


# SEARCHING FOR SERENITY

NOVEMBER 1, 2025 - JANUARY 4, 2026



A large, stylized teal leaf graphic with white veins, curving from the top left towards the bottom right, framing the text on the left side of the page.

We wish to thank Carole Ann Klonarides, Meher McArthur, Victor Raphael, Susanna Meiers, and Arts for LA for their partnership during the curation of this exhibition. A special thank you to Zach Marks, whose compassionate guidance was essential while filming with Altadena artists.

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# SEARCHING FOR SERENITY

The Eaton Canyon Fire of 2025 brought sudden devastation to the Altadena foothills, scorching cherished landscapes, damaging homes, and uprooting entire communities. For many, the loss was both personal and shared. For others, these events served as a profound reminder of life's inherent instability, shaking the sense of safety that many once took for granted.

While recovery is ongoing, the events of 2025 reshaped the community's sense of place and purpose. The response revealed the resilience of Altadena's spirit—rooted in its deep ties to nature, sense of belonging, and vibrant artistic community. Out of the ashes, new collaborations and relationships began to emerge, showing that even in the face of adversity, connection can thrive. Neighbors came together to clear debris, offer shelter, and share resources, while community centers became gathering places for healing, dialogue, and creative expression. Several movements and organizations—Altadena Not for Sale, Altgether, and ReGreen Altadena—sprouted to facilitate community rebuilding, resist displacement, and oversee efforts to restore the natural environment.

Months later, the land and the people tell a story of both loss and renewal. As new shoots rise from the blackened soil, *Searching for Serenity* brings together artists who echo this process through their creative practice, turning to nature and art as spaces for reflection, recovery, and growth. Part curated and part community call, the exhibition gathers artists who explore the intertwined process of transformation and remembrance. This collective offering seeks to hold space for the restoration of land, body, and spirit. *Searching for Serenity* is not about healing — it is healing. Each work in this exhibition invites viewers to slow down and to witness the quiet labor of emerging on the other side. It is a shared ritual — an invitation to breathe, to hope, and to begin again.

- Marina Erfle, *Director of Education and Exhibitions*

# SERENITY CURATED

The Eaton Canyon Fire left a deep mark on the Altadena community. Among those affected were local

artists who rely on the region's natural surroundings for inspiration. Many lost their homes, studios, archives, and the landscapes that once fueled their creativity. Yet in the ash, something quietly bloomed. In the fire's aftermath, many turned to art as a way to process their loss.

*Searching for Serenity* features four Altadena artists—Delbar Shahbaz, Laura Parker, Robert J. Lang, and Chantée Benefield—who turned to canvas, photography, origami, mixed media, and sound to explore themes of displacement and transformation, finding solace in shared creation and rediscovering the steady rhythm of nature. Drawing deeply from the artists' experiences, this exhibition reflects their healing—how the night sky can replace the vanished whisper of trees, how the land helps us remember who we are, and how a junco's flutter or a school of koi can remind us of nature's quiet miracles.

The exhibition is accompanied by a short film by Zach Marks, who followed the lives of Altadena artists in the months after the fire. His film bears witness to the creativity that endures against all odds, serving as a testament to the human spirit.



# Delbar Shahbaz

## *The Body Remembers the Land, 2025*

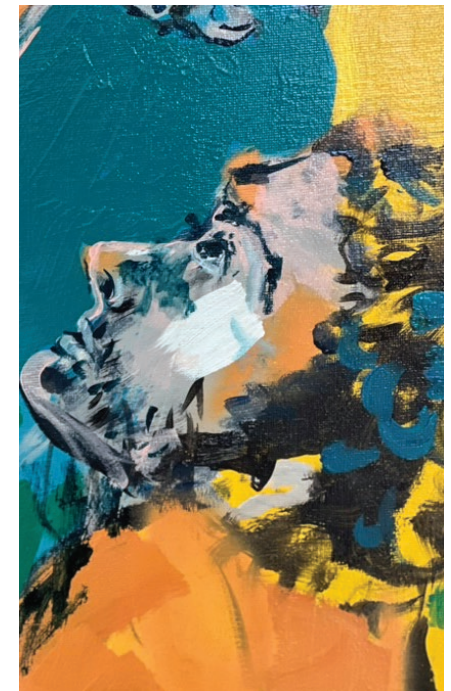
Acrylic and oil on canvas

7' by 15', 5 panels

Courtesy of the artist

*The Body Remembers the Land* is a large-scale painting that explores the tension between fragility and resilience through figures navigating a vibrant, mythic landscape shaped by migration, memory, and nature's force. The work immerses viewers in a storm of color and emotion, where human and hybrid forms move through chaos—not as victims, but as witnesses, seekers, and children of rebirth. Inspired by Shahbaz's experience as an immigrant and survivor of the Eaton Canyon fire, this piece reflects the body as a site of transformation and connection to land. The wind—a recurring motif in the artist's work—acts as both destroyer and messenger, carrying stories of displacement, fire, and renewal. It is a character in its own right, sweeping through the canvas with urgency and grace, echoing the turmoil of a world in flux.

*The Body Remembers the Land* reflects Shahbaz's evolving relationship with the environment since immigrating to the United States. Displacement brings a sense of disconnection, but through art, the artist seeks to create homes within her body and spirit. Each painting is a fragment of her soul, bridging the internal landscapes of identity with the external landscapes of nature. The fire, though devastating, felt like a message from the earth—a call to listen, to reconnect, and to care for our shared world.







**Delbar Shahbaz** is a Los Angeles-based artist originally from Iran. With over 24 years of experience, her work navigates the intersections of migration, resilience, and ecological consciousness, exploring identity as a fluid, multidimensional concept shaped by cultural and social context. Her recent series, *Between Earth and Skin*, investigates Iranian identity, myth, and cultural healing through vibrant color, hybrid creatures, and symbolic landscapes. Shahbaz holds MFAs from the Art University in Tehran and ArtCenter College of Design in Los Angeles. She has exhibited internationally in Iran, the United States, Canada, Germany, England, and Turkey. Her work is held in private and institutional collections, and her career has been supported by the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation Grant, CERF+ Emergency Grant, and multiple residencies, including Headlands Center for the Arts and High Desert Test Site.

# Laura Parker

## *Contest of Silence, 2025*

Multi-media installation

Dimensions are variable

Courtesy of the artist

Laura Parker's new multi-media art installation *Contest of Silence* centers around a nearly missed testament to the persistence-of-life found within the cavity of the artist's lost home near Eaton Canyon. While shoveling through charred debris, Parker managed to force open a cabinet where she jarringly found a freshly built bird's nest among densely packed ashes of once-legible books. Hovering a camera over the nest revealed a single egg. The artist's investment in these ruins suddenly veered onto a new path of healing. Over the next weeks Parker cautiously documented the fragile drama of a dark-eyed junco that nested within the debris. In the remains of her blackened metal cabinet, this bird brought forth four eggs, three hatchlings, and finally, an abrupt emptiness. Parker's multi-media installation pays tribute to this phenomena of discovery, transformation, and the sensation of suspended time and waiting, inviting us into a world where nature's quiet miracles become lessons in hope.







**Laura Parker's** photo-based installations upend notions of sight, space, and time. From cooking pot bottoms to planets, nothing escapes her acquisitive eye. Over a 35-year career, she has exhibited and lectured locally and internationally. Exhibitions in museums and galleries include Sidecar (of Night gallery) (Los Angeles); CMay Gallery (Los Angeles); Williamson Gallery, ArtCenter College of Design (Pasadena); DENK Gallery (Los Angeles); Fellows of Contemporary Art (Los Angeles, California); Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, California); John Michael Kohler Arts Center (Wisconsin); KONTORprojects (Denmark); PS Amsterdam (Netherlands); De Beyer Center for Contemporary Art (Netherlands); Richard Heller Gallery (Los Angeles); Long Beach Museum of Art (Long Beach); Rayko Photo Center (San Francisco); and the Torrance Art Museum (Torrance). Parker earned her BFA, Magna cum Laude from UCLA and her MFA from CalArts, Valencia. She currently lives and works in Los Angeles.



# Robert J. Lang

## *Vertical Pond III: From the Ashes, 2025*

Uncut squares of handmade paper from the Origamido Studio, ash, wire, acrylic

Dimensions are variable

Courtesy of the artist

Inspired by past work, which was destroyed in the Eaton Canyon Fire, along with the artist's home, studio, and artwork, Robert J. Lang's *Vertical Pond III: From the Ashes* demonstrates connection and resurrection while paying homage to Descanso Gardens. The installation is a wall-mounted collection of origami koi from hand-made sheets of paper that incorporate ashes from its predecessor, *Vertical Pond II*. Lang created the paper in collaboration with longtime friends and master papermakers Michael LaFosse and Richard Alexander of the Origamido Studio. The artist innovatively transposes the peaceful image of a koi pond onto a vertical plane, demonstrating how the ancient art of origami can be reinterpreted for a contemporary context. The installation conveys the complexity of Lang's fusion of mathematics and the poetry of the natural world, transforming geometry into motion, and precision into peace. Through patience and intention, he captures the fluid grace of koi— a symbol of strength, perseverance, and transformation—as they rise toward light, embodying the slow rhythm of healing. In the stillness of paper and the movement of form, *Vertical Pond III* becomes a meditation on transformation—how the simplest materials can reflect the depth, resilience, and quiet beauty of nature itself.







**Robert J. Lang** has been an avid student of origami for over fifty years and is now recognized as one of the world's leading masters of the art, with over 800 original designs. His artwork has been shown in over 50 exhibitions around the world, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Mingei Museum in San Diego, The Leigh Yawkey Woodson Museum in Wausau, WI, and more. Lang is one of the pioneers of the cross-disciplinary marriage of origami with mathematics and his design techniques have been adopted by origami artists worldwide. He has consulted on applications of origami to medical devices, air-bag design, and space telescopes, is the author, co-author, or editor of twenty-one books and numerous articles on origami and lectures on the connections between origami, mathematics, science, and technology.

# Chantée Benefield

## *...the forest for the trees, 2025*

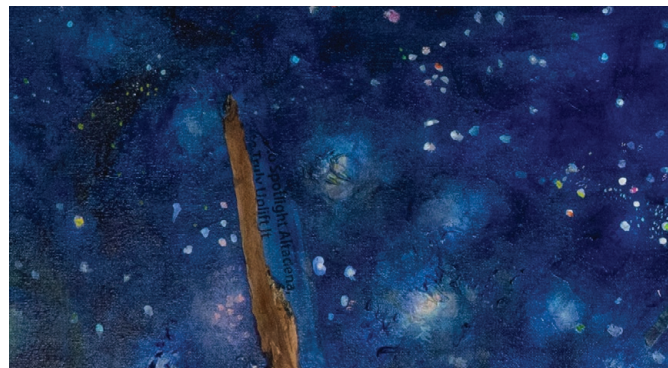
Mixed media on canvas

36" x 48"

Courtesy of the artist

Following the loss of her family home to the Eaton Canyon Fire, Chantée Benefield still feels too close to the event. Daily trials and responsibilities, the reminders of her community's loss are ever-present and difficult to process. A lifelong resident of Altadena, the artist often found serenity on long rambling walks through her tree-filled town. Seeing the glimmer of the night sky on the way home or a glimpse of a colorful, tree-silhouetted sunset from the artist's bedroom window always added a bit of awe to her favorite place. Benefield's recent visits to Altadena reveal a drastically changed landscape. The many blocks of verdant, vibrant homes have become large swaths of dirt hosting a few tree trunks or stumps holding court with crowds of weeds.

*...the forest for the trees* reflects some of these experiences and places somewhere between memory and the present day. The beauty of the serene is near and slightly out of touch at the same time. Benefield finds moments of serenity in the process of painting these memories, and her hope for the future is found in the consistency of nature, the stars, the changing sky, and seasons.







**Chantée Benefield** is a Los Angeles-based mixed-media artist and designer whose work highlights and celebrates Black culture. Her work spans from representational portraiture to abstract expressionism. She received her training in painting at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and pursued work in fashion design and interior decoration before transitioning to a career in film and television as a scenic painter. Benefield's artwork ranges from realistic portraiture and fantasy art to abstract expressionism. Informed by historical art and inspired by African American culture, she combines traditional painting techniques with collage, utilizing discarded "ephemera" (bits of anything and everything) that vibrate with life and memory. Sometimes spontaneous and highly intuitive in its creation, Benefield's goal is to make an inspiring statement that highlights and celebrates her culture.



# Zach Marks

## *Feathers, 2025*

Digital short film

Duration

14 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Editor: Rob Faulk

Composer and Sound Designer: Joaquim Timoner

Descanso Gardens partnered with an emerging filmmaker Zach Marks to explore and document the extensive loss and recovery efforts in the aftermath of the Eaton Canyon Fire. The disaster struck a vibrant community of artists, with many losing not only their homes but also their studios, archives, and entire bodies of work. Marks' documentary *Feathers* captures the raw, personal stories of three artists in *Searching for Serenity* in the months following the event. Through intimate interviews with Laura Parker, Delbar Shahbaz, and Robert J. Lang, Marks documents a community grappling with profound loss. The film highlights the artists' resilience and determination as they navigate the difficult, yet hopeful, path toward recovery. Marks' lens is focused on the psychological impact of displacement, exploring how the artists find new ways to create, connect, and reclaim a sense of peace amidst the ashes. The film illustrates that creativity can persist in the face of devastation, serving as a testament to the human spirit.







**Zach Marks** is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker whose work explores resilience, renewal, and the connection between people and their environments. His earlier film, *A Valley Reborn*, examined mining restoration efforts along Colorado's San Juan River, showcasing how communities and landscapes heal together. More recently, he served as an associate producer for *All The Walls Came Down*, a documentary about recovery following the Eaton Canyon Fire. His latest short film *Feathers* continues this exploration, following three artists as they rebuild their creative lives from the ashes.



# A COMMUNITY IN REFLECTION

After the Eaton Canyon Fire, we faced a shared ache—the loss of neighborhoods, memories, and a sense of calm. *Searching for Serenity* recognizes that everyone needs a space to heal and rediscover peace. We invited artists of all backgrounds to submit their work through an

open juried competition. Artists were asked to bridge creativity with personal storytelling by contemplating questions such as: What nature experience helps you feel grounded? What plant or place symbolizes healing or offers hope? What landscape sparks feelings of compassion, resilience, or strength?

The community response included artists who lost their homes and those who were spared; yet all were affected. From expressions of loss to visions of renewal, *Searching for Serenity* explores the ways we heal when we look closely at the natural world around us. Each work offers a moment of stillness: a photograph of a moonlit landscape, a sculpture honoring regrowth, a painting that listens to birdsong. Together, these pieces remind us that healing can be a shared journey—rooted in community and the beauty that surrounds us.

*With more than one hundred participating artists, this exhibition reflects a remarkable breadth of experience and creativity. While every submission contributes to the spirit of Searching for Serenity, this catalog highlights a selection of featured artists to represent the diversity of artistic expression. Every artist's contribution, however, is deeply valued and integral to the collective spirit that defines this exhibition.*



| FIRST PLACE

# Ted Smudde and David Gilbaugh

*Burnt Offering*, 2024

Dark brown stoneware layered  
with porcelain slip  
15" x 7" x 7"  
Courtesy of the artists

*Burnt Offering* is a collaborative ceramic vessel by Ted Smudde and David Gilbaugh. Thrown in dark stoneware and coated in porcelain slip, the form was carved, altered, and stretched to create textures that resemble charred wood and bark. Fired to cone 10 in a reduction atmosphere, the piece achieves dramatic contrast and depth. Inspired by post-wildfire landscapes, *Burnt Offering* honors nature's resilience—how blackened forests slowly return to life. Through fire, pressure, and transformation, this vessel becomes a symbol of strength, memory, and renewal.



| SECOND PLACE

## Victoria Loschuk

*Wreath to Honor Los Angeles I, 2025*

Graphite on mylar  
24" x 24"  
Courtesy of the artist

"Something about nature's beauty strikes me, even in our sprawling city. In a particular moment, it can provide me with the space and balance that I need to recompose myself, to decompress in the hustle and bustle of city life. Nature, the flora of Los Angeles and Southern California gives me hope for recovery in our recent experiences and the plants offer life giving strength in our current climatic crisis. The circular form of the wreath speaks to the interconnectedness of life in our special biome." - Victoria Loschuk





## | THIRD PLACE

# Olga Mosqueda

*Life Returns, 2025*

Oil on canvas

22" x 28"

Courtesy of the artist

"Recently I wandered near the scorched hills of Sierra Madre. I saw a small family of deer. My heart ached as they stood frozen, desperately trying to remain unseen. I envisioned a painting that would encapsulate a juxtaposition of vulnerability and hope. I sought to portray the charred landscape, adorned with blossoms and rain clouds—a representation of both the pain of loss and the potential for renewal. Hiking near the hills daily helps me to feel grounded and rejuvenated, allowing me to witness nature's remarkable ability to heal and thrive once more." - *Olga Mosqueda*





## Colleen Boye

*Reflections, 2025*

Risograph on cardstock  
11" x 17" | Courtesy of the artist

"Eaton Canyon, where I volunteer, has long been a source of tranquility for me. When my home and the canyon were destroyed on the same night, I was left contemplating the jagged fragments of my life. In this piece, a coyote gazes into the Eaton Canyon creek, seeing it as it once was. Even among the ruins, there is still peace to be found." - Colleen Boye



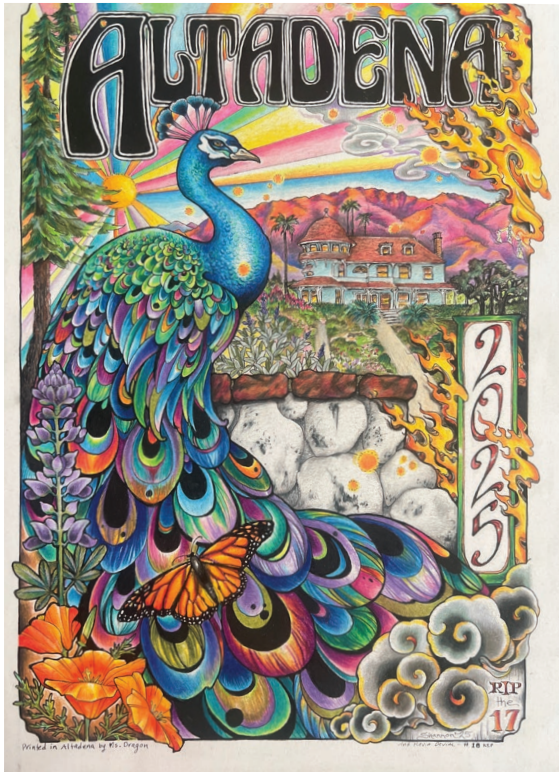
## Marilee Nielsen

*You Are Not What Has Been Done to You, 2021*

Watercolor on paper  
11" x 14" | Courtesy of the artist

"This painting depicts a prickly pear cactus blooming two years after being burned in a fire. I saw it along a trail I regularly rode on my mountain bike and was overcome by the beauty of a fresh coral bud emerging from the scarred, burned nopale. I had been watching the cacti struggle to recover—some hopelessly withering, others heroically sending out tiny new bits of growth—and it reminded me of something my spiritual teacher once said: *"You are not what has been done to you."* Memories and hope came together in the making of this painting." - Marilee Nielsen





## Shannon LaBaw

*Altadena Phoenix, 2025*

India ink and prismacolor  
11" x 17" | Courtesy of the artist

"I created this poster using iconic symbols of the Altadena landscape—its plants, creatures, and the Andrew McNally House, our architectural crown jewel that was lost in the Eaton Fire. Miraculously, the flock of peacocks that lives deep in the heart of *the burn* has survived, as have many native trees, flowers, and plants. These stand as our symbols of hope and recovery." - Shannon LaBaw



## William Stranger

*Fire Rock, 2025*

Redwood salvaged from Descanso Gardens tree  
22" x 14" x 4" | Courtesy of the artist

"My Altadena home of 28 years burned to the ground in the Eaton Fire. The experience of displacement and losing everything was traumatic, but also strangely liberating. I made a "stone" for the La Ayuda Network fire victim fundraiser, which inspired me to create a larger "rock" for this show. The lumber came from a redwood that grew at Descanso Gardens. The redwood is burned to create a subtle patina and to reflect the journey I have experienced through fire. The result is stoic, serene, and silent." - William Stranger



## Mary Veselich

### *A Ceramic Garden From The Ashes, 2025*

Copper, clay, stones  
10" x 12" x 10" | Courtesy of the artist

"Gardening helps me feel grounded. Creating cacti and succulents out of ceramics and arranging them into small "gardens" brings me joy. My home in Altadena was lost in the Eaton Fire, but two copper bowls I had been saving for my gardens survived, along with a few ceramic pieces. I have combined these with new works to create this garden as an homage to the past and a celebration of renewal."

- Mary Veselich



## Walter Cochran-Bond

### *Double Pane, 2025*

Photograph  
22" x 18" | Courtesy of the artist

"*Double Pane* (a very personal double *entendre*) reflects the Olympic Mountains in a double-paned glass door. It symbolizes the double pain experienced by my family due to the loss of our two Altadena homes in the Eaton Fire. The image was captured while we were in Seattle, seeking solace and a sense of normalcy in a familiar and beloved place."

- Walter Cochran-Bond





## Gloria Cassidy

*Past Present Future, 2025*

Collage, original hand printed paper using acrylic paint  
18" x 24" | Courtesy of the artist

"Trees have always been symbols of growth, endurance, and healing. I'm especially drawn to deciduous and fruiting trees. Observing their ability to go barren, bud new life, and bring forth blossoms and fruit helps me navigate the seasons of my own life. At the center of this piece is a healing tree, supporting past trauma as it transforms into a place of abundance and peace. The long-necked birds are witnesses, suggesting the possibility of rising above circumstances on wings of hope." - Gloria Cassidy



## Joan Sharron

*Wilderness Retreat, 2025*

Mixed media  
11" x 14.5" | Courtesy of the artist

"Mother Nature offers us an incredible healing power. This small wooden cabin, sitting quietly amidst towering trees in a forested landscape, makes me feel grounded in the beauty and tranquility of its surroundings. The abstract, circular patterns are intended to relax the spirit and bring calm to what might otherwise be a tumultuous life. Vibrant greens and earthy tones create a dreamlike atmosphere, suggesting a harmonious blend of nature and imagination—an escape, a retreat. I find inspiration and hope in nature." - Joan Sharron



## Lia Halloran

*Fire Drop January 2025 (IV), 2025*

Ink on duralar

14" x 17" | Courtesy of the artist and Luis de Jesus Gallery

*Fire Drop* is a new series that explores the fragile tension between natural disaster and human intervention. Centered on images of California wildfires, the work draws from media coverage of the January 2025 fires in Altadena and the Pacific Palisades, particularly photographs documenting the aerial battle to contain the blazes. The series builds on a visual and conceptual contrast: the abstraction and chaos of fire itself—shifting between smoke, heat, and scorched terrain, then momentarily interrupted by the sharp, brief appearance of a helicopter or aircraft. These scenes juxtapose the uncontrollable with a fleeting suggestion of control, safety, or hope. The works lean into this tension, holding space between destruction and recognition, dissolution and structure. *Fire Drop* continues an ongoing inquiry into the relationship between landscape, crisis, and the limits of visibility. It asks what we choose to see, and what remains obscured when facing disaster on both personal and environmental scales.



## Virginia Causton-Keene

*Descanso Path, 2024*

Oil on board

20" x 24" | Courtesy of the artist

"Descanso Gardens is my sanctuary—a place where I go to unwind, breathe in the scent of roses, and let my thoughts drift, often to England. This particular path is one of my favorites, especially in the quiet stillness of early morning. I worked with a limited palette to maintain a sense of harmony and cohesion throughout the painting. For me, this piece is a window into my personal paradise, a place I can return to anytime just by looking at the painting hanging on the wall."

- Virginia Causton-Keene





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**Delbar Shahbaz** - *The Body Remembers the Land*, 2025

