



**NEW
ART**
examiner

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ART CONFRONTS THE ENVI- RON- MENT

\$20 U.S.

Art Confronts the Environment

COVER IMAGES

J. Henry Fair, *Flying Dutchman*, (Staten Island, NY). © J. Henry Fair. Courtesy of the artist.

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NEW ART EXAMINER

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NEW ART EXAMINER STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The *New Art Examiner* is a publication whose purpose is to examine the definition and transmission of culture in our society; the decision-making processes within museums and schools and the agencies of patronage which determine the manner in which culture shall be transmitted; the value systems which presently influence the making of art as well as its study in exhibitions and books; and, in particular, the interaction of these factors with the visual art milieu.

Introduction: Art Confronts the Environment

Artists and their works have always depicted environment. Whether it be the natural world, or the spaces people create to house social and institutional structures, environment has always been there. From the imagery adorning cave walls, fabrics, and pottery made by artisans of ancient antiquity to modernist and postmodernist art and architecture of the contemporary industrial world, environment provides the framework for narratives artists across the world explore in our understanding of human existence.

In the 21st century the relationship between artist and environment has taken on a whole new identity. It is one driven by urgency and fraught with political turmoil while being so easily pigeonholed into shallow idealism and virtue signal grade activism. So, a question emerges; if we have turned to artists for centuries to measure the temperature of civilization and to identify a cultural moment, why are we now relegating artists to a niche group of creators addressing an elite audience? Sadly, this has become a perennial question for artists who want to engage the larger world outside of the partitions of contained circuit of capital.

Nevertheless, we are seeing an evolution in contemporary art that deals with environmental issues. Thanks to multimedia formats and research driven processes, audience are no longer limited to the merely illustrative. Art projects can now share a kinship to investigative journalism much like the game changing 1974 work by Hans Haacke *Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Board of Trustees* which exposed the exploitation of working-class tenants that fueled the wealth of a corrupt property owner who also happened to be a donor and board member at the Guggenheim.

This kind of understanding of interrelated systems is ever more present in artwork today but pressure is not only mounting on institutions but on artistic practice as well. In this issue we examine a wide range of artistic projects and endeavors that not only raise awareness but challenge the way we think about art and the environment. Phillip Barcio looks at Maria Elena González' pursuit of making the San Francisco Art Institute waste free, and Tom Wawzenek reviews the book *Ecoart in Action* which offers prompts and activities to educate and bring about environmental change in communities. K.A. Letts elevates the question of whether art can actually bring about change in her review of "Environmentally Speaking," and Rebecca Memoli reviews the expansive exhibition "Human/Nature" which chronicles the history of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists'* findings on climate change with artistic accompaniment and programming.

The climate crisis and the discourse around it has already begun to re-frame perspectives, particularly in art, and will continue to do so. We see this as an urgent moment. Our publication provides us with the opportunity to continue to cover this topic as it stands in the art world and to further elevate the work and creative communities that address it. As always, we hope you find this coverage as valuable as we do and that you will continue to share our efforts and stay engaged in your community. Thank you.

The Editors

SUBSCRIPTIONS

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Please send a sample of your writing (no more than a few pages) to:

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Environmental Art: A Visual Survey

by Michel Ségard
with poetry by Ed Roberson

Environmental art is a broad label that is open to different interpretations. In these next few pages, we have assembled a collection of images of works of art that can be called environmental art. They are introduced by two pieces by Monet from the late 19th and early 20th century that, unintentionally, illustrate our present-day environmental issues.

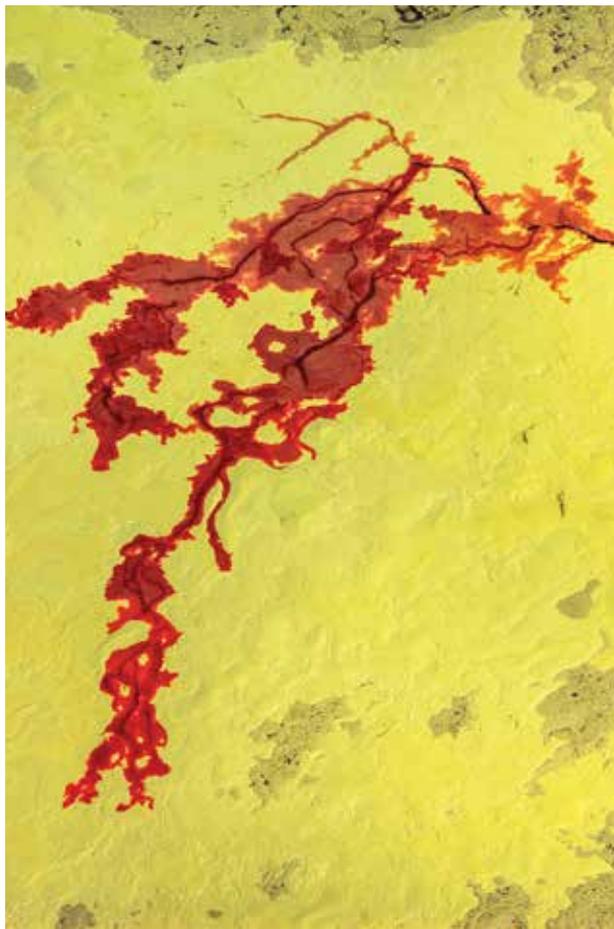
Environmental art takes many forms: paintings, sculptures, photography, installations, videos, performances. This sampling concentrates on the more traditional art forms that can be readily reproduced. So, we have not selected any videos or performances.



Claude Monet, *Waterloo Bridge*, London, 1903. Worcester Art Museum.



Claude Monet, *The Gare Saint-Lazare (or Interior View of the Gare Saint-Lazare, the Auteuil Line)*, 1877, oil on canvas, 29.5" x 41" (Musée d'Orsay, photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)



J. Henry Fair, *Molten Sulphur from Tar Sands Refinery Pumped onto Sulphur Stack* (detail). Photograph. Image courtesy of J. Henry Fair.

Edith Meusnier, *Debordement* (2015), 197 x 98 x 23.5 inches. Gift ribbon, stainless steel wire. Image from <https://canadianartjunkie.com/2017/04/24/edith-meusnier-textile-environmental-art/>.



Whose Painting Is This?

by Ed Roberson

it took a while to see what we saw
to paint thin air the sky its clouds

then smoke off stacks then shapes
like mushroom and tailings raked

into the desert zen drawn figuration
of now what happens is. —

into the spiraling eddy of views
what gives we walk out on. —

ambiguous undulation. swaddled trains are
christo-destroyed in air traffic —

sooty squalls of pigeons flock extinct without sound
cyclonic in devastation though that is.

someone tries turning the water-lilies up loud.
vibe so heavy the paint rattles pollarded off the surface free.

sticks and stones. the bones of what was seen
began say-seeing back. batons lifted on every head
in the crowd

the phosphenes at first seemed the beautiful stars
they are symbolized as then the hit hurt them

the photographs didn't play fair
made the pinks of heritage botanical blossom drawings

remake into wastes of sulfur tailings from aluminum
processing what they really are. not nostalgic after

images of nature. our doing done not the light
we see what we've done. that's photography.



Alexandre Hogue, *The Crucified Land*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 42 x 60 inches. Gilcrease Museum Tulsa, Oklahoma.

though we now can paint with that.
light brush electrically. powered —

that powered sight maybe what has driven us
this blindness. not the light kind of clarity.

of nature the world we have is our nest
in the rest of it. we've always made and painted —

to make an art of the view between the smudged smear
of our warmth and the clear, un-burning horizon.



Robert Smithson, *Spiral Jetty*, 1970. Basalt rock, salt crystals, earth, water, 15 ft x 1600 ft. Image from Wikipedia.org

Ed Roberson is Emeritus Professor, Northwestern University. He is the author of many books of poetry, most recently *Ask What Has Changed*, 2021 (Wesleyan University Press), and *MPH and Other Road Poems*, 2021 (Verge Publications).



J. Henry Fair, *Flying Dutchman*, (Staten Island, NY). Photograph. © J. Henry Fair. Image courtesy of the artist. Cover image for this issue.

Eva Jospin, *Details d'une Forêt*, 2010, cardboard and wood. Source: <https://parallelespotentiels.blog/2021/11/12/dans-la-foret-factice-deva-jospin-le-crime-du-musee-est-presque-parfait-galliera/>.



Christopher Madden, *Untitled* (a representation of the Earth in a kitchen waste bin), 2017. Image source: <http://christophermadden.art/contemporary-art/tag/environmental-art/>.

Nic Mac, *The Great Plastic Wave*, 2020. Illustration. Source: <https://www.nicmacillustration.com/#/thegreatplasticwave/>.



Agnes Denes, *Wheatfield, A Confrontation*, 1982. Field of golden wheat on a \$4.5 billion two-acre plot of landfill in Lower Manhattan, installation. Image source: https://www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/in_brief/9-artists-changing-the-way-we-think-about-the-environment-54968

Nicole Dextras, *The Mobile Garden Dress*, 2011. Photograph. A self-sustaining garden and shelter for the new urban nomad, complete with pots of edible plants and a hoop skirt which converts into a tent at night. © Nicole Dextras. Image source: <https://nicoledextras.com/2011/07/the-mobile-garden-dress/>.



Michel Ségard is the editor in chief of the *New Art Examiner*.

Beautiful Garbage

Can María Elena González make San Francisco Art Institute, America's first waste zero art school?

by Phillip Barcio

More than 300 fine arts schools currently occupy precious real estate atop the outermost shell of this rocky planet. Thousands more institutions not solely dedicated to the edification of aesthetic phenomena nonetheless offer visual arts majors in disciplines such as painting, printmaking, sculpture, photography, and filmmaking. In the United States alone, around 40,000 graduates earn a visual art degree every year.

If you're an art lover, art dealer, art shipper, art framer, or art writer, this is good news because it means a steady supply of new content, customers, clients, and subjects to cover. However, if you're a tree, these statistics should terrify you (assuming you're a tree that can read and understand statistics and project their implications into an imagined future).

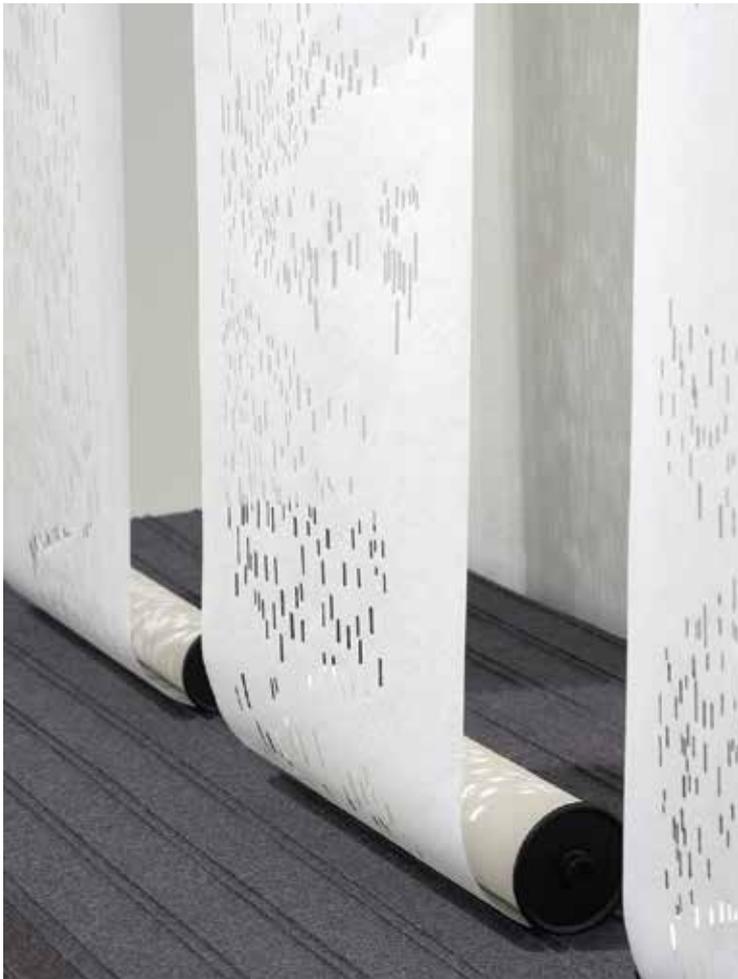
Almost every visual art student utilizes wood one way or another, in a raw or processed state, as a surface or support for an artwork or as a tool in its creation. Some tiny portion of all that student artwork then goes on to



María Elena González. Photo courtesy Ljubljana Biennial of Graphic Arts.

María Elena González, *L*) T2 #1, 2018, 2015. Graphite, ink jet on vellum. 40 in. x 45 ft. R) T2 23-33. Graphite, ink, chalk, ink jet on vellum on Japanese paper. 95 x 40 in. Photo by Phil Bond.





María Elena González, *Skowhegan Birch #1*, 2005–2012, *Skowhegan Birch #2*, 2012–2015, and *Skowhegan Birch #3*, 2016–2018. Player piano rolls, dimensions vary. Photo by Phil Bond.

be packed into custom wooden crates and shipped somewhere to be exhibited. Of course, the vast majority of student art is never shown in public at all, but instead finds its forever home in a landfill or incinerator.

Aside from the amount of wood that art students use, think of all the paint and ink and charcoal and plexiglass and fiberglass and ceramic and cement and metals and chemicals they use—all in the service of making mistake after mistake after mistake in search of the turning point that might set them on the path to being one of the ten percent of art school graduates who make a living off their art.

The bottom line: Humanity's 60-millennium-long effort to keep educating future art makers has fostered thousands of extraordinary artists and led to many magnificent works of art—but it has also contributed mightily to the wasteful devastation of earth's ecosystem and created one heck of a massive heap of beautiful garbage.

Recently, a few companies have started collecting and redistributing used art supplies. But even more important than the work of recycling the world's existing glut of toxic and wasteful student art materials is the need to convince all stakeholders in the arts education system

to fundamentally rethink what the hell kinds of materials they're using in the first place; where the hell those materials came from; and where the hell they're going to end up.

One fine arts professor on the vanguard of this fight is internationally renowned, Cuban-born sculptor María Elena González. A Guggenheim Fellow and Pollock-Krasner, Joan Mitchell, and New York Foundation for the Arts grantee, González is the Chair of the Sculpture Department of the San Francisco Art Institute, one of the older and most revered fine art schools in North America. She recently announced her mission to transform SFAI into the first waste zero fine art school in the United States by 2035.

For González, the fight is personal. Her work has long been rooted in humanity's relationship with trees. For more than a decade, she worked on a project to transform the skin of fallen birch trees into player piano rolls. The idea came to her the summer she taught at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture.

"I would have coffee in the morning by the lake, and there are a lot of birches," González says. "In that morning nebula before the coffee kicks in, you're free thinking, as-

sociating. I looked at the birches, and thought they looked like piano rolls. I wondered what they sound like.”

That fleeting thought evolved into a project called *Tree Talk*, which eventually resulted in the creation of three player piano rolls made from the bark of three fallen birches. In addition to exhibiting her graphite rubbings of the birch skins, González has participated in public performances of the piano rolls as well as interpretations of the rubbings by live musicians and produced a limited-edition album featuring the music of the trees.

All those years she spent working with the trees, and immersed in the trees, impacted González profoundly. She realized that the paper she used to make the piano rolls, the piano itself, as well as the pencils she used to make the rubbings were all made from trees—as was the exhibition catalogue, the album cover, and the frames for the rubbings.

“The concerns started stacking up,” González says.

She decided the most logical place to start making a change was to reconsider her own consumption of materi-

als. That thought process led her to initiate a new series of sculptures she calls *Repairs*, which are sourced from broken and discarded materials from other artists.

“I’ve been repairing things that have been left behind by my students,” González says. “Some students did ceramic slabs, others mugs. I found porcelain scraps from tests I did for a project a few years ago. A friend who works with ceramic had some broken pieces. I was having pizza with my cousin and his husband, and somebody dropped a plate, and I had the waiter pack it up so that I could repair it.”

González uses wooden scraps from the waste bin at school to make bases for her *Repairs*.

“My work right now seems more like a gesture,” González says.

The transformation of her own practice brought González to a place where she could envision being a model for the transformation of the practices of her students. She added a prompt on her syllabi for her students to think about all the resources and materials they’re using,

María Elena González, *Plate II*, 2021. Vitrelle, epoxy, aluminum. 11 3/4 x 10 x 3 3/4 in. Photo by Maria Elena González.



and how to dispose of them responsibly or reuse them.

In addition to the ecological benefit of these choices, she saw a potential economic benefit as well. González grew up through the scarcity of the Cuban Revolution and out of necessity learned to reuse things and make innovative use of materials. That frame of mind is one that most art students today know well.

“Most of us don’t have an unlimited source of funding, so there’s a lot of ingenuity that has to happen in order for us to keep creating,” González says.

As she and her students looked deeper into what it means to responsibly dispose of something, another layer of complexity arose. Recycling practices are not what they’re touted to be even in the best circumstances, and a lot of materials simply cannot be reused, no matter how lofty an artist’s ideals.

“That’s where I started thinking we really need to look at other materials and processes,” González says. “For example, instead of wood why can’t we look at mycelium-based products. They’re made from fungi and can be up-cycled instead of recycled. Or bio-masonry, which is a cement made in a similar way as coral. You can put the leftovers back in the mix and reconstitute it, as opposed to dumping it in the landfill.”

Becoming a faculty trustee gave González a seat at the table to oversee the whole institution of SFAI from the inside out.

“That got me to even think further along these lines and start organizing it in a way that it could make a difference for the future generations of artists and art students,” she says. “This isn’t formalized yet. It’s in the beginning stages. But by 2035, I want the materials used in the department to be 80% upcycled, 15% recycled, and only 5% landfill.”

First will come a study period, looking not only at painting and sculpture materials but photography chemicals, printmaking chemicals, film developers, and the labs that dispose of the chemicals. Once that audit is completed, all the departments will know what they’re using and how they’re disposing of it. With that knowledge, they will be able to start suggesting alternatives.

SFAI is a relatively small institution, and for various reasons (some pandemic related and others economics related), it is in a position to reform itself at the moment. It’s a perfect test case for whether these kinds of major changes can be accomplished. If the school succeeds, the resulting model could be used in any art school, or any art department, anywhere.

González acknowledges the limited impact even if that were to occur. The entire footprint of the art field is minuscule compared to that of, say, the fossil fuel industry, or the meat industry. But she also knows that the cultural footprint of the art field is massive. Artists are the cool kids. People follow their lead.

“It’s such a conundrum of how do you bring beauty to the world knowing the harm that it is causing to the environment,” González says. “Maybe our direct impact is limited. Nonetheless, word gets around. In the sense that art plays a significant role in the development of human culture, [we are] setting a paradigm that says this matters—who knows where that will lead?” ■

Phillip Barcio is an author, journalist, art historian, radio host, filmmaker, public speaker, social media skeptic, degrowth proponent, animal protector, maker of antiracist choices, and member of the executive team at Kavi Gupta in Chicago. You can read his writing and stare into his steely eyes at philbarcio.com.

“Something from Nothing”

Forestiery Underground Gardens

by Neil Goodman

The Visions of my mind almost overwhelm me.
Baldassare Forestiere

To make something with a lot of money, that is easy; But to make something out of nothing' now that is really something.

Baldassare Forestiere

Imagination is perhaps the most decisive characteristic of mankind.

Max Beckman

Although Simon Rodia's Watts Tower is well known, the Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno California is less so, although both are remarkable examples of what could be considered under the rubrics of outsider art and visionary architecture.

Baldassare Forestiere initially immigrated from Sicily in the early 1900s. After a short stint building underground for the newly constructed Holland tunnel in NYC, he journeyed west to Fresno California. With eighty dollars he bought eighty acres, originally intending it as a site for a future home and fruit orchard. Finding the searing Fresno heat and hard pan soil incompatible for either, he decided to dig down as opposed to building up. Hence, the beginning of a saga that lasted more than forty years. Although uncompleted at the time of his death at the age of sixty-seven, his underground villa included sixty-five rooms, three levels, and spanned ten acres.

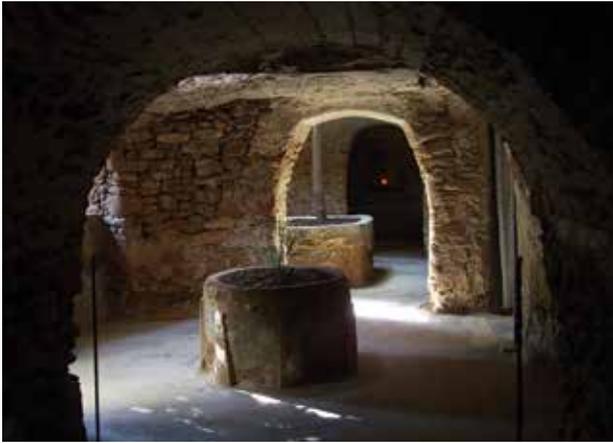
My discovery of the underground villa was more happenstance than intent, as I was in Fresno for my son's engagement party. My son's future in-laws suggested the garden and as this was during covid, other more traditional art venues were limited. Finding the underground garden was equally unexpected, as it was located on a semi-deserted industrial four lane road sprinkled with



(Left) Interior with wheelbarrow and photo of Forestiere. Photo from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiere-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiere4/>.



Baldassare Forestiere at the entrance to the Underground Garden. Photo from <http://www.undergroundgardens.com>.



Two underground trees in a hallway. Photos from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiere-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiere4/>.

gas stations, a train crossing and a vintage motel. In some ways it was like wandering into the catacombs via Cicero Avenue, as the small pathway leading to the cavernous entrance was both surrounded by chain link fence and equally understated and innocuous.

Although Forestiere’s work could be thought of as utopian, his early intent was far more pragmatic, as he ultimately hoped to create an event and entertainment center, complete with an underground parking ground. Sometimes we can do all of the right things for unconventional reasons, and if his interest was financial, his means of realizing it were entirely inconvenient as well as labor intensive. Using largely a pickaxe, a wheelbarrow, and occasionally two mules, he built as he dug, using discarded material mixed with cement to create cavernous rooms and connecting hallways. If plans were largely intuitive, the results were intentional, as each room was succinct and considered in function and use. For natural light, he created a series of open-air portals, which could be closed with glass for the winter and reciprocally opened in the summer. The connecting passages were of various dimensions, which

constricted or expanded based upon cooling, heating, and air flow needs. His ecosystem included cisterns for collecting water, a solar bath, an underground fishpond, as well as winter and summer rooms on three levels. His villa also had fully functioning kitchens, bedrooms, seating, and multiple fireplaces. If other underground chambers were built for the dead, his was clearly for the living.

For sustenance, he planted fruit trees on various levels, which included above and below the surface. Plantings above sheltered the sun, while those below were planted on multiple levels which allowed harvest times to be lagged, insuring a steady supply of fruit throughout the year. Additionally, trees and grape vines were placed off center of the portals, giving them indirect light, which softened the direct sun. Trees were also grafted, producing multiple varieties of fruit from the same root. More than one hundred years later, many of these trees are still producing.

His Catholic heritage also influenced his design, as rooms were built in alcoves of seven or three, respectively relating to the seven sacraments as well as the trinity.

(Left) Subterranean garden with fruit tree. (Right) Underground orange tree. Photos from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiere-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiere4/>.





(Left) Grape vines shading an opening. Photo from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiére-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiére4/>.

Trees likewise were grafted with seven varieties of fruit. In short, Baldassare's underground villa blended spirituality, ecology, botany, and architecture. What is remarkable is not only the vastness of his underground villa, but also his single-minded ambition, his herculean labor, and the brilliance of his integrative and intuitive design.

Wade Davis in his book "One River" writes that "one must accept the possibility that the seed of one generation can be born in the next and that the spirit of one long dead can reach across time not merely to inspire but to mold the dreams of another." In the case of Forestiere, perhaps this is true, and if his intent differed, his work could certainly be linked to many other, contemporary artists. To name a few, the skylights harken to James Turrell, the earthworks to Robert Smithson, the excavations to Andy Goldsworthy and Michael Heizer, and the portals to Nancy Holt. Although separated by close to a century, we see his work as current because of who we are now, and in this way his accomplishments are both modern

and timely. If many contemporary artists are tributaries, his *magnus opus* "Underground Garden" is a river, which is broad and embracive and links him with some of the most profound and original thinkers and builders of the twentieth century.

In an age of massive amount of waste and on a planet choking on consumption, Forestiere's self-sustaining villa is an alternative model of ecology which is both ancient and contemporary. If he does not create a roadmap for the future, his accomplishments tempered with his proletarian work ethic are unparalleled and are a testament to what is possible with "Something from Nothing." ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the *New Art Examiner*.



Bed nook and hallway. Photo from <https://inhabitat.com/amazing-forestiére-underground-gardens-were-hand-carved-with-only-a-pick-and-shovel/forestiére4/>.

BOOK REVIEW

Ecoart in Action

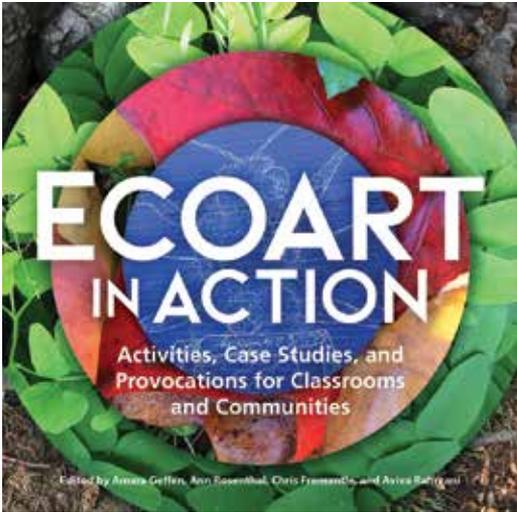
Activities, Case Studies, and Provocations for Classrooms and Communities

Edited by Amara Geffen, Ann Rosenthal, Chris Fremantle and Aviva Rahmani

by Thomas Wawzenek

Ecoart in Action is a new book, published this year, that contributes to the growing literature on artistic responses to global warming and its consequences. While emphasizing the importance of artistic expression, this book also examines and illustrates the interconnection between art, science, and social activism and why the three are needed to work together to enact change.

Compiled from 67 members of the Ecoart Network, a group of 200 internationally established practitioners grounded in the arts, education and science, this book offers pragmatic solutions to critical environmental challenges that the world now faces. The framework in this book is organized into three sections (Activities, Case Studies, and Provocations) that examine diverse methods on how to create critical strategies in relation to environmental issues. Each contribution offers templates for ecoart practices that are adaptable within a variety of classroom settings and community groups.



Ecoart in Action, 2022. Published by New Village Press.



LAGI, (top left to bottom right) Camp Participants Get a Tour of the Beaver Valley Nuclear Power Plant; Sketching on Site; Model Making; Completed Solar Sculpture, Renaissance Gate (provides 5 megawatt-hours of electricity each year), 2015. Photographs. Photo courtesy New Village Press.



Ann T. Rosenthal, *Completed Banners for Phipps Environmental Center*, 2018. Acrylic paint on upcycled vinyl banners. Photo courtesy New Village Press.

There are 25 activities that make use of various mediums such as art, photography, collage and writing that allow participants to not only reflect on their relationship with nature but also experience the dynamics of working with others in a group setting. Many of these group projects heighten one's level of critical thinking while utilizing the imagination when creating art.

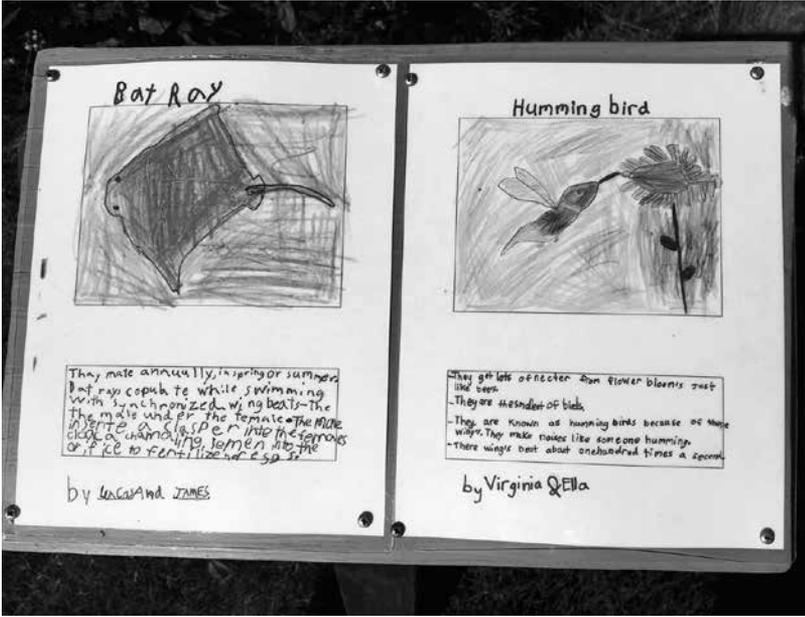
While many activities are designed specifically for either children or adults, there are some activities that can be enjoyed by both. A good example of the latter is a banner-making project. In this endeavor, participants who live in an urban environment learn about native species such as plants, insects and animals that play a vital role in an urban setting. The participants express their new-found

knowledge by composing and painting banners that can be presented as artwork in the community. This activity not only educates people as to how nature is often taken for granted in cities and large towns, but also engenders a sense of community pride. A more ambitious activity, that is geared for students ages 8 through 17, is an energy camp where students learn the basic scientific principles about energy production and how our consumption of non-renewable energy impacts the environment. The end result is for students to use their creativity and problem-solving skills to discover innovative solutions by building a fully operational solar sculpture or a functional prototype.

A couple of activities that are designed for college students and adults are inspired by sacred rituals from ancient

Fern Shaffer, *Cornfield Outside Mineral Point, Wisconsin*, 1997. Costume made from canvas and raffia. Photo credit: Othello Anderson. Photo courtesy New Village Press.





Virginia Stearns, *Students of the San Francisco Friends School, Wildlife Signs*, 2016. Colored pencil on laminated paper. Photo courtesy New Village Press.

cultures. One activity involves creating mandalas where participants engage in group discussion and personal reflection as to why symbols should still play a significant role in modern day life. Participants then create a mandala from rocks, sticks, leaves or other natural materials, developing insights into their unique symbolic language while also nurturing their artistic expression. Another activity involves creating a ritual in order to experience a deeper connection with nature. A ritual can be performed solo or in a group setting and is held in an indoor or outdoor space that holds meaning to the participants. Artist and writer, Fern Shaffer, creates personal shamanistic rituals as a form of spiritual intervention in healing the Earth. In one particular ritual, she wears a shaman's outfit that is made

of raffia, canvas and various small objects that represent the industrial age while standing in the middle of a cornfield before the spring growth. This ritual is Shaffer's way of connecting to a higher power—giving thanks for the gifts of nourishment that the Earth provides and asking that the environment be released from all the toxins of the industrial age.

When reading through the Case Studies section, there are impressive examples of how ecoart can create inspiration and hope despite the gloomy future that is often predicted by many scientists. In one case study, a group of second graders create wildlife signs for a park that is located in San Francisco. The end result is two-fold: the students increase their awareness about wildlife and also



Joel Tauber, *My Lonely Tree*, 2006. Photograph. Photo courtesy New Village Press.

Ruth Wallen, *Remember the Trees*, 2018. Installation (detail), Mesa College Art Gallery, San Diego, California. Photo courtesy New Village Press.



get the opportunity to exercise their artistic skills by creating signs that will educate visitors about the park's environment. Another case study illustrates how an artist can inspire others to take action. In this particular case study, Joel Tauber, an artist and educator, took it upon himself to nurture a neglected tree that was surrounded by a sea of asphalt in front of the Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena. Through Tauber's efforts, the city of Pasadena agreed to remove some of the asphalt around the tree and replace it with mulch. Over time, the tree reproduced some 200 tree babies and Tauber celebrated this event by creating a twelve-channel video tree sculpture and a documentary film. Through his perseverance, he received support from a community that consisted of individuals, schools, parks, and museums as they rallied around his project by adopting the tree babies and fostering their growth.

The Provocations section focuses on some of the theories underpinning ecoart practices while also presenting ideas for discourse and reflection. It examines contemporary trends in ecological thinking and how artists can play a pivotal role within a community. We learn that scientific data alone is often not enough to be used as an instrument for change. Data and facts can at times seem too abstract, or else, make one feel overwhelmed with information overload. And being overwhelmed with statistical data can create a state of mental paralysis that can lead to inaction. Ruth Wallen, multi-media artist and writer, believes one way of overcoming this sense of paralysis is for individuals to allow themselves to feel grief and gratitude—grieving for what is lost and feeling grateful for the beauty of being alive. Experiencing these two emotions not only

allows a healing process to take place, but also opens one's psyche to feel the emotional undercurrent of outrage that can lead to taking active steps for social change. A good example of Wallen showing this dynamic at work is in her installation, *Remember the Trees*. In this particular work, she commemorates the more than 150 million trees that have died in California in the last 12 years due to drought brought on by climate change and the introduction of new species. Wallen expresses gratitude for the beauty of trees while grieving their loss, and perhaps more importantly, empowers others to take action in order to create a more promising future. Other highlights in the provocations section are two insightful interviews with ecoart pioneers, Amy Lipton and Newton Harrison, as they discuss their philosophy and strategies on how ecoart can have a positive impact within a community.

Ecoart in Action is an essential guide for artists, educators, and community activists who want to address eco-justice issues. It provides useful steps on how to integrate the arts, science and social activism in order to reach a wider audience and address the ecological crisis. The contributors in this book give readers the needed insight as to why the arts need to enter the discourse about the environment that is too often dominated by scientific and political voices. ■

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I.D.E.A.

Informed Discussion Engagement Area

A Meditation on Art in the Time of Chaos: The Creation of Art During a Global Pandemic

by Corey Postiglione

Introduction

What kind of art does one make when confronted with a new deadly virus? How does an artist make sense of a world seemingly out of balance? There is a litany of subject matter that might include over population, climate change, forever wars, nuclear annihilation, institutional racism, and rampant ignorance especially in the area of anti-science, and the general lack of resources exacerbated by extreme global income inequality, and of course COVID-19. With COVID-19 alone, we have learned a new lexicon: pandemic, social distance, N95 masks, viral load, MRNA vaccine, quarantine, supply-chain, antivaxxers, virus variants, ventilators, to name a few. The losses are nearly one million deaths in the U.S. alone to COVID-19 (worldwide 5.84 million) and its variants, as of this writing. There is no way to know how many of these souls were visual artists or burgeoning ones unlike the disturbing statistics of artists of all categories lost to HIV AIDS in the 80s and 90s.

At the early stages of the pandemic, in the May/June 2020 issue of *Artforum*, a large section of the journal was titled the "Speed of Life." A number of artists, writers and collectives were asked to contribute essays and projects on living with the pandemic, many of which were inti-



Kathie Shaw, *Chaos #6: Spotlight*, 2020. Crayola Crayon on Board, 11" x 17." Photo by artist.

mate reflections. Like many of us at the time, living in the early throes of COVID-19, Andrea Zittel wrote, "On March 1, [2020] my partner and I started gradually stocking up on food. I have four thousand gallons of water on the property, [she lives in the desert, Joshua Tree] and enough food to last forty days."

Media Strategies

Note: In this essay I am focusing mainly on the visual arts of all categories including what is sometimes referred

(Left) Robert Irwin, *Scrim Veil, Black Rectangle*, Whitney Museum of American Art, NYC 1977. (Right) Lou Mallozzi, *La patria partorisce padri partiti*, a version of the piece performed at the Wayward Music Series in Seattle in 2018. Photo by Sandra Binion.





Michael Asher, *Installation*,
Pomona College of Art, 1970.

to as the "invisible" arts such as sound works (Lou Mallozzi), purely text pieces (Lawrence Weiner), and some installations like the works of Michael Asher or Robert Irwin, or digital works such as NFTs, (non-fungible unique digital representations; re, works by artists such as Mike Winkelmann, a. k. a. Beeple.)

To deal with this new reality, artists continue to explore a range of strategies from traditional studio practice, painting and drawing, to more techno products such as Zoom projects. Other artists have formed collaborative groups, much like Industry of the Ordinary and the Yes Men, to develop more socio-political works, or they are expanding the materials of art itself with digital media and platforms. This could include, of course, Facebook, Instagram, podcasts, TikTok, etc. Current objectives demand new approaches to make sense of an ever-changing existence and a reality that, currently at least, doesn't seem to have light at the end.

The Studio as a Liminal Space

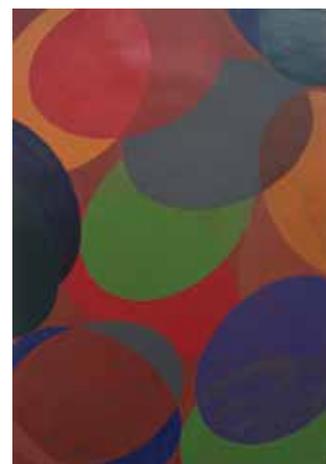
The studio can be many things for the artist; a space to think, a storage area, or a virtual mind space. When I picture an extreme example of the traditional studio, I think of conceptual/land artist, Walter De Maria's workspace, a

NY loft with only a table, a phone, and a file cabinet. Most artists, but not all, work alone. Moments spent within one's working space are a reflective time. Being in the designated creative space can become a respite from the outside world—a sanctuary—a place and/or time where the creative process takes over. While the daunting list of world problems listed above began long before COVID-19, within the timeframe of the pandemic other long-standing global issues are made even more intense. Whether the artist confronts these dilemmas directly or subconsciously, it is in some way reflected in their art. Some artists will try to move past it, but it is impossible to completely bury it, regardless of whether the artist just continues with their normal practice or not.

The Aesthetic Task

In a recent 2020 Memoir, *Year of Plagues*, Fred D'Aguiar has questioned: "I wonder if art is up to the task of healing." This is a valid, long-debated question. Scholars of art and culture, as well as artists themselves, historically have posed this same query. The eminent philosopher, Theodor Adorno grappled with the same aesthetic questions. His oft-quoted dictum reveals starkly his skepticism on the subject: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric." Can

(Left) Mike Winkelmann, (Beeple),
Everyday: The First 5000 Days, NFT,
2021 (Right) Corey Postiglione,
Swarm VIII, 2015. Acrylic on paper,
30" x 22." Photo by Kathie Shaw.



an artwork prevent future conflicts? Two art works that come to mind that tried to represent the horrors and complexity of war are: Picasso's great painting *Guernica* (1937) that depicted the devastation of that Basque city as a prelude to WWII; and James Rosenquist's anti-Vietnam large multi-paneled work, *F-III* (1964-65) rendered ironically in a Pop style as an ode to American capitalist consumerism. Maybe one work will not stop a war, but just maybe it is more the cumulative effect of all the arts that can heal the body and the spirit in a positive sense. This is the daunting aesthetic task for the artist in these difficult times. How does one make work that engages the present situation that can include the personal, the political, the social, the scientific? What we want from art is what we have always desired—that the artwork be formally complex, the content metaphoric, allegorical, even poetic, and overall, polysemic—with the visual experience open to a constellation of interpretation rather than remaining reductive, hermetic, and didactic. This is definitely the challenge for the artist living in this pandemic.

A Disconcerting Irony

Is there anything we can say that is positive about any pandemic? In the case of artistic practice, the numerous lockdowns afforded artists time to be more productive with no more socializing, going out to bars and restaurants. This is the subject of a recent novel *Burntcoat*, by Sarah Hall (Custom House, Oct. 2021) where her protagonist sculptor benefits from the pandemic with her art reaching new heights of productivity. Of course, no one would wish for this terrible virus for this purpose. However, it remains a disconcerting fact that the circumstances associated with the fallout from the pandemic provided more productive time for the artist.

Catharsis

The current reality is the day to day unknowing of what is to come. The existential threat that one tries to bury, to push down in the unconscious. Then at odd times it rises up to the surface and for a moment becomes terrifying like we are in some apocalyptic movie. And then the realization that it is no movie, it is real. Last month HBO Max provided a small glimpse of light when they began

streaming a limited 10-part series titled "Station Eleven," based on the 2014 novel by Emily St. John Mandel that chronicles a pandemic and its aftermath. There is a chronicle of apocalyptic literature, and subsequent films, that deal with deadly viruses over the years. An early precursor, *I am Legend*, a 1954 novel by Richard Matheson, reinvents the vampire genre into a man-made virus that is the cause of the "illness" that infects 99% of the world's population. Michael Crichton's classic *The Andromeda Strain*, another early example, is a 1969 novel that describes an extraterrestrial viral outbreak. Unlike these previous representations that usually had a dire outcome, "Station Eleven" presents a rare positive future. Moreover, what is oddly life-affirming about this series is that what survives is art/culture in the form of a traveling Shakespearean troupe that continues to perform against the odds. There are its dark moments when one character reflects, "there is no before time, and no after, only now." In the end it suggests a postapocalyptic world where those who remain are comforted by art, music, and simple friendship.

Waiting for the End

We wait for the virus and other world calamities, as enumerated above, to be solved, dealt with, or at least tempered in some way. So, as we enter the third year of the pandemic, we are still waiting within the liminal for the way out to some space that can be conceived of as normal, at least somewhat like our collective memory of the normal, or ordinary life, if that is still possible. With this last, I am reminded of *On the Beach*, a post-apocalyptic novel published in 1957 by Nevil Shute, that chronicles a group of Australian survivors of a nuclear war waiting for the radioactive fallout. The book chronicles their attempts to maintain a "normal" existence before the end that they know is coming.

And finally:

ARS LONGA VITA BREVIS ■

Corey Postiglione is a Chicago-based artist and writer. In addition to his career as a practicing artist, his critical writing has been published in *Artforum*, the *New Art Examiner*, *Dialogue*, and *C-Magazine*.



The Yes Men are Revolting, 2015

REVIEWS

Environmentally Speaking Janice Charach Gallery in suburban Detroit

by K.A.Letts

Global warming is on everyone's mind these days, but the existential threat is so all-encompassing that we find it hard to get our heads around the wildfires, flooding, heat waves, mass extinctions, pollution and pandemics that are its symptoms. The artists whose work is exhibited in the show "Environmentally Speaking" at Janice Charach Gallery in suburban Detroit take an all-of-the-above approach to the many-headed hydra that is climate change.

Eight of the 15 artists represented in "Environmentally Speaking" have been meeting online over the course of this COVID year in a kind of impromptu book club via Zoom. Their discussions have centered around a book, "All We Can Save: Truth, Courage and Solutions for the Climate Crisis," a collection of essays, how-to instructions for activists, poems and the like that address the almost inconceivably diverse environmental challenges urgently requiring solutions. The book's contributors are a broad

assortment of writers, scientists, environmental activists and politicians who convincingly argue for a new kind of eco-feminism that combines individual advocacy with collective political activism. They also contend that the environmental movement has, up to now, been handicapped by the persistent exclusion of women—and particularly indigenous and minority women—from the discussion.

The implied question before the 15 visual artists showing their work in "Environmentally Speaking" is this: can art be effectively used to motivate a collective societal response to global warming? While these creatives may not have a conclusive answer, they are clearly on the case. The curators, Laura Earle, Leslie Sobel and Olivia Guterson, have organized a varied collection of climate change-related artworks that range from abstract paintings to video to installation to direct climate advocacy.

At the formal end of this broad spectrum, Nancy Cohen's handmade paper pieces incorporate the substance of her

Olivia Guterson, *Lumenality: Embodying Light*, 2021. Installation detail. Photo: Morgan Diehl.





Nancy Cohen, *Between*. Paper pulp, ink, kozo and handmade paper, 21" x 60." Photo: Morgan Diehl.

natural environment into elegant map-like artworks that evoke the waterways and ecosystems of her native New Jersey. In a 2020 interview Cohen explains, "I'm compelled by the fragility and resilience of the natural world, its intimacy and vastness, its disparate time scales, quick as the tides or slow as the transformation of a freshwater pond to a saltwater marsh."

Delving even deeper into the abstract elements of nature as subject, artist and environmentalist Leslie Sobel's triptych *Lake Erie Harmful Algae Bloom* addresses the issue of water pollution, and more specifically the recent algae blooms in the western bay of Lake Erie, on a microscopic level. Sobel combines photomicrograph transfer, encaustic and monotypes in a mixed media collage to illustrate the complex way in which agricultural runoff in conjunction with the lake's warming waters creates toxic devastation.

Susan Hoffman Fishman too, has been thinking about water in the context of climate change. Completed in 2021, her 50-foot-long mixed media painting *In the Beginning There Was Only Water* takes a biblical turn. The 39-panel painting, which takes up all of a very long wall in the gallery, reframes the creation myth away from humanity as the main subject and recenters it around the whole of the natural world.

In contrast to formal approaches that color within the lines of mainstream art practice, several artists have elected to go the route of direct climate advocacy, with strong narrative content to support climate action.

Tracey Easthope is a full-time climate activist who brings thirty years of environmental advocacy to her art practice. Her large work on paper, *What a Day Looks Like*, is an improbably appealing visualization of energy output

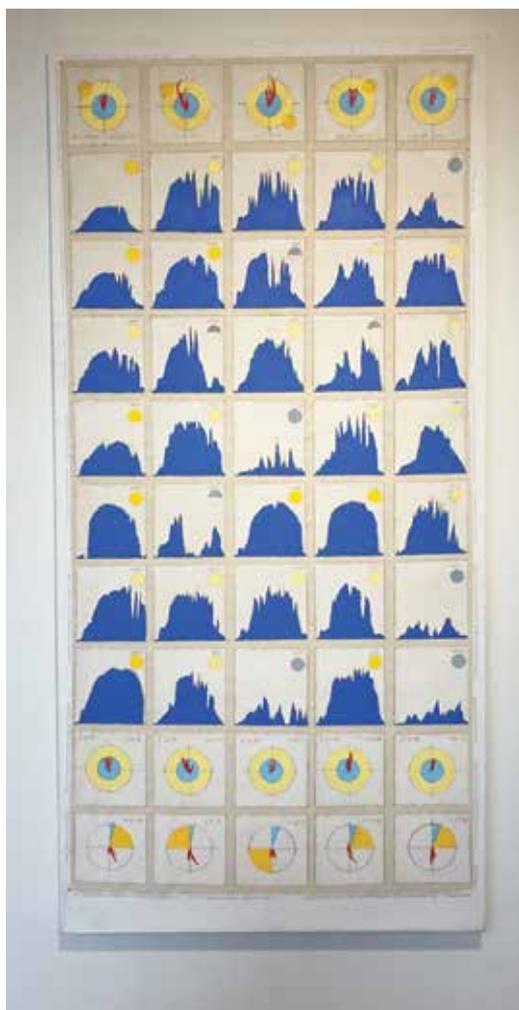


Leslie Sobel, *Lake Erie Harmful Algae Bloom*, 2021. Encaustic, monotype, photomicroscope transfer and woven paper, 3 panels, 36" x 18" ea. Photo: Jennifer Patselas



Susan Hoffman Fishman, *In the Beginning There Was Only Water*, 2021. Mixed media on paper, each panel 30" x 15, installation 50'.
Photo: Morgan Diehl.

Tracey Easthope, *What a Day Looks Like*. Acrylic, pencil and paper on canvas. Text: Jenny Joseph, Walt Whitman, John Donne, A.E. Housman, Philip Larkin.
Photo: Morgan Diehl.



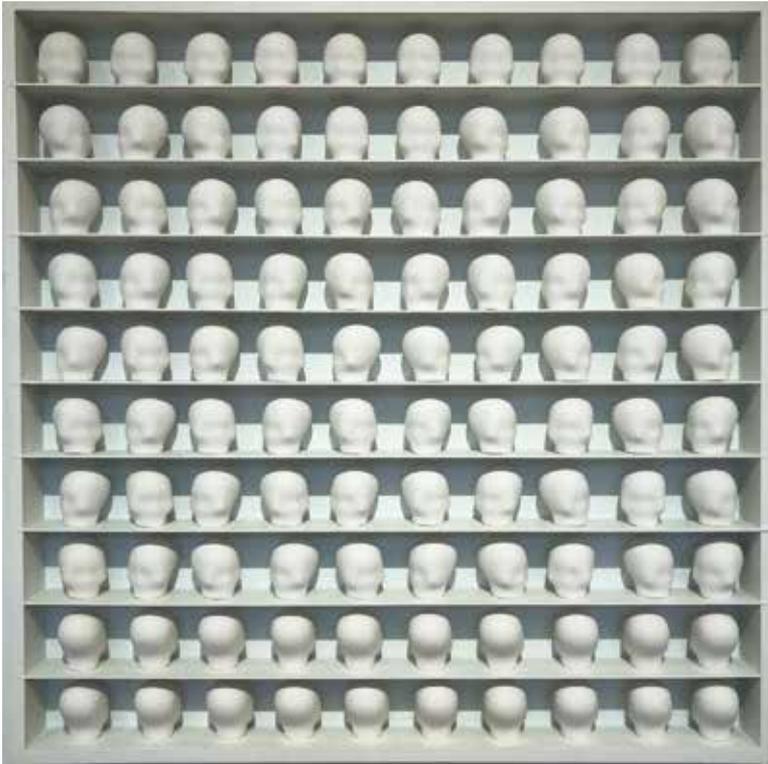
from solar panels at her home in Ann Arbor, Michigan, from June, July and August of 2020. The drawing evokes (somehow) a medieval manuscript and the phrases of poetry at the margins add lyrical heft to the matter-of-fact content of the artwork.

Easthope's video, *The Evolution of What Survives*, is set within a small, well-crafted birch box, and seems to be modeled on some imaginary educational display for a natural history museum of the future. In it, she envisions fanciful, altered images of species that have adapted successfully to climate change but have been irrevocably altered in turn.

Of all the artists in "Environmentally Speaking," Laura Earle seems the most comfortable as a promoter of audience engagement to advocate for climate change. The Detroit artist and independent curator says she is "interested in how art starts a conversation, transcends barriers and becomes a catalyst for building community, shifting meaning and shaping culture." Judging from the work in this show, she is adept at it.

Her collection of 100 bisque doll heads, *Grow the Issue Public*, is a starkly presented illustration of our national attitude toward global warming. Earle has arranged the heads in a grid, with 20 facing the wall, representing the 20% of Americans who do not believe climate change is an issue. Fifty-five heads face forward obliquely; these are the Americans who believe climate change is important, but not something to act upon. The 25 remaining heads facing out represent the "issue public"—Americans actively pursuing solutions by participating in the political process through protests, communication with elected officials and by voting.

Much of the work in "Environmentally Speaking" is excellent, but the overall impact of the exhibition would have been enhanced by more rigorous editing. The enormity—and urgency—of the subject invites an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink approach that is difficult to resist,



Laura Earle, *Grow the Issue Public*, 2020.
Ceramic, MDF. Photo: K.A. Letts.

but there is simply too much work here, and in too many different styles, to be fully effective.

But my critique notwithstanding, the question remains: can art motivate people to take action on global warming? It seems to me that, in the end, the ability of fine art to move public opinion on any issue—including climate change—is limited by its relatively small public and elite venues. It is well suited for reporting and recording cultural values over time, but its actual power to make change in the real world is finite. After all, Picasso's *Guernica*, in spite of its undeniable power, has never, to my knowledge, stopped a single genocide.

To their credit, the organizers of “Environmentally Speaking” seem to grasp this. Over the weeks of the exhibition, they have scheduled virtual lectures, made book lists, and created participatory projects to support discussion of climate change. Many of these artists are environmental advocates of long standing, and their activism has not been limited to their studio practice. Their heartfelt concern and care for the natural world is apparent in the work, but they understand very well that it is only part of what needs to be done to fight climate change before it is too late. ■

Janice Charach Gallery is located in West Bloomfield, Michigan. Participating artists: Nancy Cohen, Justin Cox, Jana Dietsch-Wingels, Kate Dodd, Laura Earle, Tracey Easthope, Elizabeth Barick Fall, Susan Hoffman Fishman, Gina Furnari, Olivia Guterson, Cynthia LaMaide, Laura Quattrocchi, Trisha Schultz, Leslie Sobel, Laurie Wechter.



Tracey Easthope, *The Evolution of What Survives*. Baltic birch around small digital screen, looped digital images. Photo: K.A. Letts.

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the *New Art Examiner*, a working artist (kalettsart.com) and art blogger (rustbeltarts.com). She has shown her paintings and drawings in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.

100 Seconds to Midnight

“Human/Nature” at Weinberg/Newton Gallery, Chicago

by Rebecca Memoli

Weinberg/Newton gallery has continued in its tradition of exhibiting work that is socially minded. With *Human/Nature*, the gallery has teamed up with the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists to recognize the 75th Anniversary of the Doomsday Clock. On Jan 20, 2022, the clock was kept at 100 seconds to Midnight. Midnight being doomsday. The end of it all.

The Doomsday Clock was designed by artist Martyl Langsdorf in 1947 for the cover of the first magazine issue of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. Langsdorf set the clock at 7 minutes to Midnight as a graphic design choice and to indicate that we didn't have much time left to get atomic weapons under control after the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The clock is reset when the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists determines a need to call awareness to changes in the world. The farthest the hands have been from midnight was 17 minutes in 1991 recog-

nizing arms control agreements put into place after the cold war which resulted in a reduction of nuclear weapon stockpiles in the US and Russia. Growing threats to the welfare of the planet has caused the Bulletin to reset the clock every year since 2015. The closest the hands have been to midnight is 100 seconds, where it stands today and has been for the last three years. It is not just climate change contributing to our proximity to doomsday, but also nuclear risks from nuclear armed states like North Korea and Russia, biological threats including but not limited to COVID-19, and disruptive technologies that have contributed to the age of misinformation.

The journey through the exhibition begins with several colorful works that all poetically reflect on nature. The large front space showcases a stunning installation called *Monument* by Regan Rosburg in which amidst a pile of moss stands the monument constructed of black plastic.

Regan Rosburg, *Monument*, detail, 2021. Recycled and virgin plastic, moss, glue, orchids, petrichor fragrance, diffuser, 180 x 180 x 108 inches. Photograph by Evan Jenkins.





Laura Ball, *Rebirth*, 2015. Watercolor and graphite on paper, 51 1/2 x 50 inches. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

It is an amalgamation of natural forms such as bird wings, antlers, invasive flowers, entwined with ribbons of smooth plastic. Live orchids grow throughout the installation, and an oil diffuser completes the experience, emitting the earthy scent similar to the air after rainfall called petricor. In nature, the scent is produced by a chemical that is emitted by dead bacteria in dirt that is disturbed by the rain. Humans in particular are extremely sensitive to this scent.

Monument is an examination of what can and will last. The moss and orchids are species that have survived on the planet throughout the ice age, a natural symbol for lasting and deep time. The plastic will also remain long after we're gone, a relic that we will leave on the planet. Activating the viewer's sense of smell with the petricor scent is a pleasant reminder of our biological sensitivity to decay and attachment to memories.

Karen Reimer, *Untitled (Change in Average Temperature)*, 2019. Embroidery, 14 x 17 inches. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.



Accompanying *Monument* are three works on paper by Laura Ball. These watercolors morph together animals and plants to create new forms. *Rebirth* takes the shape of a growing phoenix whose shape is comprised of all different species of birds. The colors are bright and powerful, giving a sense of strength and reverence to the natural world. In contrast to *Monument*, *Rebirth* feels more hopeful that nature will endure and evolve.

Moving deeper into the gallery, the exhibition takes a more scientific look at the interaction between humans and nature. Karen Reimer embroiders scientific data on human-caused climate change like melting glaciers and the formation of algae blooms. Just as the human effect on climate has been incremental, so is the act of embroidery—the accumulation of individual threads builds over time to create an image. These charts and graphs are



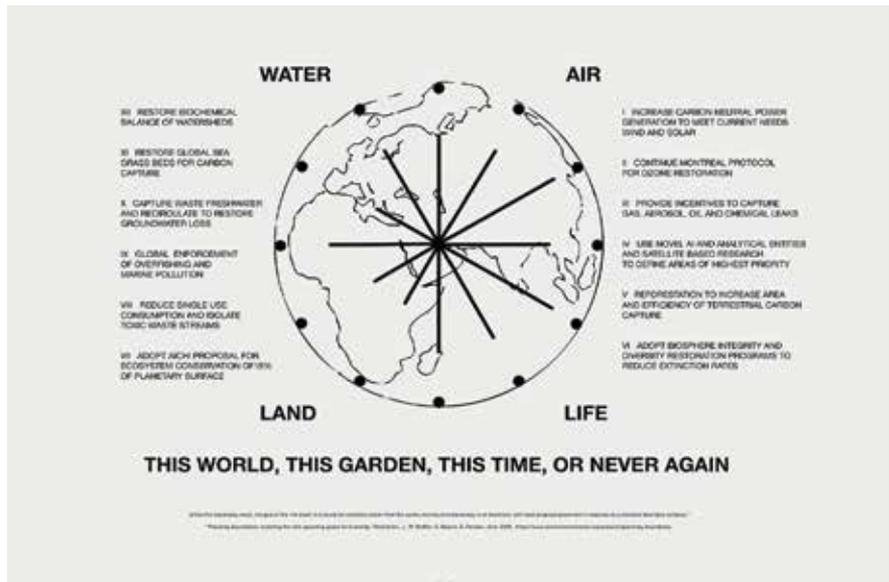
Obvious & Stas Bartnikas, *The DooomsdAI Clock*, 2022. Generative Adversarial Networks interpolation, screen display, wood and metal, 37.5 x 49.5 inches, 56 seconds. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.

remade in embroidery and fabric to bring a contrasting feeling of comfort to otherwise alarming information about negative changes to the environment. By changing the medium of this scientific information, Reimer changes the way it is received by the viewer.

Next to Reimer’s work is *The DooomsdAI Clock* by Obvious & Stas Bartnikas. Similar to Reimer’s use of data visualization, *Obvious* collects data, in this case photographs by Stas Bartnikas, to create the artificial landscapes that loop seamlessly behind a wood and metal doomsday clock. The photographs depict the physical damage caused by climate change. In Alaska, the rises in temperature have melted glaciers revealing patches of black rock and brilliant blue pools of water collecting in the ice. Increases in agriculture have drained large sections of the Colorado River leaving behind an intricate design of dried riverbeds. Aerial photographs of these and other landscapes, equally beautiful and disturbing, were analyzed by an artificial intelligence algorithm to create new images. By breaking down the physical change humans have caused to the landscape into data, the AI has created new landscapes that are derived from the accumulative devastation.

Matthew Ritchie’s *Life Clock* takes a practical approach to viewing the Dooomsday Clock. A simple graphic in black vinyl on the white wall, several hands point at every position on the clock, instead of the original two that only occupy the last fifteen minutes to midnight. For each position on the clock, he offers a set of researched goals to restore the world, such as “X — Capture waste freshwater and recirculate to restore groundwater loss.”

Ritchie’s call for collective action leads to the three video pieces that can be viewed in the center of the exhibition. The remaining works reflect a more active position for humans to take regarding our planet. Outside the viewing room is a compilation of statements on issues of climate change from scientists, politicians, journalists, artists, and organizational leaders. This video provides context into the thought process for many of the artists and offers insights on the importance of the Dooomsday clock as well as observations on how we can work to reverse its hands.



Matthew Ritchie, *Life Clock*, 2022. Interactive single color vinyl installation, 103 x 70 inches. Photograph courtesy Weinberg/Newton Gallery.



Regan Rosburg,
Collected letters
written to the future.
Photograph courtesy
Weinberg/Newton
Gallery.

Inside the viewing room is a slideshow of photographs and article excerpts from *The Navajo Times* by journalist, Donovan Quintero. The photographs depict the struggle of the Navajo Nation to maintain and preserve their land. “Water is sacred” only scratches the surface of the importance that water is to the Navajo. This precious resource is being stolen from the already drought ridden land by encroaching corporations and uranium mining operations. The space this work is in doesn’t give room to absorb the information. The slideshow itself is very short, around two minutes, and it is followed by Rosburg’s video which is twice as long and has a very different tone.

Rosburg’s video is called *dear future*. It is a companion to another installation in the exhibition. She has collected letters written to the future. For some that is a future generation, others write to the Earth itself. In this video we hear some of these letters read aloud. The tone that is set by the words is emotional. The addition of music and images of nature feels over sentimental. But if the *Doomsday Clock*’s arrested position shows, this sentimentality doesn’t reflect the actions of the population. So, within the context of the rest of the exhibition this video feels manipulative, like watching a commercial.

The exhibition ends with an open dialogue with the viewers that is facilitated by two interactive pieces in the program space. These installations allow viewers to add their own suggestions for turning back the clock and share their perspectives on the future.

Letters collected by Rosburg, including some featured in the video, are on view in an installation called *Everything is Fine*. Viewers are invited to write their own letter to add to the project. These are collected at the front desk and participants are offered a small gift for their contribution.

The letters range from rants about Trump, “—KING OLD PEOPLE!” and single use plastic to an account from an aerospace engineer about how the topic of climate change is taboo in his industry. In contrast to the emotional tone of *dear future*, a broader range of letters is presented that reflect a more complicated relationship people have with the Earth and the future. Like the single line written on a strip of blue paper, some people think “Everything is fine.”

Matthew Ritchie’s interactive *Life Clock* also provides an opportunity for visitors to add their own ideas for collective action. Neon dots populate a second *Life Clock* with handwritten suggestions ranging from thoughtful, “elect better politicians” to absurd, “root for the virus!” The immediate and anonymous nature of this piece, just like most open forums, has attracted a few trolls.

Human/Nature does a good job bringing context and dimension to the *Doomsday Clock*. Although there is a somber underlying tone of impending doom, the exhibition provides a space to have a range of emotions towards the matter at hand. An iPad is set up to allow visitors the opportunity to send a letter to their state senator. Anyone visiting the exhibition is already helping to push back the hands of the clock, but there are many approaches available to us, many of which have already been proposed, that would promote positive change for the Earth and the future of the human race. ■

Rebecca Memoli is a Chicago-based photographer and curator. She received her BFA from Pratt Institute and her MFA in Photography from Columbia College. Her work has been featured in several national and international group shows.

The Metaverse Meets Art History: New Paintings by Dan Hernandez

North Gallery, Toledo, Ohio

by K.A. Letts

If the past two years have taught us anything, it's that our smug assumptions of political and environmental stability and economic prosperity rest on a shaky foundation. In his solo show, that was on view until March 26, 2022 at 20 North Gallery in Toledo, Ohio, mid-career artist Dan Hernandez builds upon his already well-developed world view with three new bodies of work that eloquently describe our tumultuous present and uncertain future.

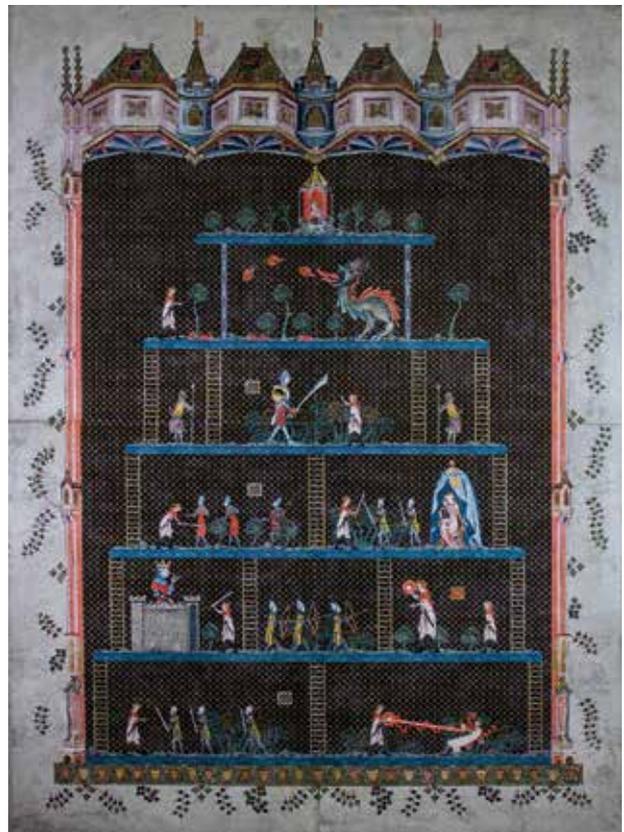
"Genesis" Series

Hernandez's paintings came to my attention a couple of years ago, with his "Genesis" Series, a collection of inventively conceived artworks that combined the compositional structure of 8- and 16-bit video games of the artist's childhood with imagery derived from art history. This comic pairing had considerable fun with the idea of religion as a systematized game of risk and reward. Images of medieval saints ascended while accruing video game token-like rewards in a well-organized and stable virtual world; orderly systems rewarded sustained effort, always ascending toward the heavens. The figures, cribbed from medieval, as well as Asian and Persian art historical sources through inkjet transfer and mounted on faux fresco grounds, were small and the compositions were relatively intimate.

In his artist's statement, Hernandez says of the "Genesis" series:

"The works enjoyably play at violence within empty, narrative shells, exhibiting action with little purpose and without consequence. They also mix and match religion, mythology and pop culture, blurring boundaries, rearranging hierarchies and calling into question notions of iconography, collectibles and devotion."

But in his most recent paintings from this continuing body of work, a sense of peril has crept in, and there have been some subtle but important alterations in scope and direction. Rather than being set in the sky with the im-

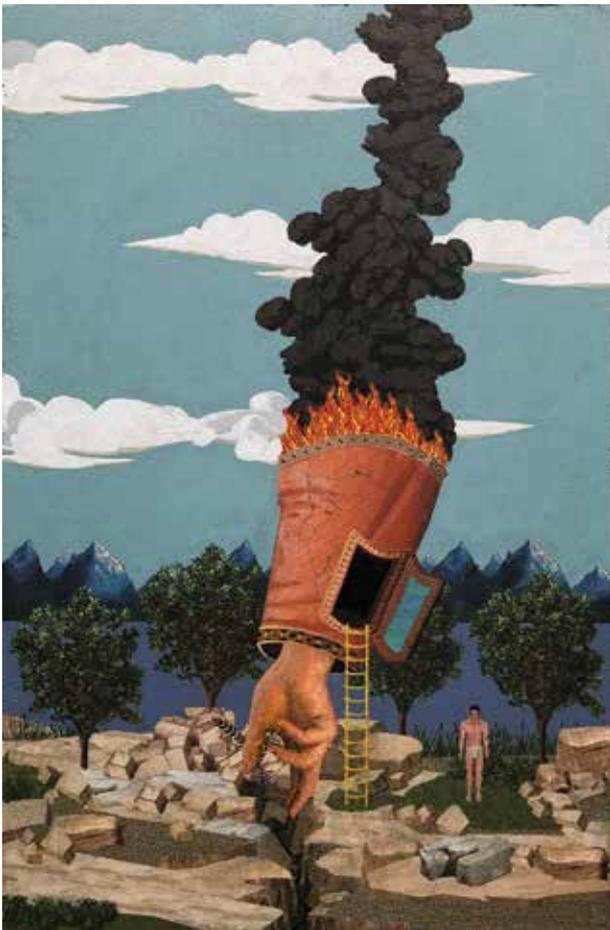


Dan Hernandez, *Romance of Pauline*, 2021. Inkjet transfer, acrylic paint, paper on panel, 33 x 24 inches. Photo courtesy 20 North Gallery.

plied upward movement toward a higher goal, some of the larger compositions have moved inside and underground. Hernandez has maintained the small scale of the inkjet transfers, though he has jettisoned the fresco treatment of earlier pieces, emphasizing the artworks' relationship to medieval illuminated manuscripts. The figures in *Grotta* appear to be climbing down into a flaming cavern that features odd subterranean plants and animals and contains



Dan Hernandez, *Grotta*, 2021. Inkjet transfer, acrylic paint, paper on panel 28 x 45 inches. Photo-courtesy 20 North Gallery.



Dan Hernandez, *Portrait of the Artist as Creator*, 2019. Inkjet transfer, acrylic paint, paper on panel, 16 x 10 inches. Photo courtesy 20 North Gallery.

tokens that bear a suspicious resemblance to the coronavirus. In *The Romance of Pauline*, characters appropriated from the Bodleian Library's *Romance of Alexander* move at great peril through a compositional scheme borrowed from Donkey Kong.

A small artwork, *Self-portrait of the Artist as Creator*, nicely sums up Hernandez's bemused attitude toward his own recent work. In it, a disembodied, flaming sleeve ending with a giant pointing hand gestures toward a fissure in the earth. It could belong to an unknown deity but is instead (according to Hernandez's cosmology) a stand-in for the artist himself as both inventor and spectator. A door in the sleeve opens and a ladder extends. The small semi-nude figure of the artist stands immobile nearby, helplessly observing the result of his own creative inspiration. There seems to be some question in his mind as to whether he is observing a cataclysmic event or if he is somehow responsible for creating it.

"Reset" Series

In the second body of work on view, entitled "Reset," Hernandez breaks new ground in size, theme and subject, and the sense of burgeoning chaos from his "Genesis" paintings becomes fully visible. Often more ambitious in scale, the paintings' militantly anarchic compositions violate the orderly, rules-based arrangement of visual elements in his previous work. The artist describes his game-derived creative inspiration:

"Early video game consoles like the Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) were designed with a reset button... my NES often got used in a release of frustration. My finger would jam this button in a fit of annoyance at an overly challenging level, or seemingly unbeatable computer opponent."



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, 1562. Oil on panel, 46 x 63.75 inches. Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.



Dan Hernandez, (Left) *Game Over*. 2019. Acrylic on panel, 40 x 40 inches. Photo courtesy 20 North Gallery.

Hernandez also credits *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* by Pieter Bruegel the Elder along with Andrea Comodi's painting of the same title for his compositional inspiration in the turbulent series. In *Game Over*, muscular hand-drawn figures painted in the saturated colors of comic books, and larger than those in his previous work, fall chaotically, tumbling down toward destruction. The orderly world of the "Genesis" series is not the world of "Reset."

Reward tokens are dispersed randomly throughout the paintings, and the architecture of the imaginary space no longer makes any sense. In *Fall*, the familiar hand-of-the-artist motif once again makes an appearance, now seeming to direct the downward trajectory of a ball of explosive flame. Intimations of disaster abound.

In *Nether*, to my mind the strongest piece in this series, the descending hand appears ashen and energyless. No longer the serene creative power directing proceedings, it limply gestures toward the disaster below. The composition retains some order by way of its symmetry, but the apocalypse is now. Two images of monstrous beasts reminiscent of the mouths of hell often found in medieval paintings devour the landscape, while two giant worms of uncertain provenance wreak destruction with laser beams from their eyes. There is still some kind of game being played, but we no longer understand the rules or the goal.

"Los Santos" Series

In addition to the "Genesis" and "Reset" Series, Hernandez has chosen to include yet another body of work in this exhibition which serves as a kind of coda to the first two. It is, perhaps, an indicator of the future direction in his art practice. The artist describes the 12 modestly sized paintings of his "Los Santos" series as a kind of cyber-escape or travelogue. The landscapes are borrowed from locations featured in the video game world of *Grand Theft Auto V*, and at first glance are straightforward paintings of beautiful, if empty, West Coast landscapes. He describes these as looking like traditional "plein air" paintings, but of course they are not. They are, in fact, the opposite: illustrations of an artificial world that exists only in cyberspace. It's as



Dan Hernandez, *Fall*, 2021. Acrylic on panel, 48 x 48 inches. Photo courtesy 20 North Gallery.



Dan Hernandez, *Nether*, 2021. Acrylic on panel, 48 x 48 inches. Photo courtesy 20 North Gallery.

if the artist wants to escape the chaos and disaster of the virtual worlds he has already created for the idyllic environment of yet another.

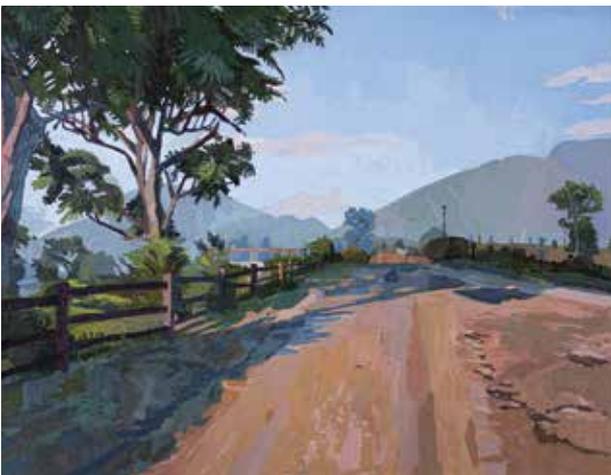
In his statement, Hernandez pays lip service to the nightmarish prospect of violence inherent in the game of GTAV, but that violence is not yet present in these pretty scenes. It's unclear where he is going with this imagery in light of his previous work; he seems to be torn between his previous orderly game-based "Genesis" series and the chaos and violence of the "Reset" series and looking for a way out.

Dan Hernandez's discomfort with both the virtual reality he has created and the one he lives in is palpable.

But the three groups of powerfully imaginative and technically inventive paintings in this exhibition show that the artist has all the visual tools he needs to continue his exploratory world-building project. They also provide the potent psychological motivation he will need as he moves forward through a virtual portal into his own private metaverse. ■

K.A. Letts is the Detroit editor of the New Art Examiner, a working artist (kalettsart.com) and art blogger (rustbeltarts.com). She has shown her paintings and drawings in galleries and museums in Toledo, Detroit, Chicago and New York. She writes frequently about art in the Detroit area.

Dan Hernandez, (Left) *Grapeseed*, 2021. Acrylic paint, paper on panel, 11 x 14 inches. (Right) *Houses on Chumash*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 9 x 12 inches. Photos courtesy 20 North Gallery.



Kounellis, Migration, and Graffiti: Notes on Arte Povera in Miami

Arte Povera: Postwar Italian Art from the Margulies Collection

by Tenley Bick

This season's exhibition at the Margulies Collection at the Warehouse is dedicated to works of Arte Povera, the primarily Italian avant-garde of the late 1960s and early 1970s coined by Italian curator and critic Germano Celant (1940–2020) in 1967, most famously in his now canonical essay for *Flash Art*: “Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia” (Arte Povera: Notes for a Guerrilla War). While the term translates to “poor” or “impoverished art,” Arte Povera was less a literal engagement of inexpensive, discarded, or readily available “poor materials,” though these were often mainstay strategies, than an engagement with stripped-down, un-transformed material (organic and industrial), gesture, process, and language, “liberated” from the confines of discourse and convention. Countering the commercial practices (for Celant) of Pop and Minimalism and refusing the trappings of signature style, these artists were revolutionizing social and cultural systems from the inside.¹

Neither the historical context of postwar Italian art (per the show's title—though much of this work falls well beyond that frame) nor Celant's urgent notes for an artistic “guerrilla war” are captured in this exhibition. But the show offers a rare occasion to view Arte Povera in Miami, and in its broader intersecting geographies of the U.S.-American South and Caribbean. This point is not lost on Margulies the collector or institution, who have long (and admirably) strived to make a world-class private collection available to the public and, as noted in the signage, local students. Curated by longtime curator Katherine Hinds with research assistance by associate curator Jeanie Ambrosio, the exhibition includes works by eight of the eleven artists in Celant's eventual set. As a whole, the exhibition often favors hefty works of Arte Povera composed of industrial and natural materials (as in the *five* wall-oriented metal shelves and sculptural tableaux by Jannis Kounellis (b. 1938, Piraeus, Greece–d. 2017, Rome).

A seven-foot-tall untitled sculptural tableau in steel, burlap, and iron ore from 2012 by Jannis Kounellis—the only non-Italian artist associated with Arte Povera, who regarded his works as paintings—introduces the exhibition with an emphasis on materiality, bifurcated references to industry and nature, and contingent form—all familiar characteristics of Arte Povera. These characteristics are underscored here with Kounellis' signature references to nomadism, migration, and transit. It is the most recent work included in the show, which spans from 1960 (also a Kounellis work) forward. Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 2012. Steel panel, iron wires, sacks, iron ore. 85 x 71 x 17 inches. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.





Exhibition view, main room. From left to right, works by Jannis Kounellis, Michelangelo Pistoletto, Alighiero Boetti (2, right wall), and Luciano Fabro (foreground). Photo by Tenley Bick.

The only non-Italian artist associated with Arte Povera, Kounellis' works here feature his often-used materials: metal panels and beams, discarded scraps of wood, musical instruments, burlap sacks, iron ore, and loose plaster.

The exhibition also includes what might be considered trademark examples of these artists' practices. That is, while Arte Povera resisted signature style, style nevertheless settled into the work of many of its protagonists, paradigmatic examples of which can be seen at the Margulies exhibition. The exhibition showcases a wall-climbing sculpture composed of neon numerals by Mario Merz (1925–2003), who often drew upon the Fibonacci series as a compositional device, as seen here. We also find a *quadro specchiante* or "mirror painting" by Michelangelo Pistoletto (1933–), belonging to the artist's ongoing series of highly polished and mirrorized stainless steel panels begun in 1962, collaged and later silk-screened with everyday figures and objects. In this case, viewers will enjoy seeing their own reflections register alongside the panel's life-size photographic, serigraphic figure whom we encounter, in this case, climbing a ladder. In another example still, we find a canvas-and-photographic conceptual work on artistic "study" (as process, as space) by Giulio Paolini (1940–).

This exhibition of Arte Povera also highlights artworks that include textual elements—a common trope in Arte Povera, which often explored language as a system of

meaning. Two works by Pier Paolo Calzolari (1943–) from the early 1970s exemplify the artist's exploration of the poetics of language and nature. One sculpture includes a series of words in neon ("elastic," "present," and "nebulous," among them), mounted on leather belts that horizontally traverse the two metal stanchions that support the work. The bare sides of the belts seem blank by comparison; with the assistance of a refrigerator unit, however, they accrue frost throughout the day; nature "speaks" alongside language. Also in the vein of linguistic experimentation, one of two floor-sited sculptures by Luciano Fabro (1936–2007) is at the exhibition's center. In addition to the poetic inscription found on the surface of the work, its material elements also engage in linguistic play. It is composed of "marble" on "marble": a marble column, positioned on top of glass marbles. Or we might consider a late-1980s work by Alighiero Boetti (1940–1994), from his *grandi Arazzi* series. Composed of large multi-colored embroidered textual grids in Italian, Farsi, and Dari, the works were embroidered by Afghan women (and from 1988 forward, by emigrants in Peshawar, Pakistan)² with whom the artist long collaborated. The work (like Kounellis') reminds us here of global exchange of capital and culture, processes of human migration and collaboration, and the language of art that we all share despite our linguistic and geographical barriers.



Mario Merz, *Fibonacci series 1/1/2/3/5/8/13/21/34/55/89/144/233...*, 1996. 21 neon numerals, cable, electrical transformer. Dimensions variable. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.

Spanning the main space at the building's entrance as well as a side gallery, the exhibition self-consciously underscores its own status as drawn from works in a single private collection. It connects the collection of Martin Z. Margulies (real estate mogul, philanthropist, and collector), through references to historic and contemporary collectors of Arte Povera who have been formative to its discourse in the primary and secondary contexts. The side gallery includes a 2020 video documentary on Christian (Margherita) Stein. Visitors can hear artists Giulio Paolini and Michelangelo Pistoletto reflect on the importance of Stein—a major dealer and supporter of Arte Povera. She sustained these artists through provision of exhibition space in her home and Turin-based gallery (now located in Milan), the Galerie Christian Stein, as spaces to show their work, many of which she also acquired. The exhibition also includes an homage to Celant, who shepherded many of these artists onto an international platform, championing their work for decades until his tragic death from COVID in 2020. Other major collections of Arte Povera—namely that of Nancy Olnick and Giorgio Spanu, co-founders of Magazzino Italian Art, along with Munich-based collector Ingvild Goetz—are explicitly acknowledged in a short text by Margulies as the inspirations for this exhibition. At 55,000 square feet and with a now-familiar industrial aesthetic for contemporary art museums, the Margulies Warehouse echoes the often-industrial aesthetic of Arte Povera, which emerged in the wake of Italy's postwar revitalization or “economic miracle,” driven in large part by a boom in its global commercial exports. It also echoes historic sites of Arte Povera exhibitions, namely the Deposito d'Arte Presente (Warehouse for Present Art, acknowledged in an exhibition text on galleries and dealers),

established in Turin in 1968 as a space for these artists' exhibitions and activities.

An extraordinary early work by Kounellis is the highlight of the show, with regard to the historical importance of the works exhibited. On view for the first time from Mr. Margulies' private collection, to which it will return after the show,³ the mixed-media work on paper (mounted on canvas) belongs to the artist's *Lettere* (Letters) or *Alfabeti* (Alphabets) series (1959–1962/3), first exhibited in 1960 at the Galleria La Tartaruga in Rome. Kounellis began the series while he was still an art student, having arrived in Rome in 1956 from his native Greece. This an exceptionally rare example of these works in color. A pale-pink “j” and yellow-ochre “u,” among other stains and partial markings—some teal, some red—distinguish this work from others. They more often have only the large black letters, numbers, and signs (arrows, in this case), seen here. The work hangs in its original frame, constructed by the artist.⁴

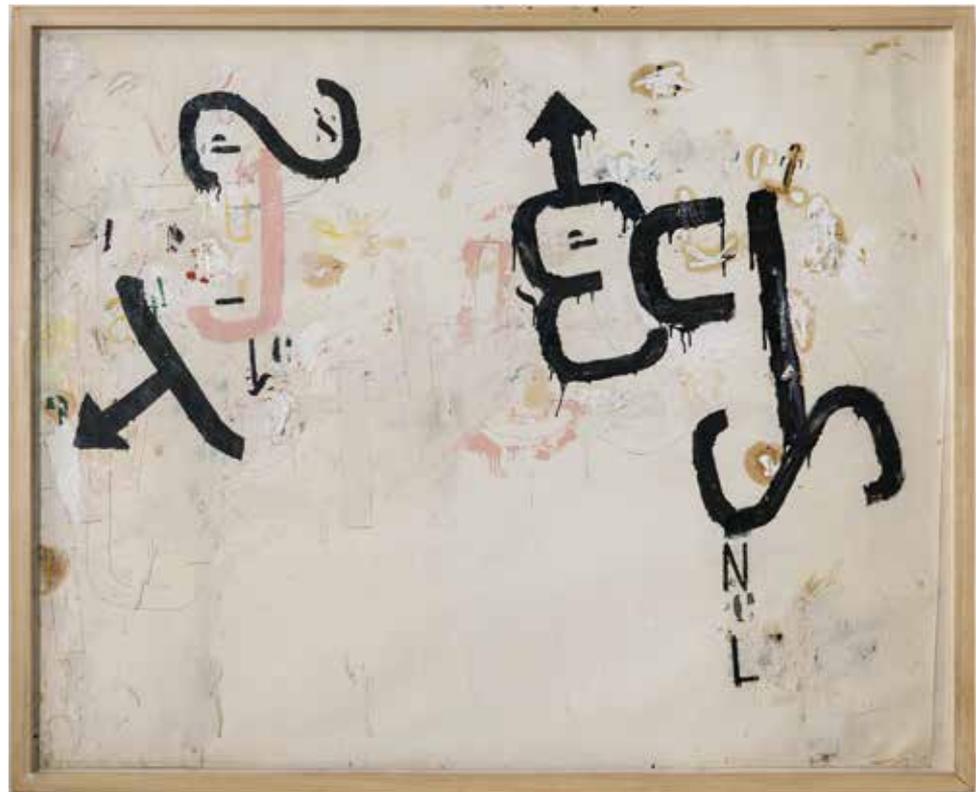
Inspired by street signage in Rome and stenciled by the artist in different orientations onto the floating material and linguistic space of the paper, Kounellis' work recalls the “primordial realm of language,” as scholar Francesco Guzzetti has written of the *Lettere*.⁵ It also asserts its sensibility as graffiti—from the Greek *graphein* (to scratch, draw, write) and then the Italian *graffio* (scratch)—as written marks, often illicit, in public spaces. In this sense, the work registers Kounellis' personal biography, moving from Greece to Italy, as well as the deep cultural and linguistic histories between these regions. It also underscores the artist's (and Arte Povera's) prescient experimentalism and its continued resonances today, in this case in Miami. The work hearkens to graffiti and street art in the immediate



A poetic sculpture in marble and glass (see the glass marbles, underneath the marble column) offers viewers an opportunity to consider Arte Povera's interests in nature, presented as it is, and linguistic experimentation. Luciano Fabro (1936–2007), *Il giorno mi pesa sulla notte I* (The Day Ways on Me at Night I), 1994. Portuguese pink marble, red Levanto marble, gold, lead, glass, 39 1/2 x 101 x 14 7/8 inches. Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1983. Wood assemblage, metal shelf, 58 x 95 x 7 inches. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.

surrounding neighborhood of Wynwood and to the rich international cultural and geographic exchanges that distinguish the metropolis more broadly. While I regretted that the work is hung some fifteen feet above the viewing floor, which makes it somewhat difficult to see, its siting also creates an opportunity to contemplate not only the history of these works but their potential local dialogues, as well.

Also of great interest is a 1985 work by Kounellis, composed of stacked burlap sacks, walling off an iron portal; it suggests passage through the space of painting and architecture, even as it occludes it. Here, the suggestion is that painting as a “window on the world” takes a different form from the Albertian perspectival illusionism and humanism of the Italian Renaissance. In Albertian perspective, Man was the measure of the world, while Kounellis alludes to



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1960. Mixed media on paper laid down on canvas, 63 x 75 inches. Margulies Collection. Photo courtesy of the Margulies.

the unfettered materialism and neo-liberal capitalism of our globalized economy, in which capital is the measure of the world. As shared in the work's wall label, the piece has been re-installed at the Margulies in a slightly different format than its original installation at the CPAC Musée d'art Contemporain (Entrepôt Lainé, Bourdeaux, France). There, Kounellis stacked the sacks, as well as coal and stones, to fill the arches of the museum that in the early nineteenth century functioned as a warehouse for colonial goods for the French Empire. While the stated intention was to underscore the visual resonances with the untitled work above, this work's engagement of histories of migration and capital will lead viewers to contemplate resonances between Kounellis' and other works in the Margulies collection, beyond Arte Povera (which Margulies has collected since the late 1980s).⁶

Brazilian artist Ernesto Neto's hanging sculptural installation, *É ô Bicho!* (It's the Bug!), from 2001, full of spices that perfume the surrounding environment, seems especially close in this regard to Kounellis' long-term use of sacks, coffee, and other goods that conjure images of markets and exchange, while creating a multi-sensorial encounter with a work of art. Or we might consider the works' resonance with the glorious, demonstratively present, hulking *Trashstone 412* (2008) by German artist Wilhelm Mundt, in which the artist encased production waste in green-flecked neon-yellow fiberglass; the 2017 sculptural wall of industrial detritus by Ghanaian artist Ibrahim Mahama; and the nearby row of wall-mounted sculptures by another German contemporary artist, Florian Bauxdrexel, composed of folded cardboard shipping boxes.

Notably absent from the exhibition are works by Marisa Merz (1926–2019), the only woman artist of Arte Povera. Her hanging aluminum *Living Sculptures*, woven house slippers, and poetic sculptural and painterly tableaux would have underscored the domestic as a key critical strategy and proto-feminist element found in the otherwise patriarchal Arte Povera. The exhibition—as situated at the Margulies—nevertheless has much to offer. It is strongly recommended. ■

Arte Povera: Postwar Italian Art from the Margulies Collection is on view October 20, 2021–April 30, 2022 at The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse, Miami, Florida, USA. Curated by Katherine Hinds.

Note: The Margulies Collection at the Warehouse is open to the public from October through April. An additional work by Giulio Paolini and a work by Gilberto Zorio were added to the exhibition in December. Visitors will have another opportunity to view works of contemporary Italian art at the Margulies next season, when their exhibition dedicated to the topic is scheduled to open.



Jannis Kounellis, *Untitled*, 1985. Burlap sacks, iron beams. Dimensions variable. Margulies Collection. Photo by Tenley Bick.

Tenley Bick is an art historian and Assistant Professor of Global Contemporary Art in the Department of Art History at Florida State University. Her scholarship on Italian art focuses on Arte Povera, internationalism, and cultural geopolitics in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as contemporary Italian art, activism, and postcoloniality. www.tenleybick.com.

Footnotes

1. See Germano Celant, "Arte Povera: Appunti per una guerriglia," *Flash Art*, n. 5 (November–December, 1967): 3.
2. "1988," Archivio Alighiero Boetti: https://www.archivioalighiero-boetti.it/timeline_slider_post/1988/.
3. Katherine Hinds, email correspondence with the author, Mar. 2, 2021.
4. I am grateful to Hinds for sharing the detail regarding the frame. Hinds, email correspondence with the author, Mar. 2, 2021.
5. Francesco Guzzetti, description of the works, "Segnali," in *Paper Media: Boetti, Calzolari, Kounellis* (Cold Spring, NY: Magazzino Italian Art, 2019), 21.
6. Collection history notes were shared by Hinds in e-mail correspondence with the author.

Bob Thompson: Desire, Elation, and Trauma in Paradise

“Bob Thompson: This House is Mine,” Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

by Diane Thodos

I paint many paintings that tell me slowly that I have something inside of me that is just bursting, twisting, sticking, spilling over to get out... Out into souls and mouths and eyes that have never seen before.

–Bob Thompson¹

The artist...cannot take flight to the Elysian Fields of the preciousness of perfection, the prism of the eye, but has to deal with matter complex.

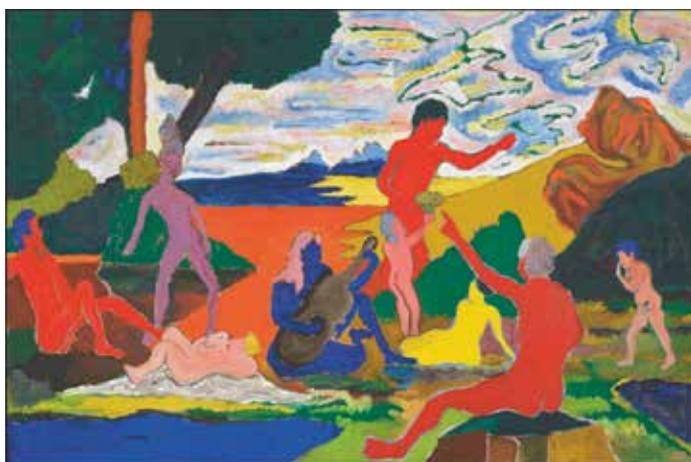
–Jan Müller²

For the horrors of the American Negro's life there has been almost no language.

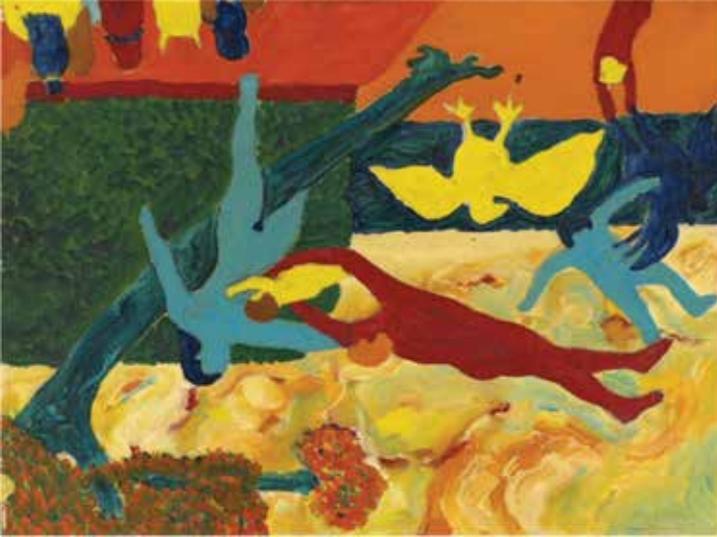
–James Baldwin³

I clearly recall the sense of joy I felt when I first encountered Bob Thompson's paintings. It was the late 1980s in New York City when the age of Neo Expressionist painting was on the wane but interest in figurative expressionism lingered in particular corners of the art gallery scene. Here was an artist that boldly reimagined Fauvism with a psychedelic palette typical of the brightly colored poster art of the 1960s. He presented a joyous peaceable kingdom of multicolored men and women that comingled race and sex with an abstract and rhythmic composition. Still, I felt the dancing and reclining figures were also uncanny and mysterious as faceless silhouettes. For all their ebullience I sensed a moodiness just below the surface. There was a mystery hidden in these bacchanales that I had yet to discover.

The Smart Museum of Art's retrospective of Bob Thompson went a long way in answering questions that first eluded me. Robert Louis Thompson was born into a middle-class black family in Louisville Kentucky in 1937. He had an early attraction to art and jazz, a therapeutic need he pursued following the death of his father in a violent car accident when he was only 13. From 1957–58



(Top) Bob Thompson, *Homage to Nina Simone*, 1965. Oil in canvas, 50 x 74 inches. Photo courtesy Smart Museum of Art. (Bottom) Nicolas Poussin, *Bacchanal with a Lute Player*, 1620s. Oil on canvas, 47 1/2 x 69 inches. Department of Paintings of the Louvre. Image from commons.wikimedia.org.



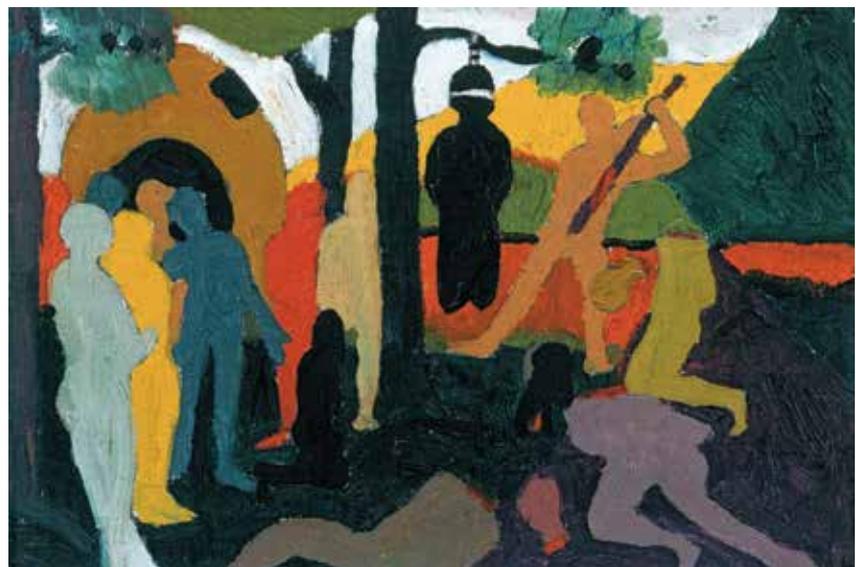
(Left) Bob Thompson, *The Milky Way*, 1964. Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 inches. Image source: Artnet.com. (Right) Jacopo Tintoretto, *The Origin of the Milky Way*, ca. 1575–80, Oil on canvas, 58 x 65 inches. The National Gallery, London. Image from commons.wikimedia.org.

he studied painting at the University of Louisville but left in 1958 to join a supportive and dynamic coterie of musicians, artists, and writers in New York City.

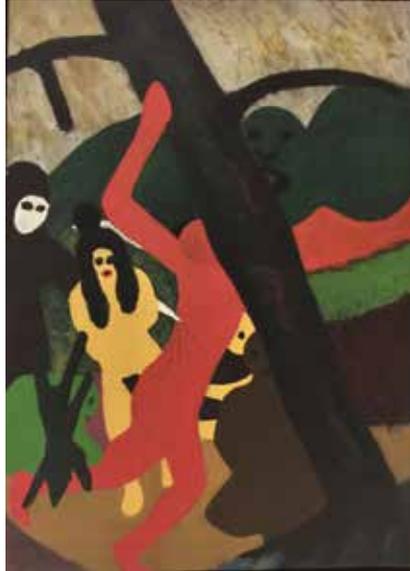
Thompson's work is a continuation of a particular modernist African-American art tradition exemplified by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. Lawrence painted scenes of African-American history and struggle, composing with bold shapes, flat abstract patterns, and bright colors to create expressive tableaux. Bearden, who traveled to Paris in 1950, adapted the figural compositions he saw in the museum works of the old masters into his own innovative jazzy modernist-based idiom. Both Bearden's and Lawrence's lives in New York City reflected the special dynamic of the Harlem Renaissance, similar to the way Thompson's work expressed the transformative energy of the civil rights and black liberation movements happening there in the late 1950s and 1960s.

Thompson had numerous opportunities to visit Europe, where he spent much time visiting museums to study old master paintings. He is well known for “riffing” on their mythology and religious theme-based compositions with a bright jazzy color that infused both his landscapes and figures. *Homage to Nina Simone* (1965) is based on Nicholas Poussin's *Bacchanal with a Lute Player* painted in 1527–28. *The Milky Way* comes from Tintoretto's 1575 painting on the same mythological theme. Bright color becomes a way of aesthetically harmonizing the social unity and sexual engagement between the races. These popular signature works reflect an integrated “paradise” in an abstract modernist style, visualizing society as a peaceable kingdom of equality, even with a sense of Matissian *luxe, calme, and volupté*.

At times this peaceful seeming pastorage becomes ruptured by disturbing acts—reflecting the turmoil of the



Bob Thompson, *The Execution*, 1961. Oil on linen, 7 x 10 1/2 inches. Photo by Diane Thodos.



Y aun no se van!

(Left) Francisco Goya, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, # 43 of the “Caprichos” series, 1799. Etching with aquatint and other intaglio media on laid paper. Image from en.wikipedia.org. (Center) Bob Thompson, *Untitled (Tree Lift)*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 37 x 26 inches. Photo by Diane Thodos. (Right) Francisco Goya, *And Still They Will Not Go!*, 1799. Etching. Image from commons.wikimedia.org.

times. The Civil Rights and black liberation movements of the the 1950s and 60s rose to challenge white supremacist oppression against the sexual and social intermingling of the races, black rights and black self-determination. It was a time of transformation in America which Thompson understood all too well growing up under Jim Crow segregation in Kentucky. His use of the old master mythological and religious themes of rescue, abduction, and execution are reinvented as a means of expressing the cruelty of white supremacist terror. *The Execution* based on a religious altarpiece by Fra Angelico (1395–1455) is transformed into a woodland lynching scene. A bound black figure hanging from a tree is about to be struck by an executioner’s bloody sword while an indifferent group of onlookers socialize among themselves.

The German figurative expressionist painter Jan Müller (1922–1958) had a particular impact on Thompson. He first encountered his work at a popular artist’s colony in Provincetown Massachusetts in 1958 shortly following Müller’s death. Because Müller’s German parents were dedicated socialists, he and his family were forced to flee Nazi persecution in 1933, living a life of fear and precarity throughout Europe. He eventually arrived in the U.S. and settled in New York City in 1945. There he was befriended by the Abstract Expressionist Hans Hoffman and studied at his famous school of fine art in Greenwich Village, famous as a meeting place for the American Abstract Expressionists. The profound precarity of his own life informed the intensity of his compositions and their expressive symbolism.



Bob Thompson, *Red Cross*, 1959. Oil on wood, 15 x 18 1/2 inches. Photo by Diane Thodos.



(Left) Bob Thompson, *The Struggle*, 1963. Oil on paper, 22x 26 inches. (Right) Bob Thompson, *Tree*, 1962. Oil on canvas, 78 x 108 inches. Photos by Diane Thodos.

“Jan did not fear physical death—but the horror in life, the Hell of conformity and spiritual death. But the spirit of life, the spirit of freedom, the freedom to search, and the faith—the faith beyond searching—are here in the witches, the angels, the paths, and the Man on the Horse.”⁴

Müller’s work impacted Thompson’s work in several ways. His female figures are the main protagonists of his tableaux: sexual and earthy, crawling like animals, supine on the ground, or leaping out of the sky as witches or angels. These same pink or light-colored female figures become central in Thompson’s work, along with the influence of Müller’s male horse riders, expressively simplified trees, and compacted blocks of color that activate his landscapes and backgrounds. Aspects of these influences stem from the 1914 German Expressionist *Blau Reiter* movement. Its leader Wassily Kandinsky emphasized bright colors, abstract landscapes, and horse rider

motifs as purveyors of spiritual values in art. “The artist must train not only his eye but also his soul, so it can weigh colors in its own scale and thus become a determinant in artistic creation.”⁵ Thompson’s small painting on wood *Red Cross* (1959) shows many of these spiritualized and expressive ideas: the compression of color blocks and tree shapes that make up the landscape with a horse and rider figure on the left and an attenuated female figure on the right. *Red Cross* represents a simple but effective modernist use of abstraction becoming an expressive spiritualized space.

Thompson’s encounter with the work of the Spanish artist Francisco Goya, specifically his *Los Caprichos* from 1797–98, seems to herald the eruption of demons and monsters in scenes of violence, struggle, and depravity. Goya’s emotionally charged apocalyptic visions seem to unleash Thompson’s ability to articulate what was irrational and unspeakable, exposing the dark social tensions surrounding the issues of sex and race. The pastoral mood



Bob Thompson, *The Hanging*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 72 x 110 inches. Photo courtesy Smart Museum of Art.



(Left) Bob Thompson, *Black Monster*, 1959. Oil on canvas, 56 x 67 inches. Image from Africanah.org. (Right) Bob Thompson, *St. George and the Dragon*, 1961. Oil on canvasboard, 4 1/2 x 7 inches. Photo by Diane Thodos.



of Thompson's sometime peaceable kingdom is ruptured by violence caused by dark, aberrant forces. In *Tree* (1962), a twisted mound of yellow, white, pink and brown bodies fight in mortal battle, accompanied by beasts from above and below. Fangs, claws, and teeth come out. Turmoil and cruelty reign. In *The Struggle* (1963), a determined mob grasps the body of a woman trying to separate her from a male figure struggling under the weight of a heavy slab. *Untitled (Tree Lift)* (1962), based on Goya's etching *And Still They Will Not Go!* (1799), has the same male figure lifting a massive tree trunk with ghoulish figures looking on. His formerly faceless figures now wear shocked, haunted, and grimacing expressions. One of Thompson's most spontaneous and expressively brushed works, *The Hanging* (1959), overtly depicts the crime of lynching—directly naming the source of racist cruelty and terror.

Thompson confessed "The monster was very much of a monster and yet I want to make him gentle."⁶ The terrifying creature in *Black Monster* (1959) attacking two light skinned women carrying a dark man seems to symbolize

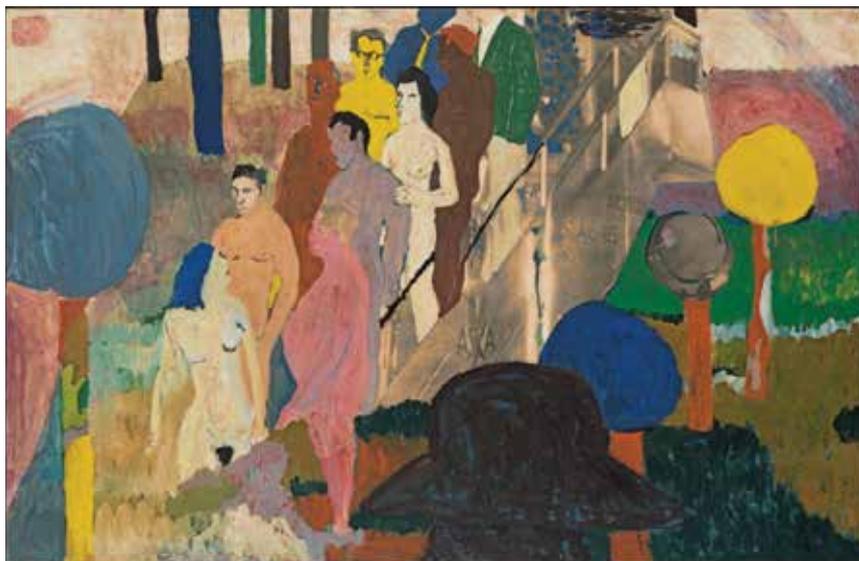
the conjurings of the white supremacist taboo against the sexual violation of the color barrier and the chaos of social tensions it produced in the mind of Jim Crow dominated society. This tension was a reality in Thompson's personal life. "It was in 1959 at the Cedar Bar in Greenwich Village that Thompson met Carol Plenda, a white woman whom he married in 1960, seven years before the Loving vs. Virginia Supreme Court decision ended prohibitions on interracial marriage."⁷ Fighting monsters and beasts symbolizes a confrontational dare against his sexual crossing of the color line and the violent emotions it caused within racist American society.

"Punishment for interracial desire is an American tradition that Thompson was certainly aware of. The lynching of black men in particular was often justified by claims of sexual activity with white women (frequently declared by murderers as a reason)."⁸

The 1955 murder of Emmett Till in Mississippi, based on the false accusation of whistling at a white woman, lays



Jan Müller, *Search for the Unicorn*, 1957. Oil on canvas, 70 x 93 inches. Photo courtesy Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.



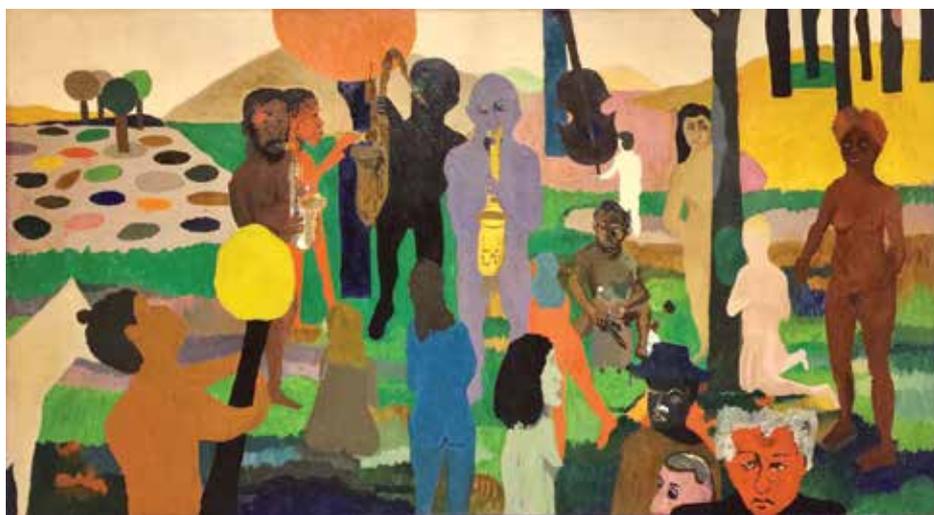
Bob Thompson, *Stairway to the Stars*, ca. 1962. Oil and photostat on masonite, 40 x 60 inches. Photo by Diane Thodos.

bare this paranoia. This adds a special layer of meaning to Thompson's *St. George and the Dragon* paintings, where a dark-skinned horse rider seeks to slay the dragon symbolizing white supremacist terror—a force that condemns blackness and imprisons white female sexual expression. In one 1963 version, a black-hatted figure reaches to embrace his light skinned female partner as two beasts attack the couple trying to tear them apart from both sides.

The final room in the exhibit shows works that highlight friends and artists who supported and inspired Thompson. *Stairway to the Stars* (1962) portrays the beat poet Alan Ginsberg and fellow artists Walter Gutman and Red Grooms. *Garden of Music* (1960) depicts jazz musicians Ronnie Coleman, Don Cherry, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Ed Blackwell, and Charlie Hayden playing on their instruments. There is the more realistic portrait of the mixed-race couple of LeRoi Jones and his wife Hettie with their two children. LeRoi was particularly close to Thompson. “He was a great painter, a fantastic emotionalist... He had a great influence on us. And his conception of paint-

ing knocked me out.”⁹ Yet even in this room of supportive artists and friends, there never seems to be a happy or contented face. In *Garden of Music* and the painting *Balling* (1960), figures hide behind trees, peering out with fear and unease similar to the fear, unease, and melancholic inwardness on the faces of his portraits. The unhappiness of his faces may well explain the mystery of his faceless silhouetted figures in his better known works—a way to hide the depression and fear that haunted him throughout his life.

Thompson embodies an artist who developed his own particular modernist idiom while also being a very rare example of the expressionist and figurative tendencies found in the works of Lawrence, Bearden, and Müller. From the late 1950s through the 1960s, very few American painters explored expressive figuration at the risk of jeopardizing successful careers when Abstract Expressionism was the dominant trend. Those who did not accommodate the doctrine of abstract purity promoted by the powerful art critic Clement Greenberg suffered sharp words under



Bob Thompson, *Garden of Music*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 79 x 143 inches. Photo courtesy Smart Museum of Art.



(Left) Bob Thompson, *LeRoi Jones and His Family*, 1960. Oil on canvas, 36 3/8 x 48 1/2 inches. Photo courtesy Smart Museum of Art. (Right) Bob Thompson, *Balling*, 1960. Oil on panel, 39 x 59 inches. Photo by Diane Thodos.



his withering gaze. Willem de Kooning's *Woman* paintings are a rare example of figurative expressionist work that survived his disapproval.

Another reason Thompson and Müller paid the price of obscurity is based on how the American cultural mind is influenced by a kind of historical Puritanism which is uncomfortable with the emotional and erotic needs of the physical body. The Puritanical mind sought to control what it saw as the dangerous power of eros, instincts, and emotions. It demanded the split of the mind and soul from the body, whose needs were suppressed and denied. This same dogma runs deep in the American white supremacist fear that inflicted dehumanization and control over Black people, their human and civil rights, and the fear of Eros as a powerful force that could violate the taboo of crossing the color line. Contemporary post-modern art continues this trajectory of "Puritanization" by forcing the human figure to become conceptualized, technologized, or erased altogether by the kind of Neo-Formalist abstraction that is endlessly promoted by popular art magazines. By contrast, Thompson and Müller chose a path to authenticity through figurative expressionism, using it to plumb the emotional ordeal of a self that confronted difficult social and political injustices in life. Both resisted the "Purifying" reduction of expressionism to *Action Painting*, which emphasized the physical act of painting as "an event"¹⁰ rather than a vehicle to express the human soul and spirit.

Thompson lived a tragically short life succumbing at only 28 to a long-time heroin addiction following medical surgery. Fortunately today, there is a strong resurgence of interest in historically important black artists and how they affect the current generation. The impact of the social realist artist Charles White on his student Kerry James Marshall is a good case in point. It is invigorating to finally examine the expressionist side of Thompson's work through an in-depth museum retrospective, giving fresh eyes to the conflict of anti-black racism that still haunts

America to this day. This timely and scholarly exhibition gives deep insight into Thompson's esoteric figurative expressionism and the complex stories that evolve within the rhythmic landscapes of his restless imagination. ■

"Bob Thompson: This House is Mine" is on view through May 15, 2022, at the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, 5550 S. Greenwood Ave., Chicago, IL 60637.

Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, IL. She is a Pollack Krasner Grant Recipient who exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others. For more information visit dianethodos.com.

Footnotes

1. Minneapolis Institute of Art, *The Incredible Forgotten Life of Bob Thompson*. newartsmia.org.
2. Müller as quoted in "Airless Despair," *Time*, February 2, 1962.
3. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 1963.
4. Dody Müller, "Jan Müller's Life," *Jan Müller, 1922–1958* exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1962).
5. Wassily Kandinsky, *The Spiritual in Abstract Art*.
6. Bob Thompson quote, exhibition wall text for *Black Monster* (1959), Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, IL, "Bob Thomson: This House is Mine."
7. Crystal N. Feimster, *Black Monster and the Hanging*, Bob Thompson: *This House is Mine*, Yale University Press 2021, p. 116.
8. Bridget R. Cooks, *Dark Figures*, Bob Thompson: *This House is Mine*, Yale University Press 2021, p. 95.
9. Leroi Jones quote, exhibition wall text for *Portrait of Leroi Jones and his family*, 1964, Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, IL, "Bob Thompson: This House is Mine."
10. Harold Rosenberg, "The American Action Painters," *The Tradition of the New*, Da Capo Press, 1994, p. 25.

The Renaissance Nature of Martha Tuttle’s “An ear, a hand, a mouth, an offering, an angel”

Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, Feb. 25 – April 16, 2022

by Chloé M. Pelletier

NOTE: In the interest of transparency (incidentally a motif in this show), I should note that the artist is a friend and therefore what follows is not a review, but rather my personal response to the exhibition.

I am still processing Martha Tuttle’s exhibition at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, “An ear, a hand, a mouth, an offering, an angel.” Revisiting the images in my phone’s camera roll, I zoom in on a patch of tufted hand-spun wool or the taught seam where it connects with a swath of painted silk, creating a crisp silhouette of the aluminum stretcher bar just behind. I smile at a photo of an adult and child crouching low to examine the titular installation which consists of small natural(ish) objects—quartz, stones cast into steel, a nut casing—arranged lovingly, meticulously in the gallery corner. (What makes one material more “natural” than another? Tuttle might ask).

The exhibition consists of two such floor installations and seven woven paintings, four of which share the scale and orientation of a Renaissance painting entitled *The Dream of Saint Helena* (c.1570), by the Venetian artist Paolo

Veronese. Housed in the National Gallery in London, Veronese’s painting depicts an angel revealing the location of the True Cross to a sleeping Saint Helena, the mother of the first Christian emperor, Constantine. Tuttle was drawn to the painting’s palette, composition, and narrative of a woman intuiting knowledge from a dream. As an historian of Italian Renaissance art whose research intersects with eco-criticism, I was especially stimulated by the ways Tuttle’s exhibition engages with the history of painting and, at the same time, prompts us to contemplate the complex physical and social ecologies in which art is made and experienced.

Ecology is a common theme in Tuttle’s work, though more explicitly so in previous exhibitions such as “Wild irises grow in the mountains” (2021) which included a work entitled *Drought* (2021), a touching recording of the artist and her mother, Mei Mei Berseenbrugge, reflecting on their personal experiences of climate change. In the current exhibition, the subject of ecology is not named as such, but rather woven into the artist’s practice and perceived through our experience of the materials and their

Martha Tuttle, installation view of “An ear, a hand, a mouth, an offering, an angel.” Photo courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.



relations to one another. In spending time with Tuttle’s work, we get a strong sense of her knowledge of and gratitude for her source materials, be they mineral pigments or Renaissance paintings. That gratitude radiates.

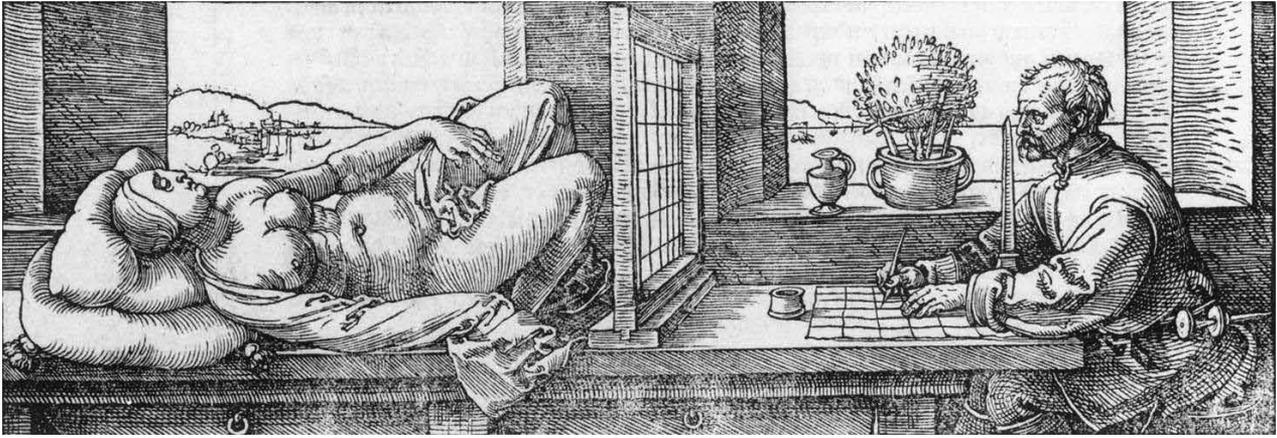
Tuttle creates her characteristic woven paintings by hand-spinning, weaving, and dyeing her own wool, and hand-coloring silk and linen with dyes (natural and synthetic) and mineral pigments including graphite, marble dust, and ultramarine ash. She then sews the textiles into bold interlocking polygonal forms, creating patterns evocative of marble and ice, and, in some of the present works, of the internal geometries of Veronese’s composition. In *the delicate touch of Helena’s foot reaching out to the window’s edge*, for instance, Tuttle reproduces the triangles of negative space around Helena’s lifted foot in Veronese’s painting, using fabrics whose color and pattern emulate the striations of Veronese’s stone wall. The subtlety of this reference rhymes with the delicacy of the gesture, as accented in Tuttle’s title. Yet, while the art historical reference reveals itself to us quietly, its implications are bold, opening larger questions about pictorial composition and the relationship between nature and artifice.



Paolo Veronese, *Dream of Saint Helena*, c. 1570. National Gallery London.

(Left) Martha Tuttle, *the delicate touch of Helena’s foot reaching out to the window’s edge*, 2022. Wool, silk, linen, pigment, dye, 72 x 48 inches. (Right) Martha Tuttle, *the woman asleep in daylight, paradiso*, 2022. Wool, silk, linen, pigment, dye, 20 x 16 inches. Photos courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.





Etching by Albrecht Durer titled *The Draughtsman's Net*.

I see, for example, a bold gesture towards perspectival depth in the juxtaposed passages of diaphanous silk and thick wool. They activate a sense of foreground/background, one of the building blocks of figurative painting. The seams connecting these fabric passages (one of my favorite aspects of Tuttle's work) create a network of intersecting lines that bring my thoughts to the Renaissance perspectival grid and, in turn, the *velo* (veil)—a compositional tool that Renaissance artists used to translate observed objects into two-dimensional representations. The veil-like qualities of Tuttle's silk as it extends across the wood and aluminum stretcher, yet another grid, adds a poetic flourish to this trans-historical connection in my mind.

The stretcher bars themselves are quite interesting and play an important role in the exhibition. Delightfully visible through the translucent fabrics, they add a regulated matrix of line, form, and shadow to the dynamic compositional arrangements of the woven paintings. At the same time, they invite us to question the way we categorize materials as either natural (i.e., hand-spun wool) or artificial (i.e., cast-metal stretcher bars). This line of inqui-

ry is echoed in the floor installations, which include metal and glass castings of "natural" objects such as bones and fossils. Crouching down to look closely at these objects in the gallery corners, two thoughts came to mind: 1) the feeling of laying in the grass as a child, marveling at the variety of things and beings that can inhabit a single patch of terrain, and 2) the concept of *ludus naturae* (playfulness of nature) remarked upon by early modern artist-scientists who saw fossils as "stones with images made by nature." Nature, to them, could be a playful, generative force. An image-maker, an artist.

These Renaissance connections beyond Veronese's painting likely transcend Tuttle's intentions, and that is one of her work's greatest gifts. It meets us where we are, and then opens multiple pathways forward. ■

Chloé M. Pelletier received her PhD in art history from the University of Chicago and is a Curatorial Associate in the Art Institute of Chicago's Painting and Sculpture of Europe Department. Her research interests include intersections of environmental history and art history as well as Renaissance resonances in contemporary art.

(Left) Ulisse Aldrovandi, "Lapides cum figuris a Natura factis [...]," *Musaeum metallicum* (1648), Book 4, p. 528. (Right) Martha Tuttle, floor installation view of "An ear, a hand, a mouth, an offering, an angel." Photo courtesy of Rhona Hoffman Gallery.



Stanley Stellar: “The Piers”

Kapp Kapp, New York

by Paul Moreno

At this moment in visual culture, anyone with a screen and the internet can call up an endless stream of male nudes. Instagram might suggest you follow this or that shirtless guy which leads you to his twitter littered with even more visual information to entice you to subscribe to the Only Fans accounts of him and all his collab colleagues. I presume that not every person who visited Stanley Stellar: The Piers has had that experience, but I assume many of those people have. So, to mount an exhibition of photographs, mostly of men and mostly in some state of undress, all black and white, that is so poignant, so thoughtful, and so simply beautiful is a wonderful accomplishment that few photographers can achieve.

Time has worked to benefit of this exhibition. The photographs were all shot between

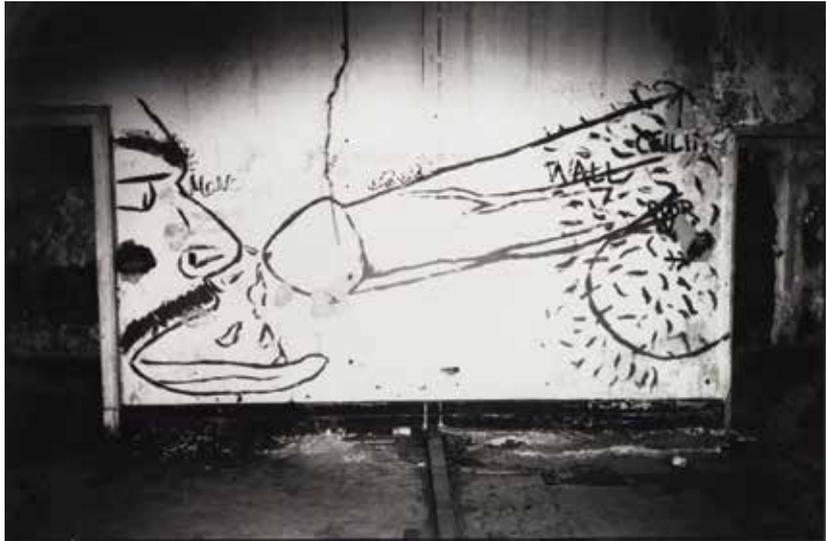


Stanley Stellar, *June*, 1988. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.



1978 and 1991, with the bulk coming from the early 80s. The artist has had decades to consider these images and bring experience and sophistication to the selection of images. Time also has made the incidental objects in the pictures feel vintage, patinated and yet, also current. In *June* (1988) a model is resting seductively on the ground, shot from the waist up, one hand in his

Stanley Stellar, *Love Is*, 1982. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.



Stanley Stellar, *Interior Wall*, 1981. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.

jeans and one arm curving above his head which rests on a duffel bag, all bathed in sunlight. His light denim jacket, jeans and A-shirt are timeless. The duffel could be from the 70s or from the early aughts. His watch is very 80s. He has an Al Corley handsomeness. Nothing feels dated in this image--you could still put this look together within 3 blocks of the gallery. But in the same way it feels immediate, the dreaminess of the model draws you into a fantasy of lost time, of when, as the press release states, the piers were "a gathering place for sunbathing, sex, community, and art." This is the art. We fantasize over the sunbathing model for the rest.

The Piers, themselves, are without a doubt as important to the photos as the men in them. "The Piers" refers to a number of piers on the west side of downtown Man-

hattan. Though these piers had been an important part of commerce since the 19th century, by the 1970s, they had largely fallen into disrepair and been abandoned by industry. It was then for a period that stretched into the 80s that the piers became the piers that Stellar photographed. He captures the vast and littered interior of the abandoned wharf buildings with an elegant formality. In *Love is* (1982) we peer through a window that faces back into the city. Below the window, someone has graffitied "Love is a 4 letter word...so is fuck." A long beam of light from another window stretches from the foreground illuminating the almost lunar landscape of the dirty floor. Despite the crass language and dirty space, Stellar conveys a Hopperesque melancholy.

Interior Wall (1981) captures a drawing that exists somewhere between graffiti and mural. It conveys a large, disembodied penis ejaculating into a willing face. Such a crass display might seem an odd thing to document but it contains a multitude of truths. In this urban ghost town, a community of gay men were making art. Many blue-chip names were making their first marks on these walls and were celebrating queerness. The mural in *Interior Wall*, 1981 was not crassly mocking queer sex, but celebrating the sexual liberation the men of the piers found there. It also celebrates a democratic space where this graffiti artist's work lived in the same space as work by Haring, Wojnarowicz, and Matta-Clark. The photo is straightforward and unjudging, in the style perhaps of photos taken of wall-carvings on Mesoamerican pyramids.



Stanley Stellar, *Turquoise*, 1978. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.



Stanley Stellar, *Dennis Frost*, 1980. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.

A long row of rooms connected by a series of doors is recorded in a photo called *Turquoise* (1978). The title of this black and white photo suggests that this series of rooms, which once bustled with commerce, must have been painted turquoise. The walls are all chipped, and the floor is dusty, light falls through windows, the space is filled with potential and awaits activation, we color it with our minds.

A similar series of passages, if not the exact same one, is shot in *Dennis Frost* (1980). The building is more dilapidated. The dirty floor is now covered with debris and the plaster of the walls is scarred and shedding. The utilitarian geometry of the structure is somehow enhanced by how catawampus things have become in the space. In this picture, a bearded man, nude except for a twist of clothing around his ankles, is captured in profile. His face is turned like the mistress in Vermeer's *Mistress and Maid*, and Stellar's photo contains as much mystery, romance, suspense, and reliance on beauty to compel us to long to know more of this lover's secrets.

The tidy right-angle depiction of interiors throughout the show was contrasted in a collection of photos hung together in a nook of the gallery. *Torso* (1991) is a horizontal nude capturing the model from shoulder to ankle, laying on a blanket spread over a rough wooden floor. The image is without a clear center of gravity, the body floats, the stripes of the blanket warble vertically and the ground falls away. In *Ron Diving into the Hudson River* (1988), Stellar tips the horizon slightly so that it is lower on the right than on the left. The model is caught in mid-dive, but his feet just touch the right edge of the photo. He appears to defy gravity, both falling and frozen as the earth tilts behind



Stanley Stellar, *Ron Diving into the Hudson River*, 1988. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.



Stanley Stellar, *June Afternoon*, 1991.
Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.

him. In *June Afternoon* (1991) Stellar tilts the horizon line even more. Men, alone, coupled, or in small groups, occupy the space while a pair of bicycles take the foreground.

As we wander through the show and romanticize and eroticize the torn down piers, these three images are a poignant reminder that a crisis was (is) in progress. At the time the latest of these photographs was shot, AIDS was becoming the number one cause of death of men ages 25-40. The men in these photos were part of a dying community.

A very special pairing of photos in the show is *Peter Hujar Portrait of Stanley Stellar* (1981) and *Peter at the Door* (1981). In the latter photo, Peter has his t-shirt pulled over his head and behind his back, he is well lit, leaning against a doorway leading to a dimly lit room, the wall is decorated with tumbling Keith Haring figures. As the story goes, once this photo was shot, Peter then initiated a switching of roles, took Stanley's camera, and took a photo of Stanley himself. Stanley is backlit, and a ray of light hits his side. The room is shambly and graffitied. Stanley is shot

from his hips up, is clothed, his hands behind his back. The authorship of this photo is interesting to debate but what is perhaps most important is to think about how these men, Hujar and Stellar, and all the men of the piers, shared stories, moments, intimacy, anonymity, wrote stories on and about each other.

In the photo *Embrace* (1986), two men, one dressed, one shirtless, are entangled in one another's arms. They are lying down; the photo is taken from above their heads so that their bodies extend to the top of the image. It could be they are resting, but it could also be that the one on the right is about to embark on a kiss with the other. The image emits love and generosity. The show emits love and generosity. It is this that distinguishes this exhibition of photographs from the stream of images one finds in their social media feeds.

It is not possible to separate art from commerce. But a viewer knows when a photographer is just making eye-candy or a commercial. And a viewer can distinguish that from an artist trying to touch your heart, as Stellar is

Stanley Stellar, *Torso*, 1991. Photograph.
Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.





Stanley Stellar, *Peter Hujar Portrait of Stanley Stellar*, 1981. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.

doing in this group of photos. There is a comfort and relief in these images which do not want to sell anything, rather, they long to share an intimacy, entangle you, let you float, fantasize, and remember. These images dive into our collective consciousness and pull up feelings of sexual liberty, of fearing that sex could kill, of a community of lovers becoming a community of fighters. The dilapidated piers were a playground for artists and for guys just wanting to

have some fun. We know how it ended but this show of elegant and personal images conveys how good it must have felt. ■

Paul Moreno is an artist, designer and writer working in Brooklyn, New York. He is a founder and organizer of the New York Queer Zine Fair. His work can be found on Instagram @ bathedinafterthought.

(Left) Stanley Stellar, *Peter at the Door*, 1981. Photograph. (Right) *Embrace*, 1986. Photograph. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery. Photographs. Courtesy Kapp Kapp Gallery.

