

On Getting Things a Little Less Wrong

Climate Futurism suggests that the world's civilizations must process lessons from its fraught colonialist histories to prepare for future ecological difficulties.



Louis Bury November 8, 2023

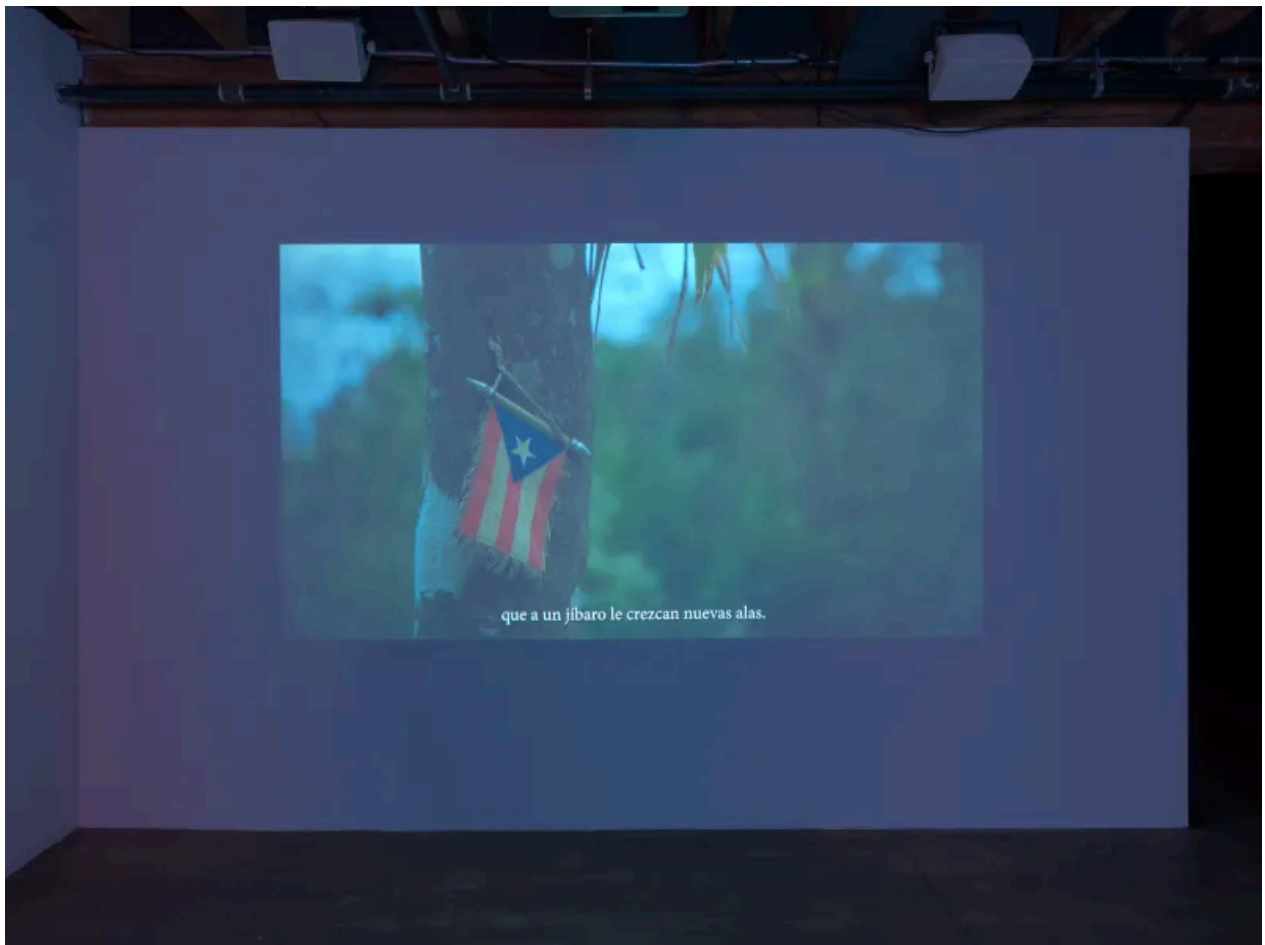


Installation view of *Climate Futurism* at Pioneer Works, Brooklyn, curated by Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson. Pictured: work by Olalekan Jeyifous (all images courtesy the artists and Pioneer Works, photos by Dan Bradica)

The most powerful artwork in *[Climate Futurism](#)*, a small group exhibition at Pioneer Works curated by ecologist, marine biologist, and writer [Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson](#), turns out to be a poem about the past. This apparent incongruity makes a bit more sense when the exhibition is understood as part of Johnson's collaborative, multidisciplinary approach. *Climate Futurism*, featuring artists Erica Deeman, Denice Frohman, and Olalekan Jeyifous, represents the

culmination of Johnson’s 2022 Headlands Center for the Arts Threshold Fellowship, as well as the prelude to her 2024 book, *What If We Get It Right? Visions of Climate Futures*. Even still, the exhibition’s selections, while compelling in their own right, unwittingly highlight the psychological barriers to climate optimism and suggest that the world’s civilizations must first process lessons from its fraught colonialist histories to prepare itself for future ecological difficulties.

Set to video footage of agricultural Puerto Rican landscapes from Cecilia Aldarondo’s documentary *Landfall* (2020), Denice Frohman’s devastatingly beautiful poem “Hacienda La Balear” (2023) reflects on her family’s intergenerational coffee-farm home turned Airbnb rental property. “May this poem be a fist, my fist,” the defiant speaker intones, “planting itself in the eye of nostalgia/ and twisting.” The speaker continues: “And what is nostalgia anyway/ if not a way to say, ‘We made it.’/ To say, ‘Here’s a door, then another.’”



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This surprising definition of nostalgia accords with the core aesthetic gesture of Erica Deeman’s eerie installation, “Give Us Back Our Bones” (2022–23). Within a shadowy room, video footage of a British coal mine flickers across dozens of plaster fragments dangling from the ceiling. Inside each fragment the artist has embedded a seed sourced from Black US farmers, metaphorically hinting at Black diasporic experiences. Both Frohman’s and Deeman’s artworks preserve cultural

memories for practical rather than sentimental purposes, offering poetic ways to move toward the future based on what's been overcome in the past.

Of the three artists featured in *Climate Futurism*, only Olalekan Jeyifous's contributions envision a possible future. Two large giclée prints, "PFC – Seneca SunCraft Orchards" (2022) and "PFC – Seed Drone" (2022), depict smiling Black farmers operating steampunk machinery in verdant environs. The prints and accompanying 3D-printed resin models, "SunCraft Farm Rover" (2023) and "PFC Seed Drone" (2023), form part of Jeyifous's *The Frozen Neighborhoods* (2020–ongoing). The project imagines a world in which the government has implemented a market-based system of "mobility credits" that curtails movement among the working class. In response, a fugitive network of downstate New York farming communities, drawing on historical practices of marronage, has sprung up.

This conceit is a curious inclusion in a climate art exhibition that seeks to answer the idealistic question, "What if we get it right?" *The Frozen Neighborhoods* imagines pockets of idyllic flourishing within an otherwise oppressive system. Similar to Frohman's and Deeman's works, the point seems to be that historical examples of perseverance can provide blueprints for climate struggles ahead. However, in this context, that emphasis risks romanticizing marronage's dangers. It also seems not so much a vision of getting things right as of getting things a little less wrong.



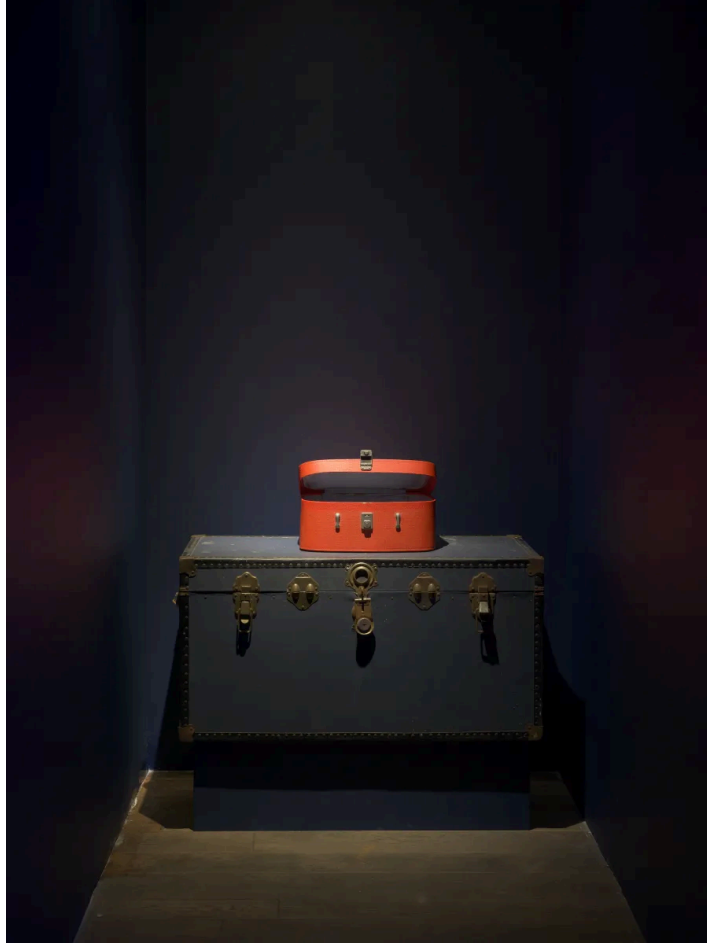
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Climate Futurism: Erica Deeman, Denice Frohman & Olalekan Jeyifous *continues at Pioneer Works (159 Pioneer Street, Red Hook, Brooklyn) through December 10. The exhibition was curated by Dr. Ayana Elizabeth Johnson.*

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