

“Global Warming” artUS issue 26, Fall 2009

The Icebox, Crane Arts Building | Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Has the art world finally grasped that climate change is the way to go, or are such greenings as "IMPLANT" (45 artists selected by Jodie Vicenta Jacobson) just a hiccup in the incessant trend toward art stardom? *Vanity Fair* has printed three annual green issues, numerous cityzines routinely interview environmental gurus and women's mags highlight green products, but no art magazine, save *Landscape and Art*, bothers to cover, let alone assess, eco art. Art press attention is so sparse that Suzaan Boettger's lone article, "Global Warning" (*Art in America*, June-July 2008), obliged her to summarize dozens of international art exhibitions, including "Envisioning Change: Melting Ice/A Hot Topic" (43 artists selected by Randy Jayne Rosenberg) and "Weather Report: Art and Climate Change" (51 artists selected by Lucy Lippard). Despite the hundreds of eco artists, those in the publishing loop apparently perceive eco art as potentially too depressing, too purposive or, worse yet, too populist an approach for the go-go art world.

Even when green endeavors intervene in art world routine, most are organized by destitute vigilantes, mounted in alternative spaces (often in-situ), and given just enough support for keen compatriots to fall below the radar. "Global Warming" (through November 15, 2008) is no exception, even though it continues an important trend in art/world thinking. Two shows in one, The Icebox features the work of five invited artists (co-curated by Leslie Kaufman and Cheryl Harper) and ten others (selected by Harper and Adelina Vlas from 84 entries), resulting in a mix of video, installation, entropic objects and participatory art. Temporarily installed walls divide the cavernous space into isolated solo shows, thus minimizing confusion. Despite expectations that some agenda drives eco art, poetry, mystery, indeterminacy and surprise are all given free rein, leading to such oddities as Miguel Luciano's ice skates fitted with plantain blades, Andrew Chartier's drawing machine triggered by car effluent, and Yi-Chuan Chen's suspended puffball dripping potentially prickly needles.

The message of "Global Warming" expands beyond climate change. It now seems largely forgotten that ecological issues have been at the heart of post-1960 avant-garde practices, involving such figures as Vito Acconci, Joseph Beuys, Agnes Denes, Newton and Helen Harrison, Eva Hesse, Patricia Johanson, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, Alan Sonfist, Robert Smithson, Mierle Laderman Ukeles and Jackie Winsor. However, younger artists reinvigorating this legacy experiment in ways that push beyond the earlier practitioners' wildest dreams. This is where eco art diverges from such established genres as stripe painting, memoir art, portraiture, collage, assemblage, landscape painting, minimal sculpture, the "un-monumental" redux and even interactive games. But unlike these fields, whose perpetrators get stuck finessing fine distinctions and updating the content, eco art expands in new directions as it tracks scientific discoveries and exploits technological advances.

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Technology rises to the fore in Michael Alstad's *MELT* (2005/08), which projects imagery of moving passersby woven into a video feed monitoring climate change's topographical effects on a grid of water-filled objects placed on the floor. Meanwhile, a webcam

surveying the scene displays its findings on a monitor embedded amongst fractured Styrofoam icebergs. A fourth camera projects this arctic diorama on the wall. With *MELT*, surveillance, scrutiny and video's invasive propensities prove far more encroaching than climate change, as the monitoring of nature spreads to spying on fellow humans. Miguel Luciano's *Pimp my Piragua* (2008), a playful musical pushcart, serves inexpensive snow cones that would be an extravagance during a global meltdown. The *Last Coqui* (2004) is a kiddie ride that pays tribute to the "co-kee," a Puerto Rican frog whose name stems from its sound. Forest Tunes--The Library--1995-2008, Shai Zakai's massive collection of plant species, enables participants to discover treasures amassed during visits to distant climes (from Japan to Australia). Cards accompanying her numerous relics are color-coded to identify key categories and explain each object's environmental/ sentimental significance. Two alternating videos describe how precious water was for Israel's earliest inhabitants, grounded in how humans identify with the land.

Jason Lee's Euthenic Landscape: Suburban Setting with Clouds (2003-ongoing) features sterile plastic fences delineating or protecting square and circular photographs of green grass and puffy clouds, all framed with OSHA Orange. *Jurassic Highway* (2007), Michael Hernandez's fragile but artificial safety devices (road blocks, barriers, orange cones) evokes the pseudo panic button pushed by a media bent on exploiting tragedies caused by global warming. Such fear mongering is rather insincere, since solutions abound that minimize global warming's environmental destruction. Seeking to demonstrate more elemental changes caused by a rise in global temperature, Stacy Levy's Melting Point (2008) is an eye-catching accumulation of hand-blown flasks filled with variably viscous oils and waxes. Surrounded by a waterline drawn just above one's shoulders, Chicory Miles's melodramatic *The Churning of the Milk* (2008) video of Katrina's aftermath is projected on the wall, with fabric panels gusting behind one's back like sheets set out to dry.

Elizabeth Mackie's sumptuous *King Ortlor and Little Siberia* (2008) consists of stacks of handmade paper cut to show shrinking glaciers. One might expect a work based on scientific data and inspired by villagers lamenting the shriveling of their beloved Ortlor Mountain Range to be instructional, yet luminous layers overwhelm its obviousness. Moving on to the ridiculous, the 256 glass test tubes in Gerald Beaulieu's Pasture (2008) sprout specimen stalks of familiar cereals. James Hayes's *A possible brutal solution to one of our ever increasing problems ...!* (2008) presents a choir of buzzing bronze flyswatters, whose intensity varies depending on where one stands, a clear reference to fluctuating insect populations. Guy Laramée's *The Wreck of Hope* (2006) reproduces the scene from Caspar David Friedrich's 1842 painting of a ship crashing into a massive, shattered iceberg. Gazing at this majestic self-lit diorama cut into an oil barrel, one recalls the horrifying wails such splitting bergs emit.

A documentary of sorts, Ben Pinder's *Return to Symzonia* (2008) delivers a clever sales pitch aligning manifest destiny with America's pragmatic urge to heat up Antarctica, so as to create an inhabitable New America. Surrounded by quasihistorical artifacts such as a polar-bear-drawn Conestoga wagon, an illustration for a "Symzonia" stamp and handdrawn maps and sketches that depict this newly colonized land, Pinder's installation doubles as a real estate office. Ralf Sander's *World Saving Machine 2--C[O.sub.2] Absorber* (2007) approaches infotainment. This curious machine uses moss to convert absorbed carbon dioxide into oxygen, yet it rather poetically breathes new life into traditional modes of existence. Shows such as "Global Warming" prove that the time is

ripe to promote eco art as being infinitely more viable, smart, sassy and provocative than the last decade's reigning genre--art fair art.

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