

Featured in
Issue 247

Hannah Chalew Sees Nature and Culture in a Continuum

Ahead of Prospect 6, we revisit the artist's portrayal of Louisiana's 'Cancer Alley' – its flora intertwined with petrochemical infrastructure

L BY LOUIS BURY IN OPINION | 30 OCT 24



The oak tree's dense foliage envelops its viewer almost as if it were an actual tree. Rendered in sepia ink handmade from oak gall, Hannah Chalew's *Embodied Emissions* (2020) spans more than two metres in width. Underneath the wide foliage lies a surreal twist: an upside-down chemical plant whose pipes connect to the branches above as if they were its roots. This curious landscape has been drawn on paper that the artist handmade from sugarcane and shredded plastic waste, which gives the support a rough-hewn texture and irregular borders.



Hannah Chalew, *Embodied Emissions*, 2020, iron oak gall ink, ink made from sheetrock on paper made from sugarcane combined with shredded disposable plastic waste ('plasticane'), 1.5 × 2.3 m. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Jonathan Traviesa

The tree and the chemical plant are both located in LaPlace, Louisiana, along the Mississippi River's petrochemical corridor, bleakly nicknamed 'Cancer Alley'. The DuPont corporation opened the facility in 1964, running afoul of various EPA water regulations for generations, before selling it to the Japanese company Denka, which for the past decade has been embroiled in lawsuits over the plant's airborne pollution. The carcinogen chloroprene persists nearby at up to 15 times the safe exposure level.

Chalew, who is based in New Orleans, has created a memorable image of a horrific reality: what scholar Rob Nixon, in his eponymous 2011 book, calls the 'slow violence' – gradual and imperceptible – of environmental racism. But the embodiment in *Embodied Emissions* pertains as much to the work's form as to its content. The drawing's conspicuous scale and texture verge on sculpture, looming over the viewer's body in ways uncommon to the medium.



Hannah Chalew, *Embodied Emissions*, 2021, 'Eco-Urgency'. Courtesy: Wave Hill; photograph: Stephan Hagen

I encountered *Embodied Emissions* as part of Wave Hill’s 2021 exhibition, ‘Eco-Urgency’. Whenever I visit Wave Hill – a historical estate donated to New York in 1960 and converted into public gardens and a cultural centre – I cycle, if possible, even though it’s a long ride. Moving from the dense Manhattan grid to the leafy Bronx suburbs serves as a reminder that nature and culture exist on a continuum; as in Chalew’s drawing, they’re so intertwined as to be functionally inseparable.

I happen to know that Chalew is also a cyclist, but you can tell just from her work. Cyclists experience landscape as the medium through which they move, enveloped, rather than as scenery flashing past the other side of a window. In most people’s minds, LaPlace and the rest of ‘Cancer Alley’ exist as a dangerous abstraction, a sacrifice zone that remains at a safe remove from their own lives. Chalew’s work recognizes there’s no distance that can keep you completely insulated from harm, no shortage of beauty and tragedy wherever you call home.

*Hannah Chalew's **Prospect 6: The Future is Present, The Harbinger is Home** is on view at The Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans from 2 November – 2 February 2025*

Main image: Hannah Chalew, Embodied Emissions (detail), 2020, iron oak gall ink, ink made from sheetrock on paper made from sugarcane combined with shredded disposable plastic waste (“plasticane”), 1.5 × 2.3 m. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Jonathan Traviesa

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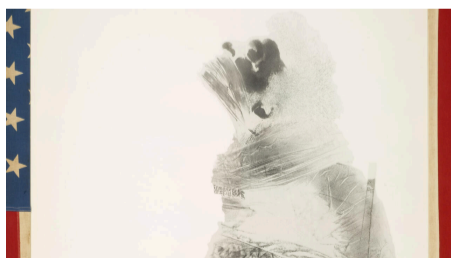
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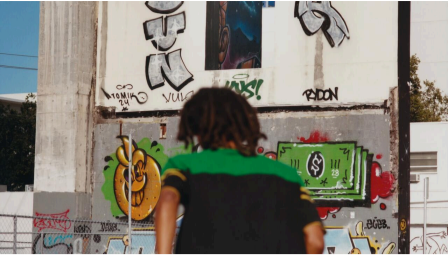
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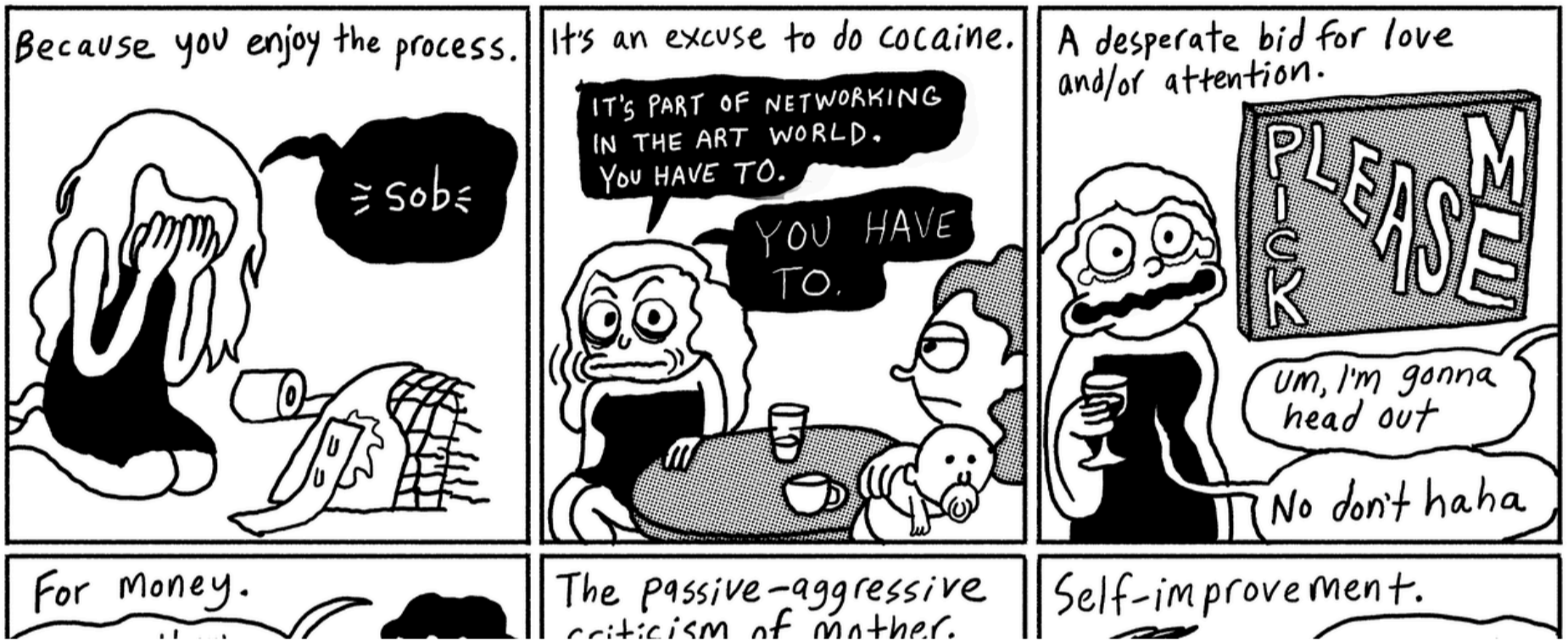
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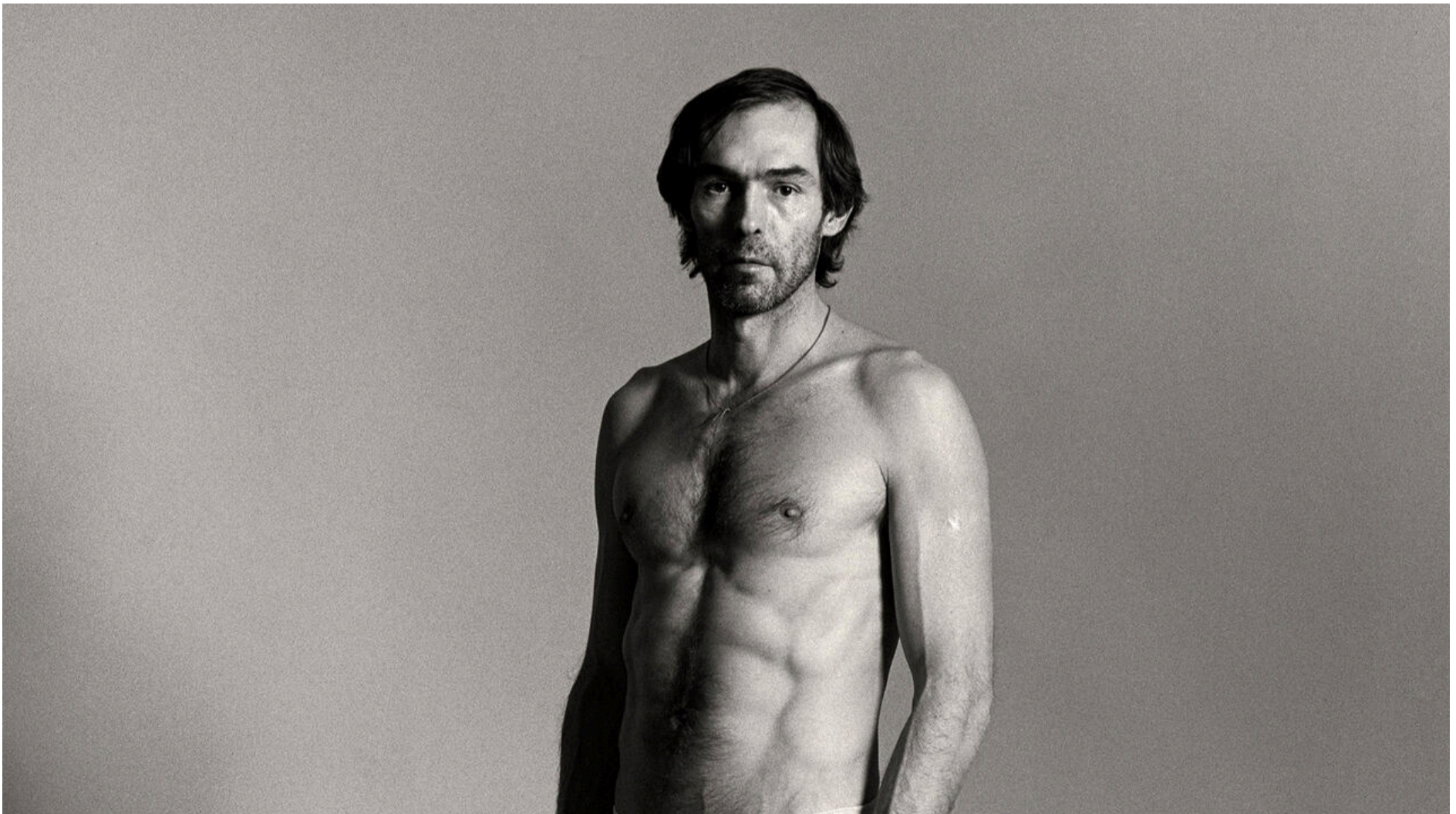
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