INTERVIEW (HTTPS://BOMBMAGAZINE.ORG/FORMAT/INTERVIEW/)

Message and Method: Hannah Chalew Interviewed

Organic installations that envision current and future worlds.

NOVEMBER 29, 2021

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Becoming-with-Hannah-Chalew1.jpg)

Documentation of moving the installation *Becoming with: A rhizomatic solar cart* through the streets of New Orleans, 2019, featuring Zarouhie Abdalian, Claire Beauchamp, Gail Chalew, Hannah Chalew, Ana Hernandez, and Cora Lautze. Photo by Claire Bangser. Courtesy of the artist.

In her short documentary video *The Push* (2019), artist Hannah Chalew, her mother, and four other women artist friends wheel Chalew's approximately 11 × 5 × 8-foot mobile artwork, *Becoming with: A rhizomatic solar cart* (2019), from her New Orleans studio to her residency at Longue Vue House and Gardens, a three-mile trip. The cart resembles a lean-to whose sloped solar panels serve as a roof beneath which lies a functional water tank atop a bench-like platform. The group hauls the plucky cart across lots and fields, past intersections and cemeteries; but most of the trip takes place on roads in the midst of car traffic, which makes their cheerful caravan appear as out of place as a horse and buggy would on a highway.

This incongruous image is apt for an artist whose practice explores what it looks like to be partially alienated from the place in which you live while also having deep connections to it. Chalew's dazzling maximalist drawings of southern Louisiana environs depict vistas in which realistic, above-ground terrain (trees in a park; a quiet suburban street) possess surrealistic, below-ground roots (an inverted petrochemical plant; a dense network of pipes in a toxic landfill). Her uncanny sculptures—sci-fi entanglements of plants, pipes, and plastics—also estrange the viewer's perspective by positing a future in which abandoned human structures have yielded to debris-strewn flora. Through her community-oriented activism and art, and with a DIY ethos, Chalew makes past and present injustices visible so that the future might become something other than more of the same.

—Louis Bury

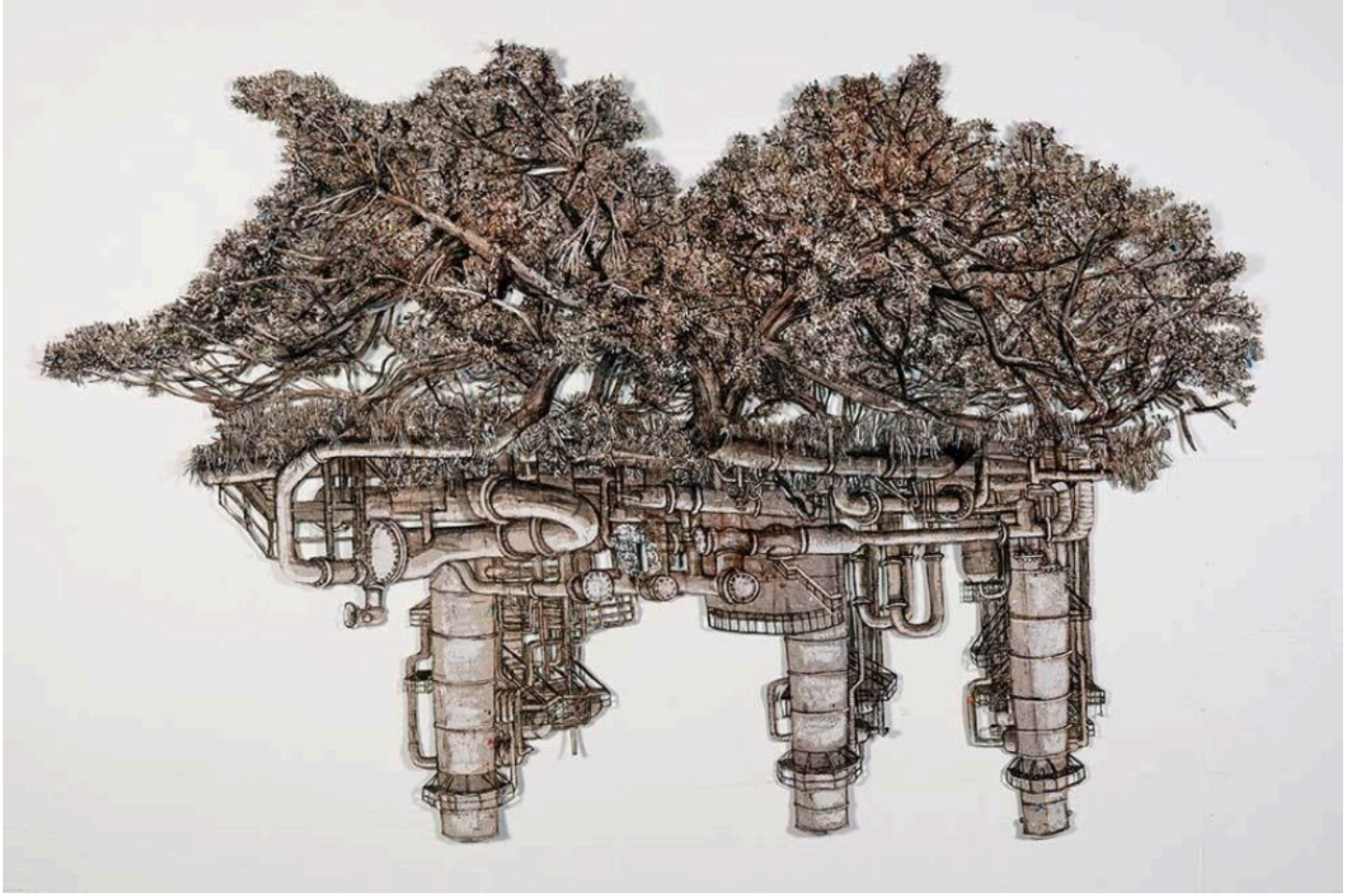
Louis Bury
You're from New Orleans?

Hannah Chalew
I was born in Baltimore, and my family moved to New Orleans when I was twelve. I was happy there, but didn't realize how connected I felt to the city until I went away to Boston for college and Hurricane Katrina hit during the week of my freshman orientation. As I went down the path of becoming an artist, I had extremely positive experiences going home to visit New Orleans arts communities, including the first Prospect Biennial in 2008. There were lots of artist-run spaces and energy; it felt like a place where things were possible for me as a young artist.

LB
Can you say more about that feeling?

HC
Some friends and I started a studio and exhibition space called T-Lot, which helped us build community with other artists. New Orleans is much more expensive now, but at the time we were able to afford large spaces and not have to work full time. This was four years after Katrina; many people had been unable or unwilling to return, so the city was littered with neglected built spaces. I would bike around and make drawings of structures that were being overtaken by the surrounding

flora, insinuating the human absence by drawing the vines but not the buildings themselves. From those experiences, I began to think of all my work under the umbrella of drawing, including my sculptural and installation work.



(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Embodied-Emissions-Hannah-Chalew2.jpg)

Hannah Chalew, *Embodied Emissions*, 2020, iron oak gall ink, ink made from shells on paper made from sugarcane combined with shredded disposable plastic waste ("plasticane"), 61 × 92 inches. Photo by Jonathan Traviesa. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

What is it about drawing that makes you understand your work this way?

HC

The immediacy of drawing is important to me, as is its transportability and precious-less-ness. My works on paper are now too large to fit in my bike basket, but they still travel easily because they roll up and fit in shipping tubes. Drawing is how I plan everything out, but I also like that it can be intuitive, provisional, and experimental. I incorporate drawing into my sculptures in a more literal, three-dimensional way by sculpting paper over a metal armature and drawing with ink on it.

LB

That's interesting because your drawings possess a physical presence that's almost sculptural. They're done at massive, wall-size scale on thick, textured, non-rectangular paper that you make from waste materials.

HC

I ended up working at this scale when I started making my own paper and incorporating trash into it. I had been using nice printmaking paper until I realized it had no connection to the places I was drawing. The trash required me to scale up in order to be able to render the drawings in sufficient detail. The large scale makes it so that, similar to Dawn Clements's drawings, viewers have to traverse the work with their eyes as well as their bodies. The papers are like skins or animal pelts; they create a bodily relationship to the work.

LB

How and why do you make your own paper?

HC

I combine sugarcane with shredded plastic disposable waste and call the combination "plasticane." I'm interested in the continuum encompassing the region's history of plantation enslavement, white supremacy, and today's petro-capitalism. Many former plantations are today occupied by fossil fuel infrastructure and sugarcane refineries in the so-called Cancer Alley corridor along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Baton Rouge. To make my paper, I collect and ferment bagasse, a sugarcane refining byproduct, and combine it with shredded plastic waste. I'm fascinated by the alchemical nature of papermaking. The paper itself tells part of the story before I even add imagery to it.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Tremblant-Hannah-Chalew3.jpg)

Detail view of Hannah Chalew, *Tremblant*, 2021, metal, sugarcane, plastic, lime, recycled paint, living plants, soil, paper made from sugarcane combined with shredded disposable plastic waste ("plasticane"), iron oak gall ink, ink made from shells, 72 × 48 × 60 inches. Photo by Jonathan Traviesa. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

How cognizant were you of such stories while growing up in the region?

HC

I wasn't taught much about the histories of colonization, enslavement, and the fossil fuel industry, in part because of the systemic racism that pervades American education and in part because the oil and gas industry is Louisiana's main economic driver. When I moved back here, I got involved with grassroots organizing against petrochemical expansion and was shocked to learn how much I didn't previously know. In particular, Antenna Gallery's 2018 Fossil Free Festival helped me connect the dots between these legacies. This festival got me thinking about how not just my work's message but also its methods could be divested from fossil fuels. For me this meant reflecting on my choice and use of materials, how I power my studio and transport my work, as well as what money I take as an artist.

LB

What are some of the benefits as well as challenges of working this way?

HC

It was easy in the sense that I knew I wanted my materials to relate to specific landscapes so I had a clear starting point and scope. Researching different chemical and artistic processes was harder, but I enjoy that kind of experimentation. The biggest challenge has been questioning the dominance of fossil fuel money in New Orleans art, particularly from the Helis Foundation, the philanthropic arm of an oil and gas company trying to art-wash its reputation. While I'm sure my stance has cost me opportunities, it has also connected me with like-minded artists and philanthropists who are trying to rethink existing paradigms.

LB

What would your ideal installation environment be?

HC

I would love to have a public project installed somewhere that could exist ongoing as part of the fabric of a neighborhood, ideally on a vacant lot close to my studio. I would want the plants to be embedded in the sculptures but also in the ground so that they could grow over and through the space. I would want it to be an interactive space for children and adults who live in the neighborhood as well as a destination.

LB

Are there any models you have in mind for that kind of project?

HC

I'm particularly inspired by Olayami Dabls's *African Bead Museum* in Detroit. It's been around since the early 2000s and is constantly evolving as the artist repairs and recycles elements of the work back into itself. The courtyard outside my studio functions in a similar way. I use it to grow a lot of the plants for my work. Most of my installations are temporary, and thus I exercise a good amount of control over the plants. But in my courtyard, my own hand is less dominant. Plants leave for exhibitions and later get reincorporated, which makes the space more of a collaboration between myself and the plants.

(https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/bomb-images/_hiresolution/Terraforming-Hannah-Chalew4.jpg)

Hannah Chalew, *Terraforming in the Anthropocene*, 2018, metal, cement, disposable plastic waste, LED grow lights, native and locally adapted vines, and solar panels and rain catchment irrigation system, installation size variable. Photo by Rush Jagoe. Courtesy of the artist.

LB

Can you say more about your incorporation of actual plants in your sculptures?

HC

I want to change audiences' normal perspective when encountering plants. I try to position plants at eye level or overhead and to expose the plants' roots, as though the visitor were underground. I like the idea that people might not know what they're walking into, might not even know that it's art. *Terraforming in the Anthropocene* (2018), for example, had an open, tent-like structure and was installed in New Orleans City Park; at twilight, its renewably powered lights would turn on and attract passersby.

LB

That ambiguity sounds important to you: you're not trying to over-script the experience.

HC

I'm interested in the open-ended situation of what happens to human infrastructure when it becomes abandoned by us. I'm also interested in plants' role in such a future because they can survive under conditions humans can't. The work tries to imagine a future by extrapolating from the present. What will our landscape look like if we don't hold these industries accountable and change course? Is this the future we want our children to inherit?

Hannah Chalew's work can be seen in Eco-Urgency: Now or Never (https://www.wavehill.org/calendar/eco-urgency-now-or-never) *at Wave Hill in New York City until December 5;* Going to the Meadow (https://artyard.org/exhibitions/going-to-the-meadow/) *at ArtYard in Frenchtown, New Jersey, until December 30; and at Aquarium Gallery (https://aquariumartgallery.wixsite.com/html/about) in New Orleans until January 2.*

Louis Bury is the author of *Exercises in Criticism* (Dalkey Archive Press, 2015) and is Associate Professor of English at Hostos Community College, CUNY. He contributes regularly to *Hyperallergic*, and has published art writing in the *Brooklyn Rail* and *Art in America*, as well as creative writing in *Boston Review* and *The Believer.*

MORE

Hannah Chalew (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/hannah-chalew/)
Eco-Urgency: Now or Never (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/eco-urgency-now-or-never/)
Wave Hill (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/wave-hill/)
Going to the Meadow (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/going-to-the-meadow/)
ArtYard (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/artyard/)
Aquarium Gallery (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/aquarium-gallery/)
Louis Bury (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/louis-bury/)
Installation (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/installation/)
Sculpture (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/sculpture/)
Environmental Art (https://bombmagazine.org/topics/environmental-art/)
