles gathered here and there to trade complicated feelings amid the necessary forced cheer of the art fairs' sales floors. Reeling also from the political blitzkrieg following the election, my fellow Angelenos would start to say "How are you?" out of habit, but then quickly correct themselves with a "Never mind." The fires and the fairs and the rest of the world around us felt like puzzle pieces few could find a way to fit together.

A lot of it felt like business as usual; some of it did not. At Nina Johnson's room at Felix, artist Tara Walters hung a painting that served as a memorial to Jack Bendes, a Malibu surfer who lost his life six months ago, but its wash of blue and ocean water almost served as a second memorial for the home Walters lost in the Palisades Fire. Upstairs at Patel Brown, amid the floral poetry of Neil Farber and Michael Dumontier sat a stack of books with handpainted titles on their spines, the top one reading "All That I Have Lost I Will Find." Along the cabanas, a gallerist told me that a person had drowned in the pool the day before while they were setting up. She had jumped into the water to try and save them, but was too late.

The following morning, I slipped into a preview of Kelly Akashi's new exhibition at Lisson Gallery, largely made in the last month after Akashi's studio and home burned in the Eaton Fire. A few works were being finished out of her studio, including a sphere made of branching, delicate glass. But one of the few works Akashi managed to salvage from the ruins was the bottom half of her face cast in bronze and blackened by fire, naked branches reaching skyward. Scarred, resistant, resilient, and still alive.

That afternoon, Frieze felt better and worse than I remembered. So few international curators, critics, and collectors. Friends texted from abroad; many felt that the city was still in ashes, and truly parts of it were. Wandering the tent at the Santa Monica Airport, I found succor in the ethereal softness and mystical glow of Agnes Pelton's paintings, the celestial dreams of Joseph Cornell's boxes, and the startling dissonance and beauty of Romare Bearden's collages at Michael Rosenfeld's booth. On the other side of the fair, I found a moment of repose astride the half-empty bed by Rodrigo Hernandez at Bel Ami (its partner waiting in another bed at the gallery's storefront across town).

And though she concocted the project ages ago, Madeleine Hollander's *Day Flight, 2025*, a choreographed flight from Santa Monica to Point Dume up the coast and back, became an accidental example of disaster tourism far above the ruins of the Palisades and the scorched remains of the Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu. The devastation is still too hard to fathom—an ashen lacuna. In the Palisades alone, 6,837 structures were totally destroyed

at last count. I imagine that, viewed from high up in the air, the vast wreckage can feel as remote as it sometimes did at the fair, even if it was only a fifteen-minute drive away.

A ten-minute drive in another direction, Post-Fair, organized by gallerist Chris Sharp, debuted at the 1938 Old Santa Monica Post Office. The beauty of the open space, with galleries from Tokyo to Cambria (a small town on the central California coast), felt somehow like the air I'd been missing elsewhere. Sprueth Magers showed ceramics from the dearly departed artist Kaari Upson; Sharp showed beautiful reliefs by Lin May Saeed. I was quietly thrilled to see Altadena's Alto Beta, their space lost in the fire, with a solo by Amy Sarkisian.

The following day I stopped at Matthew Brown's to see "Tactile Memory," an exhibition organized by Kenturah Davis. An embossed map of Altadena revealed itself in the glow of orange pigment in her print *altadena*, 2025. Hanging from an opposite wall were a series of beautiful quilts made over the past decades by the Alta/Pas Quilting Circle, an extension of the African American Quilters of Los Angeles, of which Davis's mother was a member. Many of their makers were displaced by the Eaton Fire, and their quilts lost. In the patchwork mazes and vibrant patterns of those on display here, I just barely began to find the soft edge of all that had been unimaginably lost. Kenturah's father, Keni Davis, had been painting watercolors of Altadena for years; one of his latest is the ruins of the house the Davises owned for thirty-eight years. In the immediate aftermath, Kenturah posted online a photo of a cup filled with the ashes of books gathered from where her Charles White retrospective catalogue had been.

Nearby, an exhibition of over eighty artists who were affected by the fires was hung in a former furniture showroom. The title "One Hundred Percent" relayed that all the proceeds from the works sold would go to the affected artists. The many columns of the massive space became a democratic grid, with elder and younger, the storied and the starting-out, all fitting together in this volunteer-organized exhibition independently curated by interim Hammer chief curator Aram Moshayedi. Some works were recovered from the wreckage, seared and battered by smoke; others were made for the exhibition, as many of the participating artists had lost everything. What here was memorial and what was resilience? Somehow all of this was both simultaneously.

And there were parties. The radically redecorated Hop Louie's, art bar of another era, opened up for a raft of galleries and scenesters. House parties with messy dance floors with one character selling gusts of nitrous by the white balloon. And many openings that felt original and energetic, but mostly for us Angelenos. (The elegance of bow-tied waiters serving Japanese whiskey for Sawako Goda's opening the weekend before Frieze at Nonaka Hill; the swirls of spirited color coating Honor Fraser by Sarah Cain.) Outside

the fairgrounds, it felt easier to take off our good faces and just be alive. In many ways, I'm not sure how to depict what happened in a way that makes others really understand the strangeness and melancholy, and finally the release.

Five days before the fair, the Box gallery announced its withdrawal from Frieze via a mass email. Instead, it put together an exhibition called Our Externalized Frieze Booth at its gallery in the Arts District. Stepping into the Box that Saturday, some part of me expected, in a totally absurd way, that the "externalized booth" would have the commercial bark of the fair, but the place felt tranquil.

Here was the booth that might have been, proudly on view. The magical post-Fluxus noise and color of Ursula Reuter Christiansen, the black-and-white (and sometimes red) sculptural majesty of Sarah Conaway's photographs (in which a cat seemed to wander and fall asleep amid the serious artmaking), Stan VanDerBeek's experimental illuminations, including one watercolor with sorbet oranges and pinks announcing "A World of Two Dimension Love." I loved it.

And with no official authority, I bestow upon the Box the best booth not at Frieze this year.

All the members of gallery founder Mara McCarthy's family lost their homes. The father of Robert Zin Stark, her coprincipal in the gallery, lost his home as well.

At the bottom of the Box's announcement, the gallery wrote, "We believe these actions of community care, and practices of presenting work we care about to our community, are equal imperatives."

Amid the ashes, against the threat of ICE raids, through the performance of an art fair, in Los Angeles, we're taking care.

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Tara Walters, *Blue (For Jack Bendes)*, 2025, Pacific Ocean water, water-based paint, and oil pastel on muslin, 72 × 60"

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Kelly Akashi at Lisson. Photo: Kaeli Deane

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Bel Ami, Frieze Los Angeles 2025. Photo: Casey Kelbaugh/CKA

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Post-Fair. Photo: Chris Sharp

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View of The Box LA's "Our Externalized Frieze Booth."

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Curator Zandie Brockett introducing Survival Strategies at Soho Warehouse. Photo: the author.



Tacita Dean and George Baker at Marian Goodman. Photo: the author.

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Just the Thursday sunset leaving Frieze. Photo: the author.