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# ANTHONY PEARSON

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AT ABOUT 11 PM, Anthony Pearson was at home in Los Angeles, exhausted, eating a bowl of cereal. That day he and his assistant, Ariel, had loaded the contents of his old studio into a rented truck and driven it from Culver City to his new studio in West Adams, two miles away. Over the previous four or five months, he had redesigned and renovated the space—a former auto garage—in collaboration with his landlord. Finally the work was finished. It was so late by the time they drove the U-Haul over that they simply rolled up the large door and parked the vehicle inside the building, leaving it until the following day to unload.

Back home at his dining room table, scrolling through the *Los Angeles Times* on his computer, Pearson saw an “L.A. Now” news item with the headline “Structure Fire West Adams.” He looked at it for a long moment, hesitating to click on the link as dread mounted within him. When he did, instantly he knew it was his studio. An aerial photograph showed a single-story building, its white walls cradling a glowing orange inferno. The distinctive rounded corner of the building was clearly visible from the helicopter, and there was no doubt in Pearson’s mind. More than one hundred firefighters were responding to the blaze, the article said, which was largely contained but not extinguished.

When his wife, Ramona, found him, he was on the floor. She managed to calm him down and coax him into making a rational plan of action. He realized he had to get over there immediately.

“When I drove over that night,” he tells me, “they had the street all blocked off. When I told them who I was, they let me in. My landlord was there with his wife and the guy who works for him, and some neighbors, and my studio assistant came down, because she learned about it somehow. And then I saw it. But it was dark, and there were a lot of people, and the fire was still in embers. I couldn’t get inside, and I couldn’t do anything.” Pearson milled around, helpless, and eventually went home.

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The next morning, as soon as the sun came up, he returned with Ramona and Ariel. They picked through the wreckage and pulled out whatever looked like it might be saved.

“It was a remarkable scene. The bow-truss ceiling was built from giant old growth hardwood timber beams. These things ... somebody had just driven the inside of a tree through a mill. A big block. All the way across. It was an 80-year-old structure. And when the ceiling came down in embers—and Ariel felt the same, everyone felt the same—the interior of this building looked like a giant fireplace. There were giant timbers cast about in there. Black.” The charred chassis of the U-Haul truck, its tires and fiberglass cargo hold completely melted, was underneath.

It did not take long for the men to arrive, the ambulance chasers and the opportunists. Pearson was taken aback at how many there were. They hung around for three days after the fire was announced in the evening news, loitering beside the destroyed building. He enumerates the various types: “People who board places up, people who like to sue other people, people who like to rebuild shit that has burned, people who like to haul off all the shit that needs to be taken away, people who come to put the big posts up to stabilize the wall to keep it from falling, people who represent you against insurance companies—who go to bat for you.” Some of them are sent by the insurance companies to investigate the causes of the fire. Around Los Angeles, fire departments don’t have the resources to undertake those kinds of investigations, so they largely delegate the job to the insurers, who are granted access to the site even while the tenant and owner—Pearson and his landlord—were not.

On the night that Pearson moved into the space, various pieces of electrical equipment were turned on for the first time. Because of a flaw in the construction of the building, the electrical system malfunctioned and caused a fire to start inside a wall. The

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structure, which was wood-framed, began to burn. “The ceiling had been sandblasted recently, so it was very porous, and full of sawdust,” Pearson says. “It looked beautiful, but it was open-pored and there was a lot of timber up there, with all the dust and stuff. The entire roof burned, but the walls remained standing.”

Inside the U-Haul truck was the nucleus of Pearson’s artistic practice, evidence of a career that stretched back to the late 90s, when he graduated from the photography MFA program at UCLA. “My complete archive of drawings, that was all destroyed. My entire archive of negatives and proof sheets: every negative that I owned, from every photographic work that I ever made, and every proof, was decimated. Over six hundred and fifty. Ten or twelve years of work. More—probably more like fifteen. I lost all the framed prints that were in my possession. Beautiful prints. The finest prints were often framed, so there were many exceptional prints destroyed.” Not to mention tools, hand-carving implements, ceramic vessels made by his friend the artist Shio Kusaka, and some antiques that had belonged to his parents. Almost everything was irreplaceable, and much of it—as with photographic negatives that have no resale value—uninsured. The economic loss was not the hardest part, says Pearson. But by an incredible stroke of luck, when Pearson’s assistant, Ariel, filled out the U-Haul rental form, she had ticked the box to insure its cargo. It cost an additional eight dollars; the insurers eventually paid out over $14,000 for the contents of the truck.

Anthony’s new studio is only two blocks down the street. It is a large, high-ceilinged building split into two, with a clean viewing area facing the street and a workshop opening onto a yard at the back. Anthony is an imposing presence: a big guy with a tanned, close-shaved head. His gentle demeanor, however, makes me sorry to have to ask him to relive the trauma of the fire. He offers to walk down with me to the site where the fire happened. We

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cross at the lights to an empty lot on the corner of Jefferson and Buckingham, where temporary panels of chain-link fencing surround a concrete foundation with nothing on it. Signs are tied to the fence: “Enroll Now: Grades K-8”; “We Remove Bed-Bugs”; “Plumbing”; “Roofing, Rain Gutters.” And freestanding on the concrete, the landlord’s name and phone number, and the large, hopeful word: “Available.”

We look out over the void, silently, and just as I expect him to turn back, Anthony pulls the fence away from the wall at one end and slips behind it. There is a wooden structure—a single room, unclad—still standing at the back of the lot. Inside, its walls are covered in graffiti; the first tagger who got in there clearly couldn’t believe his luck and went hog wild. There’s trash on the floor: a lottery scratch card, packaging for a bandage, cigarette lighters, a razor, empty spray cans, plastic bags, some plastic electric conduit, and piles and piles of Anthony’s contact sheets, damaged negatives in sleeves and mounted prints.

At these last items, he is as surprised as I am. I expect him to get upset, but he is bemused more than distressed. He can’t understand why this stuff still remains here; everything that was in this room was affected only by water damage from the hoses, and he salvaged most of it and dried it off. These things must have been in the truck he says, but all of that was taken away by the insurance company. Was it never taken, after all? There is nowhere on this vacant concrete lot for things to hide, so it is impossible to believe it was overlooked. From the pictures for the insurance claim, he says, you can see that they left nothing behind. Did somebody find it and return it to the site for safekeeping, for Pearson to find?

People of a certain generation, he says, have a deeply ingrained respect for photographic negatives. They know they’re important, even when they don’t know why. “They’re right up

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there with somebody's car keys, or somebody's phone," says Pearson. Most people never reuse negatives after that first printing, but they hold onto them anyway.

Even though they are irreparably damaged, I assume he will want to collect them and take them with us—not that we have any suitable bags to carry them in. But he pulls one or two sheets from the mire, peels some apart that have been stuck together by water from the hoses, and lays them out on the ground. He encourages me to take a few, as souvenirs, but mostly he leaves them where they lie. It seems so callous to abandon them there like that, for anyone to see, like pages torn from a journal. I think of the term "intellectual property" and the duties of care that it implies.

Something changed in Pearson after the fire. Aside from the post-traumatic stress, the neuroses—unplugging every appliance before leaving the studio at night, seeing electrical hazards everywhere he looked, fearing for the safety of his family at home, and, like Chambers, wrestling with the chafing suspicion that somehow it was all his fault, that he had caused this situation through his own irresponsibility, the guilt—aside from all that, Pearson found himself becoming oddly superstitious about the significance of the fire.

"It felt like a sign," he says. "The fire showed me that I'm supposed to stop making these things because they all burned. It's like lightning striking you. What more do you need, to know that you're not supposed to do this anymore?" There were six bodies of work, developed over almost a decade, that Pearson resolved to stop making. Much of his work is self-generative: negatives are kept and reused; a scan of the back of a drawing becomes a new print; a drawing becomes a negative, which becomes a photo print, which becomes a water-cut steel sculpture; old things are combined to make fresh arrangements.

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Some series, like his “Solarizations,” in which he made unique prints from photographs of his own abstract drawings, depended on the archive of negatives that was incinerated in the truck. After the fire, that series ended. Others, including the “Flares” series, were originally made from negatives but were now printed from digital files, stored on hard-drives. These also melted. “I could reclaim it somehow, but I’d feel like I was trying to relive something that was over,” says Pearson. “I don’t think I would be the person, if I lived up in the Malibu hills and my home burned, to rebuild in the same exact spot. I think I would be out of there. I have a history of wanting to leave things behind.”

Since the fire, Pearson’s work has turned away from photography, as a technique and a motif, and moved toward the conventions of painting and sculpture. He makes rectangular, wall-mounted panels of poured Hydrocal plaster that slump and pool geologically. He scores hundreds of concentric lines into the surfaces of plaster panels in order to make surfaces that shimmer and vibrate in their own darkness. When he adds black pigment to the plaster, which he often does, it resembles charred and nubby wood. The superficial aesthetic affinities with burnt materials, however, are probably less significant than these works’ technical realities; while photography (and drawing, to an extent) is a technique of speed and opportunity, the objects that Pearson makes now are achingly slow to produce, and strive for a material longevity that prints on paper, even framed, can never hope for.

“People will say to me, ‘Oh, that’s terrible, can I help you?’ But there’s nothing. There’s nothing that can be done. The destruction of artwork is a very particular thing. It’s not like your car got lit on fire. Or you were cooking at a barbecue and you burnt a napkin. These were things that were made, with this degree of intensity and over this period of time. It’s really

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a part of you. *Destroyed*. To me it feels very visceral. It almost feels as if my arm is like gangrenous and dangling, I just want to cut it off."