

WINE COUNTRY FIRES

Artists lost their works as flames raged through

3 who suffered enormous devastation in the blazes tell their stories — one in 'graphic journalism' form

By Charles Desmarais

An artist who loses his or her home to fire feels no deeper pain than others who might experience such a shattering loss. If what is gone includes their art, however, it becomes our loss as well.

Of the thousands of people displaced by North Bay fires in recent days, an uncountable number were artists. Celebrated professionals, promising novices, dedicated amateurs — we find them everywhere, but places like Wine Country seem to nurture more than a fair share.

Here are the stories of three of the artists who have lost their homes and work in the Wine Country Fires. Versions of these stories were published first online at SFChronicle.com.

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In aftermath of fire, he responded with a comic. Brian Fies sat down to a piece of drawing paper one day last week. He carefully penned at the top of the page, "ON MONDAY, MY HOUSE DISAPPEARED."

Coping with loss is a deeply personal thing, and anyone who experiences tragedy must find his or her own way. A route to some kind of normalcy. To someplace safe.

Fies, 57, is a graphic novelist.

"I've been a cartoonist all my life," he said in a telephone interview.

So he did what came naturally when the home he shared with his wife, Karen, in the Santa Rosa community of Larkfield, went up in flames. He started drawing.

The 18-page comic he created, "A Fire Story," is published, for now, as a post on his blog. (You can see it here, <http://bit.ly/2gvvxfr>) It describes the couple's evacuation; detailing decisions they made about what to take and where to go. It takes an ominous turn when he returns alone, bypassing police roadblocks on foot, to see how their house has fared.

"The sun was a dim orange disk in a salmon-gray curtain of smoke," he writes. "I inhaled my neighbors' lives."

Turning a corner, he lets out
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Courtesy Brian Fies

When graphic novelist Brian Fies lost his Santa Rosa home to fire, he responded the best way he knew: He started drawing.

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT



Photos by Mason Trinca / Special to The Chronicle

Graphic journalist Brian Fies points to where the second floor of his house once was in the Larksfeld neighborhood of Santa Rosa.

Artists lost their works to flames

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an expletive at what he sees.

"I picked my way down the middle of the street to avoid smoldering debris collapsed into gutters, alone on a sterile plain.

"Black toothpick trees, madly tilting chimneys, and the twisted steel frames of garage doors.

"Hell."

Fies generally likes to work with good materials — "2-ply Bristol board with brushes dipped in India ink," he said in an email. "A Fire Story" was done under duress, much faster and rougher than I normally would. I drew it with Sharpie markers and colored highlighters on terrible pulp paper because they were the only art supplies I could find at Target, the only open store within 20 miles of home. That's part of the point: How the comic was made reflects the circumstances it was made in."

This is not the first time that Fies has dealt with difficult subject matter in his work. Some years ago, he experienced what he calls his "break-through" when his mother became ill. He began to work on a comic describing her struggle and his responses.

"Mom's Cancer" started as a Web comic drawn between 2003 and 2005, winning the industry's respected Eisner Award. It was published as a hardcover book by Harry N. Abrams in 2006, which was quickly followed by translations in German, French and Italian.

When he started on the book, Karen had said, "It'll be good therapy for you." Fies allows that he writes, first, for himself. But it is also a matter of bearing witness. He once worked for a small newspaper as a reporter and he still writes freelance science pieces; he thinks of himself now as a "graphic journalist."

"Comics are the best way for me to tell these kinds of stories," he says. "It's like a direct tap into the reader's brain."

Glass sculptor loses "every single piece" in Atlas Fire. Glass melts at roughly 1,400 to 2,300 degrees Fahrenheit, depending on its composition. No one knows that better than Clifford Rainey, chair of the glass program at the California College of the Arts in Oakland and a sculptor who works principally in glass.

On Friday morning, Oct. 13, police allowed Rainey to briefly survey the damage for the first time after his Mount George home and studio burned in Napa's Atlas Fire on Sunday.



Clifford Rainey, above, examines his incinerated glass sculpting studio in Napa and Norma I. Quintana, left, returns to her studio at what used to be her home in Napa.



and the 911 Communication Center in San Francisco.

Moreover, a long-term environmental art project to restore an old pumice quarry on his property with native plants was unscathed. And some young coffeeberry bushes that had not yet been replanted survived, still healthy at what was the door of his cindered home.

Photographer loses studio and art, but never faith.

Norma I. Quintana, 58, is an established photographer whose book "Circus: A Traveling Life," published in 2014, documented the faces and the lives of a small troupe of performers who assembled from around the world to work out of the city of Hugo, Okla., population 5,310. She was getting ready to head to Puerto Rico, where her parents were born and where she spent much of her childhood, to photograph the people there whose lives were disrupted by Hurricane Maria.

Instead, she experienced disaster herself when her Silverado Country Club home and studio in Napa went up in flames. She and her husband of 36 years, Sergio M. Manubens, a doctor, and two of their three children were at home Sunday night.

"I received a call from a dear friend (who) told us to look outside and we saw from the distance an orange glow," she reported via email. Soon, they

"Every single piece of artwork I own (that) I've had since college was lost."

Glass sculptor Clifford Rainey

found police officers at their door, telling them to evacuate. "They would not leave until we left. The smoke was uber thick and we left with our autos ... we took the contents of our safety deposit box ... not much ... passports, etc. Then I managed to run into my studio and grab my Hasselblad ... with one lens!

"I just thought we would be back and never ever thought it would burn ... we had this house almost 30 years."

On Monday morning, she said, "We received a photograph from a mobile of a friend who snuck in to see our street and it was shocking. But I must say it has helped me prepare for what I will see with my very own eyes."

She had that opportunity when police escorted her and daughter Juliana Manubens to the site.

"I got excited for just one second," she said by telephone. "I have a lot of faith."

But everything was gone: Her home. Her studio. All of her framed prints, returned from exhibitions at such venues as the galleries and museums of Pennsylvania State and American universities and the Stanford University Center for Latin American Studies.

Her extensive collection of works by photographers she admires — Mary Ellen Mark, Sally Mann, Graciela Iturbide and others — purchased with proceeds from sales of her own pictures, is all gone. So is the collection of more than 100 vintage cameras.

Her most important negatives, however, were with a master printer in Portland, Ore., and thus are safe. And, she said, she has received "a lot of love and support." Friends who now live in Houston loaned her family their vacant west Napa house.

"Artists have reached out to me. ... The circus people have reached out to me." It has given her perspective on "all the politics and nastiness" of recent months. "Now I've just realized, that's kinda not important." Even the lost exhibition prints have less significance.

"The photographs are in me," she said.

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"Every single piece of artwork I own (that) I've had since college was lost," he said by telephone.

He shared the property with his partner Rachel Raiser, a floral designer, who also lost her studio.

Three shipping containers on the property held 34 life-size figures Rainey was just finishing. There were also 30 glass works in the form of hand tools, along with the original old tools that had served as models. All melted.

Born in Northern Ireland in

1948, Rainey has invested years and untold financial resources in the career now so dramatically curtailed. But his life's work is far from all lost.

He has glass sculptures in the collections of the de Young Museum; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; and other significant institutions. His public art commissions include the Lime Street Railway Station in Liverpool, England; the Jeddah Monument in Saudi Arabia;