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She Was Chosen to Help Rebuild Notre-Dame. Then Fire Hit Her Adopted City, Too.

Claire Tabouret, an artist in Los Angeles, was chosen to create new stained glass windows for the Paris cathedral. She never expected fires to shatter her sense of safety in California.



By **Matt Stevens**

Matt Stevens reported from Los Angeles, where he visited Claire Tabouret at her studio.

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Claire Tabouret in her Los Angeles studio, with vibrant sketches for the new stained-glass windows she is designing for Notre-Dame's southern bays. Tag Christof for The New York Times

The story of Notre-Dame's restoration starts with a fire, as Claire Tabouret is well aware.

Officials in France have chosen her, a Frenchwoman who, for the last 10 years, has called Los Angeles home, to help bring its \$900 million, yearslong resurrection project to the finish line. She will create stained glass windows in several of the southern bays.

And as Tabouret has watched the most destructive fires in Los Angeles history burn her adopted hometown, the parallels have become inescapable.

It all “starts with a fire, which starts a conversation,” she said — a conversation about how “to transform this destruction into a new rebirth, new life.”

The little piece of Notre-Dame's rebirth that Tabouret, 43, is contributing to is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity: Add a contemporary touch to an almost 1,000-year old cathedral.

The only reason Tabouret is getting this chance is because [a fire engulfed the cathedral's roof and spire](#) in 2019. Laurent Ulrich, the archbishop of Paris, then raised the idea of installing new stained glass windows, and, [on a visit to the construction site in 2023](#), President Emmanuel Macron of France [signed off](#).

The French culture ministry, he said, would run a [yearlong competition](#) to pick the artist who would design them. The windows, the ministry said, would fill six of the seven chapels on the side of the nave, joining one figurative window in one of the chapels that would remain. Officials said the commission was not to replace anything that had been lost, but to give the cathedral a flavor of the contemporary gesture [that had been promised](#) in the wake of the fire.

Preservationists lodged [vociferous objections](#), in part because the windows being replaced — from the 19th-century renovation orchestrated by Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc — had survived the fire. (Other windows in the cathedral, including celebrated rose windows, remain intact.)



"The idea of using and reusing and transforming is part of the history of this building," Tabouret said. "Each renovation does modify what was before." Tag Christof for The New York Times

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But the ministry pressed on, selecting Tabouret from more than 100 applicants, who were eventually [whittled down to eight](#). She is collaborating with the [Atelier Simon-Marq stained-glass studio](#) in Reims on the windows, which are to be installed by the end of 2026.

"I never applied for any competitions before," Tabouret said in an interview. "And I think when I saw this, I was like, 'OK, if I'm going to try once in my life to apply for something, it should be this. Because there's nothing bigger, more historic or incredible.'"

Tabouret grew up in the South of France and knew even as a child that she wanted to be a painter. She fed her interest with books filled with 19th-century landscapes. And around the time she turned 18, she took the train to Paris, where she was admitted to the venerated École des Beaux-Arts.

A little more than a year later, she moved to Los Angeles, where she quickly discovered one of the city's core charms: "That feeling that you can be in a town, but also be very solitary," she said.



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Since then, much of her work has been filled with figures: sometimes [miners](#), sometimes [wrestlers](#), sometimes [children](#) (who are sometimes in groups and [sometimes wearing makeup](#)), sometimes young women and sometimes [herself](#). Her figures are often filled with "body language" and "inside feelings," as she put it, and they have been exhibited in Paris, Los Angeles, London, Tokyo and elsewhere. A painting of young debutantes in blue dresses [sold at auction](#) for \$870,000 in 2021, and several of her other works have also sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“Claire has always kind of taken from her personal life as she creates her paintings. But they transcend her personal narrative,” said Davida Nemeroff, the owner of [Night Gallery](#) in Los Angeles, which will host an exhibition of Tabouret’s new work (“Moonlight Shadow”) from Feb. 15 to March 29. “We can all see ourselves in the paintings, which I think is why they’re so powerful and also why I think she’s such great candidate to do the Notre-Dame project.”

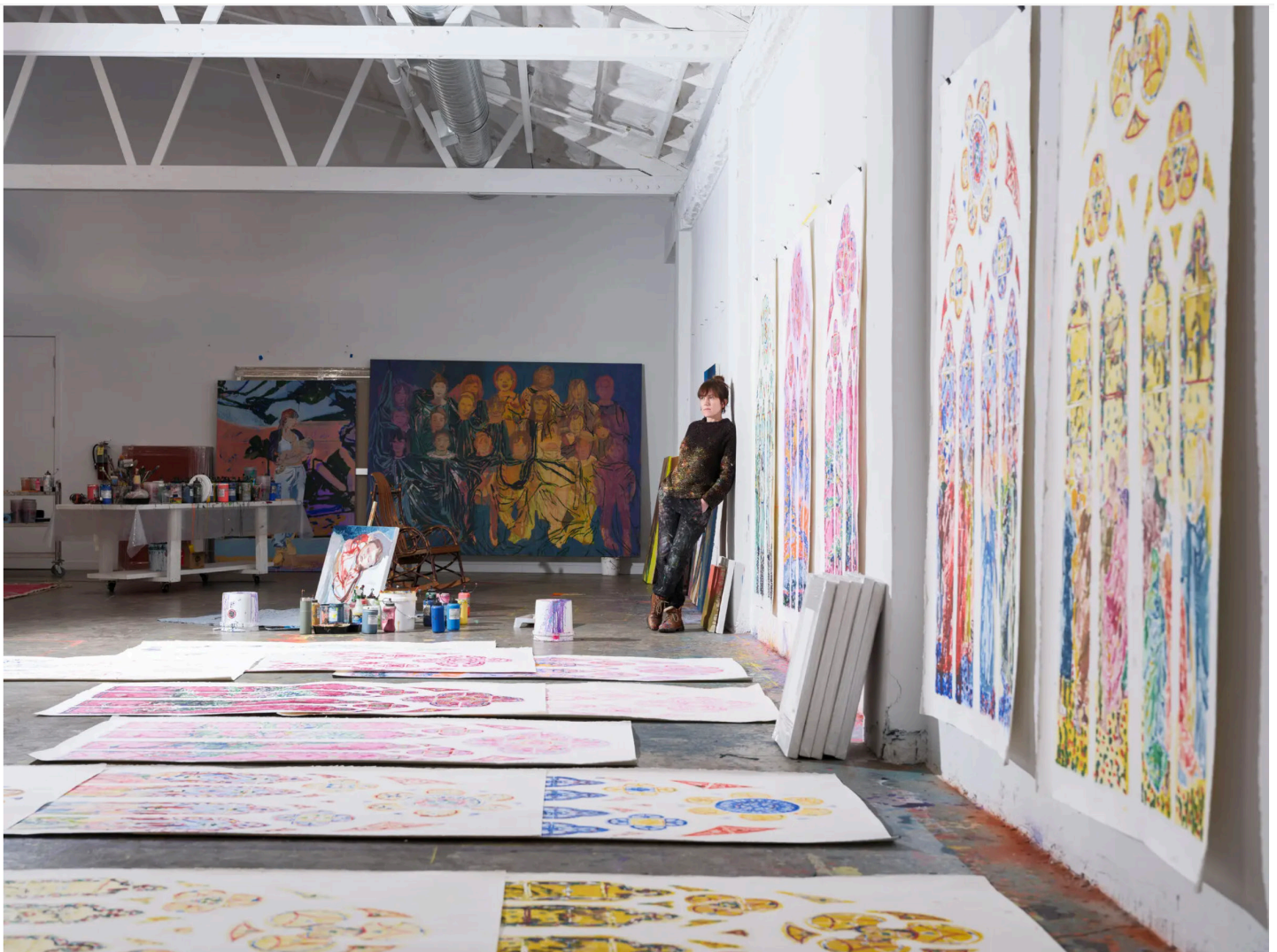
Tabouret, whose dark sweater and jeans were splattered with paint on a recent weekday, knows that some stiffly oppose her new work replacing cherished windows.



“The idea of using and reusing and transforming is part of the history of this building,” she said. “Each renovation does modify what was before. So it would be kind of weird to freeze it in time.”

“We have to trust our art,” she added, “the same way every century before us trusted our artists.”

A committee running the competition Tabouret ultimately won gave the final eight contenders a specific assignment with specific parameters: Paint the Pentecost. Each large window, with its many panels, must represent one sentence from the Bible; follow the story; make it figurative work; when considering colors, respect the beautiful, neutral white light; whatever you make should be easily understood.



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In Tabouret's Los Angeles studio, her vibrant sketches of each of the six windows were displayed on the wall and on the floor. They were accompanied by pieces that zoomed in on some of the human faces offering a life-size, more detailed look at how the work will eventually appear inside the cathedral.

She had made her work on plexiglass. And then, using a press, Tabouret created the prints on paper of each design. The ink displayed differently on each print, offering insights into color, texture and shadows. "There is an element of unpredictability and surprise," she said. "Like playing between what you can actually control and what you can't."

One of the six windows she had sketched depicts ["tongues of fire,"](#) Tabouret said. It is the reason officials chose the Pentecost and the passages they did, she said. They wanted to tie the project to the fire that forced the restoration.

At this, Tabouret took a moment to consider the fires in Los Angeles that have burned not far from her studio and the life she has created here for herself and her family.

Across the studio, a large painting of a group of children leaned against the wall. Tabouret had recently pulled it out from storage and had decided to spritz it with blue-gray liquid acrylic paint, without quite knowing why. She had added a blanket over the children, too.

Now, she said, the streaks created by the spray suddenly looked to her like ash. The blanket felt like a form of protection. "Maybe not a lot of coincidence," she said.

"What is truly shattered for everyone in L.A. is that we did feel safe and certain," she lamented. "It's so densely populated here, we thought fire could never come to us."