HYPERALLERGIC

The Ghosts of Our Future Climate at Storm King

A group exhibition featuring almost 20 artists suggests directions for visual art in response to climate change.

Louis Bury July 29, 2018

Allison Janae Hamilton, “The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm,” (2018), tambourines and steel armature, 18 feet x 36 inches x 36 inches (image courtesy of the artist, photograph by Jerry L. Thompson)

CORNWALL, New York — In economics, an indicator refers to a statistic or metric that helps analysts understand and, especially, forecast market conditions. Economic indicators are classified as one of three types, according to their timing: lagging indicators, such as unemployment rate, are measurements that change only after the economy as a whole changes; coincident indicators, such as retail sales, change at approximately the same time as the economy; and leading indicators, such as stock market returns, change before the rest of the economy. Each type of indicator thus provides information about the economy’s past, present, or future.

Indicators: Artists on Climate Change, a group exhibition at Storm King Art Center featuring work by almost 20 contemporary artists, implicitly asks what type of indicator visual art might be with respect to anthropogenic climate change. The obvious answer, evident in the exhibition's diversity of work, is that art can be any of the three types and that each type has its own value and function. The more interesting answer, evident in the exhibit's future-oriented works, is that one of contemporary ecological art's most unique and important functions is to model possibilities for how our species might anticipate — and even accept — its eventual displacement or disappearance.

A selection of artworks that point back in time evince a strong sense of historical conscience. Allison Janae Hamilton's *The peo-ple cried mer-cy in the storm* (2018) — a precarious installation of Jenga block-like stacks of black-and-white tambourines sited on a small island on the Center's grounds — stands as a testament to African-American perseverance in face of actual and metaphorical storms. Steve Rowell's film *Midstream at Twilight* (2016) — a helicopter's-eye survey of petroleum pipeline pathways in winter — offers an icy vision of, in the artist's words, "a fossil fuel industry in decline." Alan Michelson's film *Wolf Nation* (2018) — eerie, purple-tinted security camera footage of a wolf sanctuary — serves as a ghostly reminder that Storm King occupies Lenape, or Wolf Tribe, territory. A trio of Tavares Strachan works deconstruct whitewashed narratives of early 20th-century arctic discovery.

A spirit of defiant resolve animates many of these historically minded works. In a light box panoramic photograph, "Standing Alone" (2013), a parka-clad Strachan stands beside a fictitious flag, designed in the colors of his native Bahama and planted in an otherwise empty arctic vista. Michelson's indistinct, purplish wolves prowl back and forth menacingly, as though they were guard dogs rather than captives. Hamilton's tall, white tambourine towers contrast with their expansive and verdant environs, and contain latent celebratory potential, which will be activated by performances during the exhibition's run. Each artwork strikes its own distinct tone in response to a socially troubled past, but — with the exception of the installation *Eighty circles through Canada (the last possessions of an Orcadian mountain man)* (2013), Mike Nelson's response to his friend's death in a mountaineering accident — none are stricken with melancholy or regret. Instead, the emphasis is on recuperative acts of creation in the present.

The artworks that resemble coincident indicators also emphasize imaginative creation by putting twists on mimetic or documentary techniques. Maya Lin's contributions play with perspective: a pair of white encaustic reliefs, "Before It Slips Away" and "59 Words for Snow" (both 2017), depict polar ice topography from a distant aerial perspective, while an installation, *The Secret Life of Grasses* (2018), zooms in on 10-foot-tall root-to-tip cross sections of prairie grass. Justin Brice Guariglia's *Mining Landscapes* series (2018) manipulates photographs to achieve a splotchy and scarred figurative abstraction, while his LED highway construction sign, "We Are The Asteroid"

(2018), flashes warning messages such as “THERE IS NO AWAY.” Gabriela Salazar’s installation, *Matters in Shelter (and Place, Puerto Rico)* (2018), leavens its architectural pragmatism with poetic touches: the tarp-covered shelter references Puerto Rico’s recent recovery efforts following Hurricane Maria in 2017, while its lyrical details — the tarp’s translucent blue shimmer; the use of coffee grounds as a construction material (a nod to Puerto Rico’s coffee industry and the artist’s mother, raised on a coffee farm) — bespeak a poignant fragility.

Jenny Kendler, “Birds Watching,” (2018), reflective film mounted on aluminum on steel frame, 6 feet. 6 inches x 40 feet x 24 inches (image courtesy of the artist, photograph by Jerry L. Thompson)

Among such works, Jenny Kendler’s crowd pleasing “Birds Watching” (2018) takes a particularly imaginative approach. Across the length of a 40-foot steel frame, the artist has affixed 100 images of variously sized and colored birds’ eyes — all species imperiled by climate change. At a glance, this cluster of concentric color looks like a whimsical shooting range or a floral bouquet. Upon further inspection, the viewer finds her or himself being viewed by a quizzical and accusatory collective stare. This horde of disembodied eyes, each printed on shiny reflective film, reverses the customary human-bird watcher/watched dynamic to incarnate something like an interspecies conscience.

While many of the exhibition’s lagging and coincident indicators seek to prick the viewer’s conscience, the works that resemble leading indicators are rarely accusatory or moralistic. The emphasis in such forward-looking works is less on what has been lost to climate change and more on how our species might adapt to, and cope with, the coming changes. The result is a set of works that, though created in the present, speak in a peculiar future perfect tense. In a group show

in which the work is consistently of high quality, many of these pieces stand out as especially thought-provoking and powerful.

Mary Mattingly's *Along the Lines of Displacement: A Tropical Food Forest* (2018) embodies this anticipatory logic. Imagining a turn-of-the-next-century future in which the earth's average temperature has risen by the forecasted 4 degrees Celsius (7.2 degrees Fahrenheit), the artist has planted a group of tropical fruit trees on Storm King's picturesque grounds. The trees' palm fronds and pliant trunks appear out of place amid the leafier deciduous trees native to the region. However, more than just a fatalistic warning, Mattingly's incongruous forest, in its ability to grow fruit, is also a proposition on how future generations might find sustenance in midst of tragic displacement.

The artistic collective Dear Climate — comprised of Una Chaudhuri, Fritz Ertl, Oliver Kellhammer, and Marina Zurkow — goes a step beyond silver-lining resourcefulness toward a paradoxical embrace of the climate in order to better adjust to its coming upheavals. Their installation, *General Assembly* (2018), consists of a circle of twenty black-and-white banners whose combinations of text and image — for example, "Say Hello/ To The Hurricanes," with a silhouetted image of a person holding an umbrella over a house — display a knowing humor. Previous versions of the project were installed in poster form, but this version's sturdier materials (nylon banners hung from wood poles) give the work a statelier feel and create a fitting tension between its form's gravitas and its content's jarring levity.

Mark Dion, “The Field Station of the Melancholy Marine Biologist” (2017-18), mixed-media installation, 16 feet 2 3/4 inches. x 24 feet 1 1/2 inches x 9 feet. (image courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York, photograph by Jerry L. Thompson)

Not all the forward-looking work in the exhibit welcomes change. In his installation *The Field Station of the Melancholy Marine Biologist* (2017-18), Mark Dion imagines a scientist who has vacated their cabin workstation — temporarily or permanently, we don’t know — because the dire implications of his or her climate research are too much to bear. Ellie Ga’s artistic tarot cards, *The Deck of Tara* (2011), made in response to her time as an artist-in-residence on a nautical scientific expedition to the Arctic, also evince anxiety about the future’s perils and uncertainties. But however emotionally resonant, both works are, in this context, intellectually dissatisfying for the way they abdicate a sense of agency through fantasies of escape or fate.

Two of the quietest yet most compelling works in *Indicators*, David Brooks’ *Permanent Field Observations* (2018) and Jenny Kendler’s *Underground Library* (2017-18), exercise what agency is available to them in subtle and evocative ways. Elegiac time capsules intended for a deep future that has become estranged from its past, both works provide a keen sense of art’s capacities and limitations as an indicator. Perhaps not coincidentally, in an exhibition whose spacious outdoor grounds permit, even encourage, its artists to work at monumental scale, both artworks are comparatively mouse-like, almost invisible, in size and appearance.

David Brooks, “Permanent Field Observations,” (2018), bronze, dimensions variable (image courtesy of the artist, photograph by Jerry L. Thompson)

Brooks’ sneakily smart installation consists of 30 bronze castings of woodland objects, such as rocks, fallen branches, and tree roots, with each replica placed alongside the real thing on the Center’s grounds. The small sculptures are located on marked forest trails that run, aptly, along Storm King’s periphery, but each sculpture site is unmarked, sending interested visitors on a scavenger hunt for elusive flecks of bronze. Side-by-side with its original, the metallic half of each unassuming object pair looks like a twinkling prosthetic eye. Subject to the vagaries of time, just like a rock or branch in nature, Brooks’ replicas are poetic memorials to their own eventual displacement and obscurity, artistic winks to a future that may or may not recognize them as such.

Kendler’s *Underground Library* also stages the process of its own decay and disappearance in smart and subtle ways. For the long-term project, the artist alters used or discarded climate change books through biocharring, a process that sequesters carbon from the earth’s atmosphere. As sculptural objects, the charred books — crinkly stacks of warped and blackened paper — provoke dystopian jitters about book burning. Yet those burnt books not reserved for gallery display are buried underground in unspecified sites, where they provide benefits to plants and grasses, such as reducing soil acidity and feeding microbial life. Kendler’s repurposed and mostly invisible library combines aesthetic and conceptual suggestiveness with practical ecological touches.

Ellie Ga, “Remainder,” (2010), gelatin silver print, 17 x 17 inches. Edition: 10 (image courtesy of the artist and Bureau, New York, photograph courtesy the artist and Bureau, New York)

Like Ellie Ga’s spookily taciturn gelatin silver print, *Remainder* (2010), portraying four shovels standing in a grey, horizonless expanse of snow, Kendler’s *Underground Library* and Brooks’ *Field Observations* manifest an almost archaeological interest in the objects that humans leave behind. Unlike Ga’s print, however, which depicts traces of the past as encountered during her Arctic expedition, Kendler’s and Brooks’ works compel the viewer to imagine what objects from the present will remain in the future, and in what ghostly forms. Both works are elegies for climate losses and changes to come.

Among the objects human beings produce, artworks seem some of the likeliest to persist, relatively intact, in the future. Unusual amounts of thought and care are put into both their making and their maintenance. As climate indicators, then, artworks offer clues about how our species understands its material legacy in an era when it has become increasingly difficult to imagine the exalted posterity such works were once meant to secure. Through feats of creative remembrance, documentation, and forgetting, the works in *Indicators* hint at how it feels to bear witness to the dawning awareness of your own decline.

Indicators: Artists on Climate Change *continues at Storm King Art Center (Cornwall, New York [GPS: 1 Museum Road, New Windsor, NY 12553]) through November 11.*