

Rebuilding Sonoma County: Museums Chronicle Pain, Hope After 2017 Wildfires

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First comes devastation, then suffering and loss. Then comes artistic interpretation and reflection. It happened after the Spanish Civil War with Picasso's "Guernica." It followed the Holocaust and Hiroshima. After 9/11 transformed New York's skyline, art altered it again. And the power of art to heal took shape once more after the North Bay fires of 2017.

"It happened in October and by mid-November I had already been contacted by an artist who was working on a project," said Jeff Nathanson, executive director of the Museum of Sonoma County. "She wanted to know if the museum would support her in applying for a grant."

Similar sparks of creativity and collaboration would soon emerge around the region as Sonoma County museum curators began creating spaces of healing, taking them on missions they never thought they'd embark upon — each one redefining and reaffirming their relationship with the community.

As ideas began to take shape at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art, curators knew what they didn't want.

"We knew from the beginning, we didn't want it to be about what we were calling 'fire porn' — images of fire and destruction without any redeeming message," said Margie Maynard, who together with Tanya Gayer co-curated "From Fire, Love Rises: Stories Shared from the Artist Community."



Peter Hassen was the first artist to approach SVMA. He had gone out a few days after the fires started, taking photos of houses destroyed on Napa Road. After tracking down the owners of one house, he asked if he could create a mixed-media work incorporating one of the few remnants that survived: fence railings. As the exhibit gained momentum, renowned artist Laura Kimpton eventually came on board, agreeing not only to lend her work, but also personally paying the expenses to ship her "LOVE" sculpture across the country where it landed in front of Sonoma City Hall, as part of the SVMA exhibit.

In Santa Rosa, the dedicated crew at the Museum of Sonoma County was quick to react, creating "The Fire Wall" by February 2018, an online community where people could post art, photos and mementos from the fire.

A former Princeton, New Jersey resident who moved to Santa Rosa only five weeks before the fires, Nathanson had seen firsthand the power of art to heal in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

"The Fire Wall" was inspired by a project he oversaw outside the Princeton public library — a literal wall, 30 feet wide, made up of 4-inch squares, each one containing a photo or poem or artifact contributed by the community.

In early discussions, Nathanson and co-curator Eric Stanley, talked about the way the fires impacted such a broad section of the community.

"This notion of a shared experience — that's a phrase we used a lot," remembers Stanley. "We all had this shared experience. Well, where can you gather all that stuff and share it? That's where you find the healing value."

There was no lack of art to choose from. The day after the Tubbs fire, comic strip artist Brian Fies began "A Fire Story," a graphic novel that would start with the words, "On Monday, my house disappeared." Ceramicist Gregory Roberts began creating pots from the ashes of people's houses.

Slowly the pots and comic-strip panels, along with video installations and photos and relics recast from a fire-ravaged street sign or a burned-out truck began coming together in a curated narrative, what would later be called "From the Fire: A Community Reflects and Rebuilds."

By the fall of 2018, regional museums began opening fire-themed exhibitions. It had been a year since the fires inspired artists to create works they never could have dreamed. And now, upon the anniversary, the moment had finally arrived for a community to lay eyes on the art that rose from its ashes.

In Petaluma, the multimedia exhibit "Renewal Through Art" showcased works by 21 artists at the Petaluma Center for the Arts. Nearly two dozen artists joined together for "Reflections: After the Fire" at Sonoma State University.

But all the way up to the opening night of Oct. 6, 2018, Nathanson was still grappling with questions like: "Should we be doing this? Are we getting it right?"

Stanley also worried, "Are people going to want to relive this?"

Likewise, Maynard at SVMA was asking herself, "Are people ready for this?"

On opening night, the owners of the house who agreed to let Hassen create art from their ruins were sitting in the second row during the introductory discussion at the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art. As tears welled in their eyes, Maynard watched the wife to see how she might react.

"She was kind of like my canary in the coal mine," she remembered. "And I realized she felt good, and she felt like people cared about what had happened to them. That's what this was all about."

On opening night at the Museum of Sonoma County, Nathanson was still gauging the room when he saw a board member who lost her house, sitting alone on a bench in the middle of the exhibit.

"She looked so sad and I went over and sat next to her and said, 'Are you OK? Would you like to step outside?' And she said, 'No, I have to be in here. It's really hard, but thanks for putting this together. I feel like it's really healing,'" Nathanson recalled.

That same night, Nathanson would find his own catharsis while watching a dance performance in the gallery, where dancers recreated the sense of panic during a fire evacuation.

"It came out of the blue and hit me like a Mack truck. Tears just starting running down my face. I can tell you, it felt really good to let it out. I didn't even know it, but I had PTSD from that night," he said.

Looking back, he can see how it changed the museum's mission forever. On the surface, the organization had been called "Museums of Sonoma County" — a plural union of the art museum and the history museum, both considered separate entities. Now, after the fires showed how art and history are "forever interconnected," the board made the decision to rename it simply, "Museum of Sonoma County."

"Art is responsive to society and to history," he said. "There is always a backstory."