

## DE LOS

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# Artist Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio, affected by the Eaton fire, traces memories and time



(Elana Marie / De Los; Photos by William Liang / For De Los)

By Sarah Quiñones Wolfson

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**E**ddie Rodolfo Aparicio didn't sleep the entire night before the Eaton fire hit his Altadena neighborhood in early January. The intensity of the winds and power outage had him on edge. The artist and his partner were sitting in the dark, on their phones, glued to the news as harrowing details came out of the Palisades. But Aparicio's evening took a devastating turn when he began receiving messages from friends that a fire erupted above Pasadena.

"We could see these massive flames wicking off the top of the mountain and moving fast," he said.

Aparicio left without knowing it would be the last time he would see his house.

The couple safely fled with their three pets — cats Bird and Mammon and a dog, Dune — and a few belongings. But his home office contained years of drawings, drafts of projects and notes. There were also paintings by his father, Juan Edgar Aparicio, an artist whose work captured the trauma of the Salvadoran civil war.

All of it was destroyed.

# Tanya Leighton

A rare, 100-year-old blue cactus Aparicio planted with hundreds of native species in his yard are among the scorched remains. An immense sculptural beehive oven, “Pansa del Publicó,” which he originally built as a public sculpture at L.A. State Historic Park, is irrecoverable due to toxification from the fire. It also operated as a mutual-aid project to feed people during the COVID-19 pandemic and as a nod to his parents: His father, who was an activist and student leader in El Salvador organizing with the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front and his mother, a lawyer and former executive director at the Central American Resource Center.

One of the paintings by his father lost to the fire, “[Pesadilla de un General](#),” was created in 1994 and focused on children whose lives were taken in the war. In the painting, a young girl — engulfed in a radiant glow — points her finger at a general standing before her. The model was Eddie’s sister Carolina, named after Juan Edgar’s preteen daughter, who was disappeared by paramilitary forces along with her mother.

Weeks before the fire, Aparicio brought several of his father’s wooden wall sculptures and paintings home from his art studio in North Hollywood, thinking they would be safer there — one included a dedication to the 1989 massacre of six Jesuit priests in El Salvador.



Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio and his dog Dune. (William Liang / For de Los)

# Tanya Leighton

“I consider [these] to be his most significant and important works,” Aparicio said. “I held on to them because I was having conversations with different institutions so they could collect them, care for them and display them.”

Aparicio says his dad has rarely been able to talk about this sensitive period: “It’s part of why he stopped making that type of work.”

Their loss, he acknowledged, “has definitely been heavy.”

But his father, who lives in La Palma, El Salvador, is hoping to bring the paintings back to life.

“Even though the paintings were destroyed in the fire, it’s something that happened to the world and happened to El Salvador, specifically,” said Juan Edgar. “I want to be able to remake them. The fires can’t take the reality of that away.”

And just like his father, Aparicio says he will continue making art that tackles causes important to him, which now includes his experience escaping the Eaton fire.

The 34-year-old often engages with the concept of ever-shifting time and materiality as a tool for preserving and archiving realities. The torched properties in his Altadena town were a reminder of how the fire that devastated his community is connecting to his work.

Aparicio explores themes of erasure and memory to honor and reflect on his family’s history during and after the Salvadoran civil war by using materials such as amber or petrified resin and rubber, inspired by Indigenous techniques, his Salvadoran heritage and L.A. roots. His ongoing “Caucho (Rubber)” series features casts of trees, like the ficus, labeled as “invasive” in Southern California decades after city planners introduced them throughout L.A. He uses rubber castings as metaphors to acknowledge communities vulnerable to “forced displacement” in broader discussions about identity, movement and migration.

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This month, Aparicio will participate at the UCLA Center for the Art of Performance Omnibus Series, “Salvage Efforts,” where he will reflect on U.S.-Salvadoran collective memory, weaving together topics that he already integrates into his artwork.

Aparicio said he first encountered art-making through his father, who ended up in Westlake after fleeing El Salvador in 1982. As Aparicio developed his practice, he looked deeper into the world around him. He did this through “various methods of engagement, some of which were rational and scientific [or] a lot more subjective and imaginative,” he said. “I find that to be a really fruitful place to think about being part of the Salvadoran diaspora, particularly because so much of its history is unknown to Salvadorans and the general public or has been erased purposefully and obfuscated. So, it’s this place of intense research and imaginative spaces of filling gaps.”

Aparicio’s first major show, 2018’s “My Veins Do Not End in Me” — named after a line in a poem by the Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton — was an evocative and intimate portrayal of remembrance and the effects of the U.S.-backed Salvadoran civil war through artwork from three generations of Aparicio’s family. Aparicio’s late grandmother, Maria de la Paz Torres Aparicio, handcrafted dolls adorned with clothes that people left behind during the war. His dad’s artwork hung between Aparicio’s colossal rubber castings dangling from the ceiling, embodying residual markings.

The influence of familial experiences on his work is evident, suggesting that memory is inherited. His first solo museum [presentation](#) in 2024, at the Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, included a glimmering installation of amber splayed across the floor. The title “601ft2 para El Playon / 601 sq. ft for El Playon” refers to the lava field near El Salvador’s capital that became an infamous dumping ground in the war. The cascading amber-encapsulated ceramic bones, together with found objects and ephemera from MacArthur Park, serve as a gesture to the green space’s deep history of organizing and presence for the Central American diaspora.

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Eddie Rodolfo Aparicio, "601 sq. ft. for El Playon (detail)," 2023, mixed media (Christopher Knight / Los Angeles Times)

“During the walk-through of that show with my dad, who had come to visit from El Salvador, he told me [El Playon] is where the body of his daughter was found,” he said.

While walking through the debris fields in his old neighborhood, Aparicio was drawn to pieces of glass that had morphed into an iridescent color and slumped over from the heat of the fire.

Like his earlier works of reclamation, Aparicio looked at the rubble of the Eaton fire as a palette.

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“It’s a place where everyone cared about history and place and place-making. I can’t think of a single house in the entirety of Altadena that looked like a new construction,” he says. Aparicio’s distinct neighborhood, the nature surrounding it, the house he filled with curations and the landscaping he designed and built mirrored his art-making. Like a painting, this town and its environment held memories and stories, revealing a specific time but altered by the fire.

In March, Aparicio participated in the painting of a collaborative mural as part of a climate rally at the Pasadena Community Job Center. Aparicio designed the chimney and brick fireplace in the work, loosely based on the only remaining structure in his house. The paint was made of ash and charcoal ground, “sifted and mixed” from the Altadena and Palisades fires by arts organizer David Solnit and volunteers.

Aparicio recalls seeing the haunting image of chimneys across the news after the fire swept L.A. “[They’re] something that has survived pretty consistently and gives us a road map to the future. It is a symbol both of destruction and optimism,” he says.

*Wolfson is a freelance journalist based in Los Angeles.*