

Zac Skinner's Survivalist Sculptures

Skinner imagines the jury-rigged technology that would enable survival in the wake of apocalyptic climate disaster.



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The parched, charcoal tile floor ("Anthropocene Stones," 2020), jury-rigged survivalist structures, and stylized paintings portraying apocalyptic weather scenarios that comprise [Zac Skinner's](#) plucky exhibition, *Ecocide Drifter*, have transformed the ordinarily upbeat Sunroom of Wave Hill's Glyndor Gallery into a cross between a dystopian film set and a yard art installation. A stacked and imbricated arrangement of small tarps, each folded into a V-shape so as to collect rainwater, hang suspended from rickety bamboo stalks ("Rainwater Collector (Woods Pattern) with Rocky Stand," 2019-20). A homemade solar generator pumps water to nearby plants through tubes that recall medical IVs ("Camp Solar Generator," 2016-20). A Rube Goldberg-esque solar cooker is fashioned out of a discarded umbrella that has been opened, turned upside down, and lined with tin foil and gold leaf ("Wind Driven Solar Cooker with Potatoes," 2018-20).

The premise is that climate catastrophe has forced the installation's titular drifter to cobble together an existence amid the inhospitable terrain of a dried-out riverbed. However, unlike some other recent installations that imagine a post-apocalyptic climate future — for instance, Caitlin Berrigan's 2019 *Imaginary Explosions* at Art in General or Really Large Numbers laboratory's 2020 *The Observatory* at Smack Mellon — *Ecocide Drifter* doesn't spin a detailed narrative around this imaginary world. Instead, the emphasis is on feats of amateur engineering that might become necessary under adverse conditions. Similar to Tattfoo Tan's autodidactic courses of survivalist study, Skinner's functional DIY contraptions posit that seemingly impractical artistic skills can have pragmatic applications.



Zac Skinner, "Rainwater Collector (Woods Pattern) with Rocky Stand (2019-2020), stitched camouflage-printed tarp, thread, brass grommets, bamboo, rope, bucket, copper, approx. 60 x 72 x 54 inches; Rocky Stand: Natural pigments, natural plaster, wheat paste, cardboard, human-made detritus from the Hudson River (courtesy of the artist)

Skinner incorporates human-made detritus into the sculptures in *Ecocide Drifter*, such as soiled segments of styrofoam, crushed and cut up plastic bottles, and plastic trinkets and doodads. In a video on the Wave Hill website, the artist explains that, as part of his practice, once a week he walks along part of the Hudson River shoreline and removes any non-biodegradable objects he finds. He performs this private ritual as “an act of reclamation” and “a cleansing gesture,” putting some of the objects into the recycling system, some into the trash system, and some into artworks.

This ethos has a reparative bent that avoids the dog-eat-dog survivalism of much doomsday prepper culture. Skinner brings that same sense of care to his sculptures’ makeshift, almost whimsical, fabrication. The sculptures present inventive amalgams of salvaged objects — such as a windmill constructed from slices of plastic bottles, a metal spur, and a globe — and are held together, just barely, by looped and stretched lengths of twine, wire, and zip ties. There’s something oddly tender about the way the contraptions’ catch-as-catch-can seams and joints remain exposed, vulnerable. In the climate future Skinner imagines, acts of care manifest in the labor needed to meet basic human needs rather than in material or psychic indulgence. The dark, cramped interior of his “Wisdom Tent” (2018-20) — a tarpaulin tent built atop a handcart and designed for meditation — signifies the limited space available for respite in this austere world.



Zac Skinner, "Wisdom Tent" (2018-2020), handcart, bamboo, tarp, fabric, string, zip ties, grommets, copper, detritus, approx. 72 x 96 x 96 inches (courtesy of the artist)

Within that world, artworks may provide only a modicum of bodily comfort but they provide even less philosophical or aesthetic consolation. The paintings hung throughout the installation highlight the contrast between decorative and utilitarian art; they depict swirls and flurries of tempestuous weather and are suspended — a touch lopsided and in a manner that recalls the sculptures's makeshift construction — from ropes affixed to bent nails that jut out from the canvases' side framing. It's as if Skinner wants to preserve space for decorative art in his imagined world but that world won't allow him to be precious about such art's contents or method of display. In this way, both the paintings and the sculptures in *Ecocide Drifter* raise questions about art's role in the midst of climate catastrophe; together, they suggest that role can be larger than we might assume, if not necessarily what we want.

Zac Skinner: Ecocide Drifter continues at Glyndor Gallery at Wave Hill (4900 Independence Ave, the Bronx, New York) until December 6.