

Kevin Cooley

WIRED

[MICHAEL HARDY](#) 01.04.19 09:00 AM

A WILDFIRE WAS EXTRA CLOSE TO HOME FOR THIS LA PHOTOGRAPHER

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AFTER YEARS OF playing with fire, Kevin Cooley finally got burned. Inspired by the smoke signals used at the [Vatican](#) to signal the election of a new pope, the multimedia artist began setting controlled fires in and around his studio and [photographing their multicolored plumes of smoke](#). In a way, it was the logical next step for an artist whose previous projects have examined [earth](#), [water](#), and [wind](#), the other three classical elements.

But in 2017, Cooley's personal and professional lives unexpectedly intersected when [the La Tuna fire](#) nearly destroyed his Los Angeles home, which sits on a two-acre lot

in the Tujunga neighborhood of the San Fernando Valley, between the Verdugo and San Gabriel Mountains. The fire broke out on September 1, and quickly began racing through the hills of the Los Angeles suburb of Burbank.

Cooley happened to be helping his son assemble an emergency preparedness kit for a school assignment when he first noticed smoke rising from behind a nearby hill. "It was hard to tell how far away it was, because there was just this giant smoke column," he recalls. He and his family had just moved into the house after a six-month renovation; now they had to pack their most valuable belongings in a car in case they needed to evacuate. (At the top of Cooley's list: hard drives containing his digital photographs, and some old negatives.)

The night passed uneventfully, Cooley and his wife sleeping in shifts, but in the morning the fire crested a nearby hill, with only an empty expanse of dry chaparral between it and them. After helping his family evacuate, Cooley returned with his camera to document the possible immolation of his home. "The only way I could process the fire was to photograph it," he says. "I took a lot of the photographs from my driveway, essentially."

The hard work of local firefighters saved the house, and Cooley continued photographing the aftermath of the fire, which eventually consumed over 7,000 acres, becoming one of the largest in Los Angeles history. Over the following weeks, Cooley was amazed to see the charred landscape showing early signs of recovery. "The chaparral ecosystem only regenerates through fire," he says. "It was amazing how fast it came back."

After the close call with destruction, Cooley briefly considered leaving LA. "But where do you go that's safe from natural disasters?" he says. "New York has flooding from hurricanes, the Midwest has tornadoes, anywhere in

California has earthquakes. I really don't know where safe is." Besides, he points out, unloading his house might prove a challenge for the immediate future.

"There's a charred landscape right behind me—that's not exactly a great selling point."