

Atlanta

After a fire destroyed his studio, Atlanta artist Fahamu Pecou prepares to start over

A GoFundMe campaign set up by his wife has already raised more than \$13,000.

BY MARA SHALHOUP · SEPTEMBER 15, 2018

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Fahamu Pecou sits in what remains of his studio after a fire devastated it on September 8.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JARRETT CHRISTIAN

Last week, [Atlanta artist Fahamu Pecou](#) was vacationing in Cuba, on his way to a market, when he stopped at one of Havana's many Wi-Fi parks to check his text messages. As soon as he was able to connect, his phone lit up one alarming message after another.

"Oh, I'm so sorry."

"I heard what happened."

"Call me right away, it's an emergency."

Pecou had no idea what his friends were talking about. He called the person who sent that last message, Scot Dunn. Dunn owns the Inman Park studio space where, for the past four years, Pecou had been creating some of his most magnificent work—paintings exploring African spirituality and "the ways in which we've become separated from our cultural memory," which have appeared in exhibits in New York and Paris. Some of his earlier works can be spotted on screen in shows such as *Empire* and *Black-ish*.

When Dunn picked up, he couldn't contain his crying. A fire had consumed the entire building, which also housed Dunn's own art studio, a reiki center, and a high-end hair salon, Cameo. Pretty much everything inside the building—located on Waddell Street just south of DeKalb Avenue and dubbed "The Waddi"—was gone.

The following day, September 9, Pecou flew back to Atlanta, dropped his bags at home, and went straight to the wreckage.

"Walking in there for the first time, it was just surreal—because it doesn't look like the Waddi anymore; it really looks like a bomb went off in there," Pecou says. "The heat kind of singed the outlines of frames that were on the wall. Things almost melted off the wall or evaporated or something. You just see the ghosts of these things on the walls."



The "ghosts" of Pecou's framed artwork are still visible on the studio walls.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JARRETT CHRISTIAN

Pecou has dealt with loss before. Six years ago, several of his paintings that were in storage in New York were destroyed by Hurricane Sandy. The year before, his home was broken into and his computers and hard drives were stolen, meaning all of his records pertaining to his work up to that point disappeared. Infinitely worse is the fire he survived in 1980, when he was four years old. Inside the Brooklyn apartment where he lived with his parents and sister, his father, who'd been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia, killed his mother and set their home ablaze.



Pecou in his studio

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FAHAMU PECOU

Pecou touched on that this week when he talked with his good friend, artist [Hebru Brantley](#). "He actually made a point of saying, 'You have this thing around you with fire. I don't know what that means.' I don't know what it means, either."

He says all he knows for sure is that he's learned to be good at starting over.

After the hurricane and the burglary, Pecou began making it a habit to keep much of his work in off-site storage. Had he not done that, his loss this time around would have been much worse. His current touring exhibit, "[Do or Die: Affect, Ritual, Resistance](#)," was also safe and will soon be transported from Charleston to Emory's Michael C. Carlos Museum for a solo show that opens in January.

Still, the fire took nine of his paintings, all recent work that included three pieces he intended to debut at the Atlanta "Do or Die" show, and another three that had already been purchased by collectors. (The collectors have offered to wait for Pecou to recreate the paintings, for which he is grateful.) Also gone is some of Pecou's personal art collection, including one of his favorite pieces: a portrait Brantley had done of the two of them. He currently estimates the loss of his paintings, the portion of his personal collection, and various supplies to be close to \$100,000.



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FAHAMU PECOU

Pecou had planned to spend Monday packing the three paintings to be shipped to the collectors. Instead, he spent the day sifting through the blackened remains of his space. Several large canvases that he had prepped for painting had fallen over and blocked the entrance to a small back room of the studio. He was surprised, when he pulled the damaged canvases away, that they had helped protect that room, which housed two paintings that are relatively, miraculously unharmed.

One of them, [All Dat Glitters Aint Goals](#), was the one that appeared on *Empire*. The other, from 2006, is called *Liberation* and shows a man (Pecou) with his back turned and a woman embracing him while staring straight at the viewer.

To help recover some of the losses, Pecou's wife, Jamila Crawford Pecou, set up a [GoFundMe](#). As of September 14, it had surpassed its \$10,000 goal by \$3,500.

"It's a really great affirmation of the sense of community here, that people really stand for and rally for and come to the aid of one another in times of need," Pecou says. "I'm trying to figure out how I can say thank you to everyone for all that they've done. I'll find a way. Maybe I'll just make some excellent painting."



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF FAHAMU PECOU

He's eager to find a new space to get back to work, but he doesn't want to be hasty. "Wherever I go I want to be sure that I can be there for a while," he says. As for whether the fire itself might inform some of his future work, he's not sure. "I would say that remains to be seen, but I do have plans to go back in the space this week and collect some of the ashes and maybe work with them in some kind of way."