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After the fire, Joe Goode finds a new passion

The artist was devastated when a fire destroyed his art studio. But then he found a digital camera in the damage and got some ideas.

By Anne-Marie O'Connor,
Los Angeles Times
Staff Writer

It was any artist's nightmare. Painter Joe Goode and his wife, Hiromi Katayama, were sleeping in their Mar Vista home when their wolf-sized dog, Pollock, appeared at the foot of the bed, barking loudly. Pollock wouldn't stop until they stumbled out of bed, and followed him, half-asleep, into the small yard leading to Goode's painting studio.



What Goode recalls seeing that morning seemed unimaginable, unthinkable, impossible. Smoke poured from his studio. Flames licked through the skylights. Inside were more than 100 valuable artworks, representing 40 years of Goode's painting, as well as works by painters Ed Ruscha, Kenneth Price, Larry Bell and Ed Moses. "At first, I was kind of in shock," said Goode, a gray-haired, soft-spoken man with bright blue eyes and a thoughtful demeanor. "I didn't know what to do."

A Los Angeles Fire Department report called the blaze a "spontaneous combustion from oily rags." Goode called it a personal disaster. He stumbled around the charred studio for a couple of days, shaken. On the third day, he found his digital camera, deep in a drawer of a metal cabinet. He figured the camera was ruined. But he idly aimed it at the wreckage, and to his surprise, the shutter clicked, capturing the blackened studio walls, the ravaged paintings that hung like ghosts in their frames. The photos were spooky, intriguing. That was in May 2005.

Goode took the images of his ravished life's work and began to paint over them. One wall-sized work, "Lost Painting, Fire," captures the inferno, with incendiary splashes of orange and yellow paint, and a superimposed photograph of a forest fire he shot long ago. The painting dominates Goode's new art exhibition, "Ashes," a collection at the DNJ Gallery that represents Goode's phoenix-like comeback.

"It's most people's worst fear," said Moses, a notoriously dapper 82-year-old hipster with a gray Vandyke, sitting in front of the painting at the opening earlier this month. "It's happened to a few artists. He lost paintings that were very valuable. Everybody could identify with it. But he took the residue and made it into something positive."

The feeling that Goode had overcome the insurmountable was the prevailing mood at the exhibition, which runs through May 24. The crowd, many of them close friends, came to pay homage to Goode's tenacity and resilience.

"He sure worked it out," said musician Ry Cooder, his tall frame cloaked in a comfortable brown fleece coat and loose black pants, a knit cap over his gray curls. "It's a fantastic improvisation."

"I was fascinated to see him improvise, given the circumstances," Cooder said. "He would have made a great jazz musician. A lot of people would have been devastated -- or worse. He's a tough man, Joe."

Creative sparks

There was a bizarre coincidence to the disaster. Goode was already working with images of fire when his studio burned. For years he photographed forest fires, awed by their power. In 2004, he was immersed in a series, "Burned Out," in which he photographed previous works, mounted the images on insulation boards and painted over them with oil, then used a blow torch to burn away some of the surface and create depth and shadow. Those 40 works were destroyed.

It's been almost three years since the fire, and Goode has had a chance to absorb his loss.

"Well, you either get up, or you don't, you know," said Goode, sitting on the floor of his rebuilt studio, his black-and-white brindle dog -- named for the painter Jackson Pollock -- at his feet. "I lost it. What's gone is gone."

Behind Goode and Pollock are three blown-up black-and-white photographs of twisting oak trees, the first shot in spring, the last in the winter and laden with snow - the seasons of life. Goode will paint over them in acrylic, which he began using after the fire to avoid flammable solvents.

"Basically it gave me new life," he said of the fire. "I don't mean I'm glad it happened. But this was the beginning of a whole new body of work I'm immersed in. If I hadn't lost the paintings I lost, I wouldn't be doing the paintings I'm doing today. It evolved out of this."

Moving beyond "this" -- the fire, and its wreckage -- posed a psychological challenge.



Joe Goode Studio
BURNED: "2004mm 28pph stairs," from a series Goode worked on before the fire. Goode had burned away some of the surface for effect.



Joe Goode Studio
IN COLOR: Goode painted over the black and white photos with acrylic, which he began using because it's nonflammable.

"Honestly? The paintings that I lost, of my own, I had a way of dealing with that," Goode said. "But the paintings I lost of my friends', I had no way of dealing with."

Twenty or so of his friends showed up at the studio in the days after the fire to see what could be salvaged. "I went into the studio afterward, and it was gorgeous," Moses said. "Most people would look at it like a burned-out shell. An artist will look at it as a visual thing. They'll say, 'How can I capture this?' "

Eventually Goode got to that place -- with a little help from friends. Fellow artists donated works to an auction at Santa Monica Museum of Art to raise funds to rebuild. His studio is now a soaring sky lit space with a second-story loft office whose balcony overlooks the studio and windows capture a sweeping view of the Santa Monica Mountains.

Still, new beginnings can be difficult, at any age.

Goode was born in 1937 in Oklahoma City, where he attended St. Francis of Assisi Catholic School with Ruscha, another Los Angeles artist. Ruscha still recalls seeing Goode's messy, unmade bed when he came to visit on Saturdays.

"Could he, or I, for that matter, have realized that decades later he would be making paintings of unmade beds?" Ruscha asked in a written appreciation of Goode's work distributed by the gallery. "Joe would laugh at the nobleness of a fried-egg sandwich, or even a telephone, and then, sometime in the future, would find himself painting pictures of these very things."

His exhibition of the work he made after he was, literally, burned out is laden with images -- the forest fires, floating steps, a memorable waterfall, a tornado, unmade beds -- suffused with personal meaning. The talismanic leitmotif suggests Goode possesses some secret of internal continuity that defies even the most catastrophic creative loss.

"For 40 years," Goode marvels, he has hung out with the same artist friends, gone to their shows once a month. "For 40 years," he repeats, marveling at the passage of time.

Goode came to Los Angeles in 1959 to attend the Chouinard Art Institute. He lived in the Hollywood Hills, supporting himself with odd jobs, including a window-washing gig he got at a Venice party that led to one of his first key exhibitions.

"There was much less stress," in those days, Goode said. "It was certainly better for artists. There was a much smaller art scene. It was like a club. Everybody knew each other. There was much less emphasis on money. In the 1960s, there was nobody buying the art we made."

The work began a slow rise to prominence following a seminal 1962 exhibition at the Pasadena Art Museum, where Goode's work was shown along with works by Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Jim Dine, Wayne Thiebaud and Ruscha -- an exhibition that helped put Pop Art on the map.

Since then Goode has incorporated conceptual and surreal elements, and become a well-established artist, represented in numerous collections -- LACMA, MOCA, the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney in New York.

Maybe a new start, with a new creative quest, is Goode's defiance of mortality. "I'm not so worried about whether my work will look like a Joe Goode," he said, petting Pollock. "I'm worried about seeing something I've never seen before."

anne-marie.oconnor@latimes.com

dnj

154 1/2 north la brea avenue
los angeles, california 90036
323 931-1311
www.dnjgallery.net