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# California Wild fires Give Rise To New Artistic Process Forged By Flame

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"Lost Terra-Cotta Bust," from Ari Salomon's ongoing series "Burn Line," turned a photo of a clay sculpture into charcoal through controlled burning.

ARI SALOMON



"Lost Terra-Cotta Bust," from Ari Salomon's ongoing series "Burn Line," turned a photo of a clay sculpture into charcoal through controlled burning.

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At first glance, the object appears to be nothing more than a piece of burned wood set in a black frame against a black background. Move closer, however, and the subtle outline of a face emerges.

Fine-art photographer [Ari Salomon](#) used a computer-controlled precision cutting machine to engrave the face into a scrap of cedar, which he then converted to solid charcoal by placing the wood in a metal box and heating the container in a controlled fire in his backyard fire pit.

The face staring out from the blackened block is part of "Burn Line," Salomon's ongoing series that turns photos of objects lost or damaged in [Southern California wildfires](#) — shoes, ritual objects and in this case, a clay bust — into charcoal art that represents loss, resilience and transformation. He calls this original process "pyrotype."

"Each piece becomes both image and relic, a fusion of photography, sculpture and memory — objects literally forged by fire, embodying how trauma alters what remains," Salomon says in an artist's statement.





Ari Salomon's computer-controlled CNC router carves a face into wood as part of the "pyrotype" process he created to tell wildfire victims' personal stories.

ARI SALOMON

Salomon — just one artist who has [channeled wildfire devastation into creative expression](#) — creates "Burn Line" pieces in collaboration with wildfire survivors, including friends who lost homes in blazes [both this year and last](#). Based in San Francisco, he conceived of the pyrotype more than a year ago as a way to reach beyond ubiquitous news images of charred Los Angeles-area neighborhoods and landscapes to capture the emotional stories embedded in the objects people lost, and the memories the items carried.

The charcoal chunk depicting the face tells one such story, of his friend Robin Wallace, whose childhood home in the hills of Ventura County burned in the Mountain Fire in November 2024. The fire displaced her parents, who had lived there for more than 60 years, and destroyed countless cherished family

belongings.

Among them were two terra-cotta busts her artist father sculpted years ago — one of her as a girl, and the other of her brother. Both hung on a wooden wall in the home ceramics studio. When the burned wall came down, the busts “kind of fell together, scarred but whole,” Wallace said.





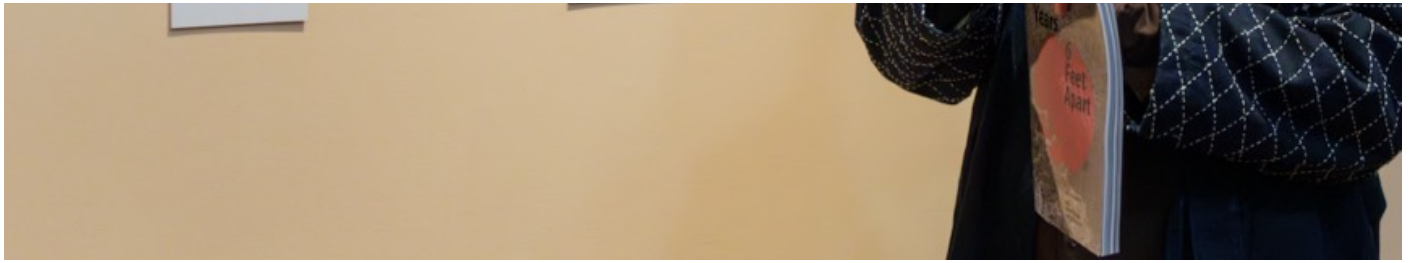
In the remnants of her burned family home in Camarillo, California, Robin Wallace found remnants of clay busts her artist father made.

ROBIN WALLACE

Wallace was on hand, tears in her eyes, as Salomon explained the project on Sunday at the [Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life](#), a museum and research center at U.C. Berkeley that mounted a one-day exhibit centered on the theme of change. She hadn't seen the work before, and since the fire has come to believe that the busts — and other items pulled from the wreckage of her family home — have taken on an almost heroic timelessness, like ancient ruins.

“Standing at the burn site with the challenge of finding ‘salvageable’ items felt totally overwhelming and, well, just horrible, but once I realized that nothing was useful as it once was, I started to see the beauty and the strength in what was left,” Wallace said in an interview. “As survivors, we share that honor with the ‘debris.’ We are what’s left. And we too have been changed forever.”





Photographer Ari Salomon describes his "pyrotype" process at the Magnes Collection of Jewish Art and Life in Berkeley.

HILLARY GOIDELL

Wallace, herself an artist, curated a show earlier this year called “Trans/formed” [that featured a range of objects lost](#) in the Mountain Fire — scorched musical instruments, garden equipment, picture frames, tableware and more.

“Whether functional or sentimental, machine or hand made, the history and functionality of these objects has been displaced by a patina that puts our own existence in perspective,” reads a description of the exhibit.

Like Salomon’s work, the show approached fire-scarred objects as artifacts that narrate both destruction and transformation.

## How Does A Pyrotype Come To Be?

To create the piece “Lost Terra-Cotta Bust,” Salomon employed the same technique he uses for all the “Burn Line” works.

First, he edited a digital photo Wallace had taken of the two ash-covered clay busts amid the remains of the family house, removing the background to make the image cleaner and easier to translate into a carving.

Next, the software connected to his CNC router converted the image into a 3D model, which the machine carved into the wood. Salomon then sealed the carving inside a metal container to reduce airflow, creating a low-oxygen environment so the heated wood would carbonize rather than turn to ash. He put the container in his home fire pit for about 20 minutes, the typical duration for making one of his

charcoal creations. ([Watch a video of the technique here.](#)) He does plan to experiment with speeding up the process by burning the wood in his new, super hot pizza oven.



A piece of charcoal art, just out of the fire.  
ARI SALOMON

Salomon displayed “Burn Line” as part of an exhibit of works by artists affiliated with [LABA Bay Area](#), a branch of the LABA international creative laboratory for Jewish culture, which uses ancient Jewish texts to inspire creativity, conversation and community. Works created through LABA need not be explicitly Jewish, though one of Salomon’s images depicted a menorah that stood in the parking lot of Chabad of Pacific Palisades before it got burned in the wildfire that tore through the town in January, devastating thousands of structures, including a number of Chabad buildings.

In the months that followed, the Jewish organization restored the ritual candelabrum and says it looks forward to lighting it again as a gesture of faith and resilience.



The January Palisades Fire singed a large menorah that stood at the edge of the Chabad of Pacific Palisades parking lot facing the street.

ARI SALOMON

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