



Risky Beauty: Aesthetics and Climate Change

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Main
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Risky Beauty: Aesthetics and Climate Change

by Cynthia Haveson Veloric, PhD

As our days and months grow ever warmer, covid seems endemic, and our country is besieged by wildfires, floods, and droughts, many of our fellow citizens are still in denial, or they normalize or compartmentalize the climate crisis.

In June 2022 the Supreme Court limited the authority of the Environmental Protection Agency to regulate greenhouse gas emissions from power plants that contribute to global warming. Politicians continue to placate big oil and gas companies, the military industrial complex, and those who do harm to our ecosystem through large-scale extraction, exploitative land development, illegal dumping, and by generating illegal, actionable levels of toxicity in the air, soil, and water. Greenwashing has become the norm for global corporations who pledge net-zero emissions, yet consistently fail to reduce their emissions in line with the 1.5-degree Celsius warming target established by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

The scientific community, journalists, and environmental activists have tirelessly tried to elucidate the connections between these agents and forces and our worsening climate crisis. They have even offered practical and sustainable solutions to a greener economy and thus a healthier planet. Yet there is still an overriding sense of numbness and apathy when it comes to making significant changes to avert catastrophe. What means are left to challenge our mindsets?


The arts have a way of intervening and awakening us by touching parts of our souls, our senses, our shared sense of humanity. Art succeeds in triggering emotions and sensations that cause us to ponder our role in nature's degradation. Artists expand the discourse by illuminating, questioning, and disentangling the cultural ideologies and forces that led to this crisis. The six artists in this exhibition so profoundly experience the ecological/environmental conditions that are changing the appearance and atmosphere of our planet, that they are moved to employ their media in ways that reawaken others to our collective predicament.

Risky Beauty: Aesthetics and Climate Change showcases artwork in different media that draws in viewers with its sensual beauty and drama, while stimulating awareness and changing perceptions about climate outcomes. This exhibition challenges viewers to consider how their aesthetic experience of nature has changed in light of the scientific consensus about the validity of the climate

crisis, the known societal forces that hasten environmental degradation, and the impact of climate change in their personal environments. Can the autonomist perspective of nature, which separates the inherent beauty and pleasure of nature from moral considerations, continue to have relevance in a disfigured and toxic world? The selected artwork frames landscape within the breakdown of ecosystems, over-developed land, loss of biodiversity, and extreme weather events. Each work reminds us of the precious quality and fragility of nature and how its existence (and ours) is threatened by human-induced actions.

A close inspection of each work reveals the destructive forces which undermine a healthy, biologically self-regulating planet. Each artist approaches the critical issues through intellectual speculation, an empathetic world view, and rigorous craft-making. Environment and ecology have been their preoccupations, whether through biology-based residencies, landscape and waterway interventions, on-site learning labs, travel to the front lines of the climate crisis, or via the imagination aided by computer-generated imagery or digital photography. They do not present the world at face value; instead, they imbue it with multiple layers of personal meaning, philosophy, imagination, and free association.

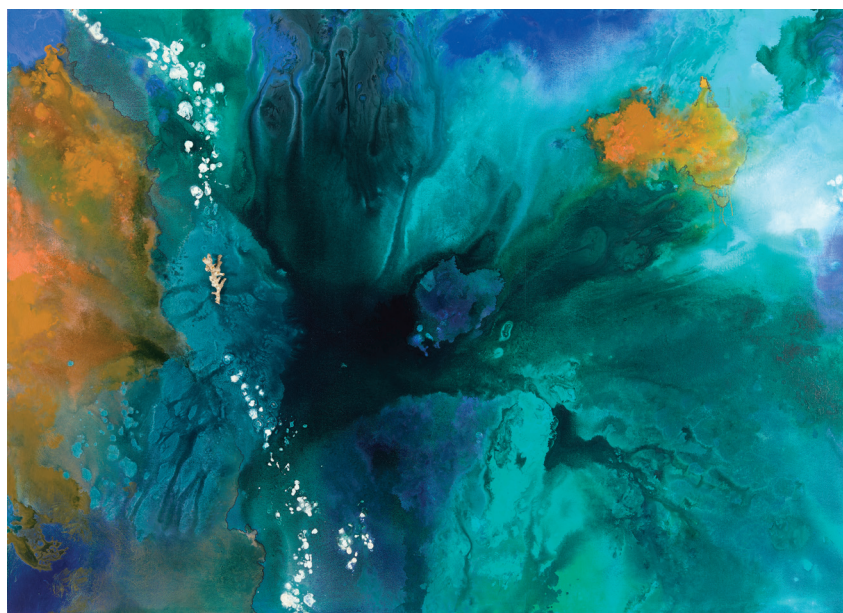
Essay continues

An abstract drawing consisting of several thin, flowing blue lines that curve and intersect, creating a sense of movement and organic form. The lines are light blue and set against a white background.

Dr. Cynthia Haveson Veloric is an independent curator, adjunct professor at University of the Arts, and environmentalist. She has worked in the curatorial departments of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She recently combined her passion for art and environmental advocacy by pursuing a PhD focused on international artists' responses to the climate crisis. In 2018 she curated the exhibition *Repairing Our Earth*, Diane Burko Artist/Environmental Activist. She was enthused to serve on the art committee for the inaugural Pennsylvania Climate Convergence in Harrisburg in June 2022.



Diane Burko's emotional and sensual attachment to the earth's most awe-inspiring geology above and below the sea has led her to create landscapes of breathtaking splendor. She is equally guided by an imperative to expose the worst effects of global warming on vulnerable landforms and organisms. We are confronted with stunning panoramas of a world exploding, disintegrating, and melting due to unprecedented heat. Bold color, huge scale, and multi-panel compositions are used to great psychological and emotional advantage, prompting viewers into awe or terror, an artistic effect known as the *sublime*. The superficial beauty is complicated by the insertion of repeat photography, maps, and charts—the toolkits of scientific communication which emphasize tipping points in the biosphere. The combination of these visual tools with photo-realistic or abstract landscape is the marriage of rational thought and artistic license. The paintings warn that no place on Earth is immune to disaster, from glacial terrain to coral reefs to eucalyptus forests.



◀ Diane Burko,
Great Barrier Reef, 2018.
Acrylic on canvas, 60" x 84"

▶ Diane Burko,
*Main Rongbuk Glacier
Series 1–3*, 2010. Oil on
canvas, 48" x 208" overall

▶ Diane Burko,
Summer Heat 1 & 2, 2020.
Mixed media on canvas,
84" x 162" overall

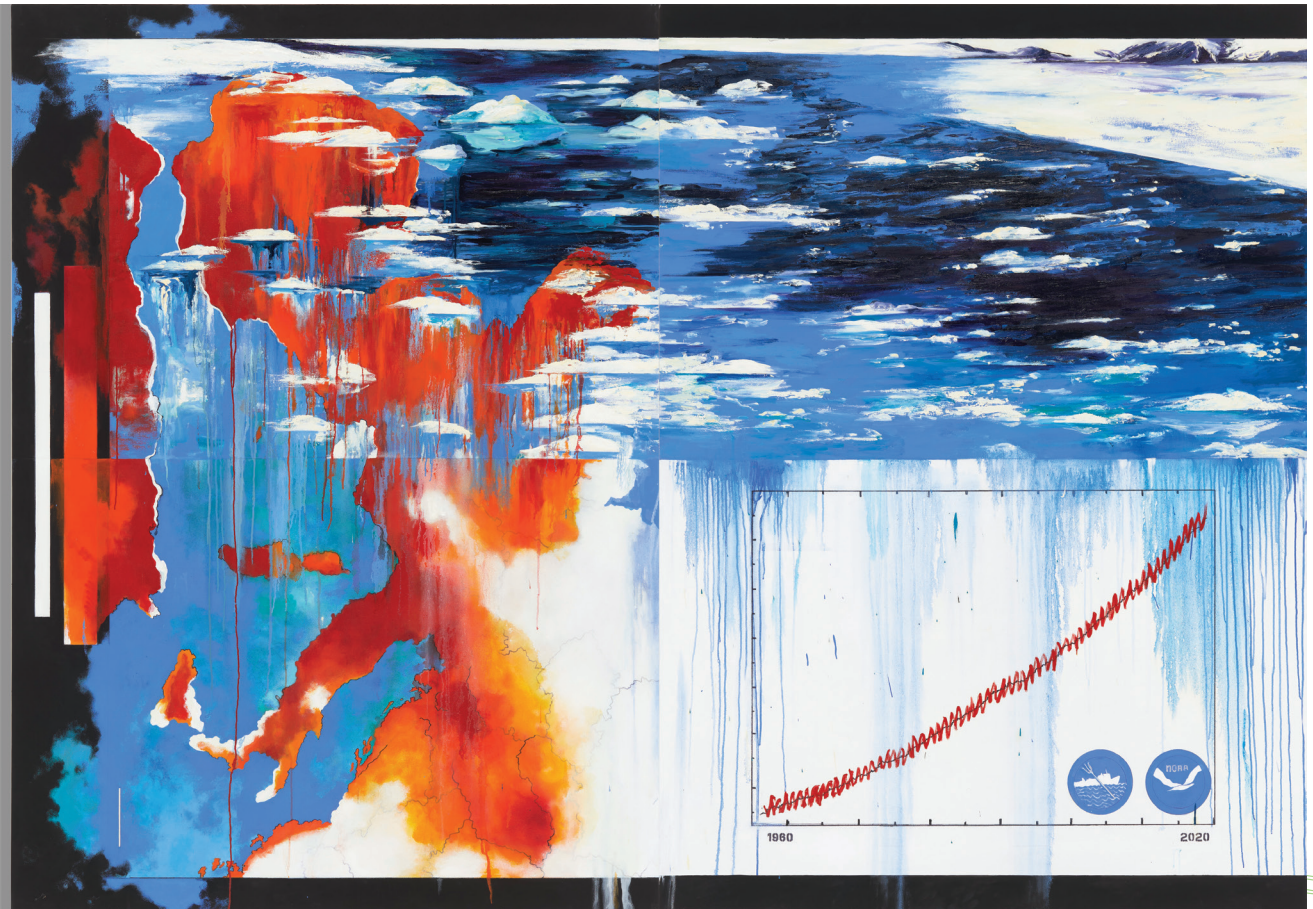
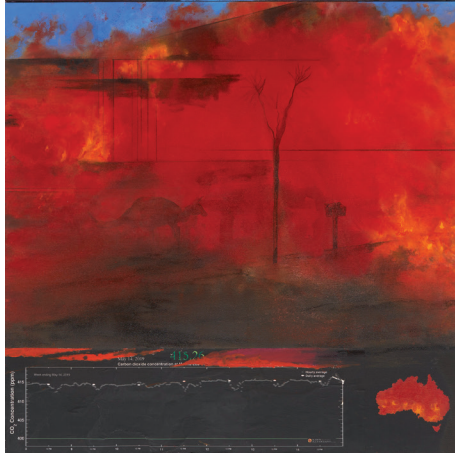
Diane Burko

Artist Statement

I work at the intersection of art, science, and the environment with an artistic practice that is devoted to bringing the challenges of climate change to light. Having spent over four decades exploring monumental and geological phenomena in a wide range of media from painting to photography to video, in 2006 I began devoting myself exclusively to the exploration of environmental issues. My artworks integrate experiences of on-location explorations, interactions with scientists in their labs and research data all resolved into captivating climate-conscious works that

encourage critical thinking about the impact humans are having on the environment. *Great Barrier Reef*, *Summer Heat*, and *Main Rongbuk Glacier Series* each approach the range of ecological crises that spiral out of rising global temperatures. By intertwining my aesthetic instincts with my political beliefs, I hope to inspire awareness, action, and a sense of purpose in confronting this critical moment before us. I want my images to bring both urgency and beauty into the conversation.

www.dianeburko.com



Deirdre Murphy has been studying bird and insect migration and nesting patterns for the last decade, a decade of the most extreme weather events in recorded history. Biology-based residencies have informed work such as *Oculus Minor*, in which she has transformed bird flight data into colorful visual schemes consisting of orbs, starry skies, black matchstick-like shapes, trails of white dots, and marbled (or camouflaged) horizontal strips. This is not the classic human-centric vision of Earth in its seasonal rotation, nor the "blue marble" photographed by NASA astronauts in 1972, both of which are dominated by a sense of regularity and calm. Murphy transforms earth into a series of surreal, boldly-colored celestial globes with different surfaces and rhythms; they are traversed by threatened species whose migrations have been disturbed by weather irregularities, smog, and light pollution. The dots and dashes also represent pathogens and viruses which are roaming more freely in our unstable atmosphere. There is friction between the overall aesthetic harmony of the paintings and the detailed chaos that they contain.

Deirdre Murphy

Artist Statement

Oculus Minor was produced during a BioArt residency at Integral Molecular Lab funded in part by the Knight Foundation and University City Science Center in Philadelphia. During the residency I worked alongside virology scientists that were trying to identify protein structures on deadly viruses such as Ebola and Dengue and create vaccines. Peering through the lens, I found similarities between the fluorescent microscopic images to light pollution maps and constellations. Just as birds migrate, so do viruses, as we have seen with the COVID pandemic. Climate change has direct implications to the spread of viruses as humans disrupt the deep wildernesses, warming the planet.

Birds know no artificial boundaries and can migrate across country and state lines without repercussions. We humans are just one of Earth's species that migrates, yet we cause so much unnecessary conflict with one another. I choose to study the Arctic Tern, a slender shore bird that crosses both Northern and Southern Hemispheres every year to migrate to its breeding territory. Many migratory birds navigate via the constellations to find their way, just like sailors thus the use of the Milky Way motif. The Arctic Tern travels 25,000 miles per year to lead its peaceful life cycle. We humans can learn from the migratory birds, to open our boundaries to one another, to welcome and embrace all people as part of humankind.

www.deirdremurphyart.com

▼ Deirdre Murphy, *Oculus Minor*, 2019.
Acrylic on Fabriano paper, mounted to
Baltic Plywood Panel, 24" x 180" overall

► Deirdre Murphy, *Invisible Currents Celestial Maps*,
2022. Mixed media prints on Japanese rice paper,
24" diameter each







Hiro Sakaguchi

Artist Statement

I am interested in making an image, containing a fictional realm that is relevant to my experience as an individual and an artist. I depict images gathered from everyday life, social concerns, interest, and memory. In making artwork I am after a story, which leads the viewer's visual and conceptual departure. In 2022, one cannot escape the reality of the environmental crisis; it is very natural for me to make images that reflect and convey concerns for the wellbeing of this planet that is our home.

www.hirosakaguchi.com

▲ Hiro Sakaguchi, *Nebula*, 2022.
Acrylic on canvas, 76" x 114"

More collisions of the natural and unnatural are cunningly, yet artfully embedded in landscapes by Hiro Sakaguchi. Pastel colors, often associated with prettiness, innocence and children, wash over environments that contain the signs and symbols of man-made destructive and polluting forces, as in *Nebula* (literally=numerous clouds of gas or dust in interstellar space). At first the viewer is enticed

by nine feet of seductive color, swirling vortexes, and the deployment of various shapes throughout the composition. But upon closer inspection we find tanks, missiles, cargo ships, airplanes, cars, nuclear reactors, and oil rigs. These are all agents of climate change because they drain the earth of natural resources, create toxic waste, and contribute to CO2 emissions and the greenhouse effect.

A cluster of family houses is subsumed in a hailstorm of our own making. In *Crocus*, the tranquility of a hilltop house and blooming fields is disturbed by planes, miniature armies, and smog. Sakaguchi is presenting a candy-coated apocalypse, an illusion that many polluters and climate deniers cling to.

► Hiro Sakaguchi, *Crocus*, 2014.
Acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24"
Collection of Deena Sara Gerson





◀ Amie Potsic, *Paradise*, installation view 2019.
Archival pigment print on silk. Dimensions variable

Forests are enclaves of wonder and spiritual fulfillment. Research studies have shown that they also provide mental and physical health benefits. They are friendly to humans and non-humans alike, supporting thousands of species, seen and unseen. Amie Potsic's immersive, draped fabric installation lets us linger in a fragment of a forest where time is irrelevant and peace prevails. But when the forest drapery is pulled back, her photographs reveal the harsher realities that assault these oases. We are reawakened to the ever-increasing scourge of wild fires and purposeful deforestation. Potsic positions the viewer between the visible extremes of natural harmony and disharmony; this frisson causes us to think deeply about the disappearing old growth forests and why we must preserve them. *Girl in the Garden* brings a sense of intimacy to the issue by framing the child in sunlight and green arbors, while just steps away, black shadows portend the demise of her environment.

Amie Potsic

Artist Statement

My work references the sensory experience of being within the forest while encouraging us to appreciate and preserve its future. Incarnate environmental explorations, my photographs and installations invite you to connect with your own perception of nature in a manner that is both intimate and enchanting. I focus on the allure and dynamism of the forest to share my sense of wonder, develop our connection to trees, and support environmental protections. Personal experience underscoring the urgency of climate change, I draw attention to deforestation by creating visceral and cerebral connections to trees and the natural world.

Girl in the Garden: Danger in Paradise explores our environment from the vantage points of female agency, deforestation, and Magical Realism. After photographing my daughter in the lush forests of the northeastern United States, I traveled to Paradise, California, and surrounds to photograph the complete devastation caused by the deadliest wildfire in the state's history. With Paradise located upwind from my extended family's home, seeing what we should preserve, and what happens when we don't, was sobering to comprehend. Introducing magical and narrative elements to the overwhelmingly complex issue of climate change, the intimacy of storytelling can examine the concept of Paradise and reveal our role to play in creating solutions.

www.amiepotsic.com



▲ Amie Potsic, *Girl in the Garden #2*, 2019.
Archival pigment print, 33" x 22"

◀ Amie Potsic, *Danger in Paradise #3*, 2019.
Archival pigment print, 22" x 29"



Tim Portlock

Artist Statement

[About the series *Nickels From Heaven*] “The work is not science fiction or futuristic...it’s actually describing what’s happening now. Each building sort of represents a different idea about how society is organized. [By] tearing them down [and] building them up, people are asserting or tearing down different ideas about what sort of social model we should be living in. I’m contrasting sort of the sublime elements of 19th century American landscape painting. There’s a reoccurrence of the notion of what the landscape is: is it a wilderness? Is it an ordered space?”—excerpt from podcast “Tim Portlock’s ‘Nickels From Heaven’ Isn’t Dystopian — It’s Reality,” St. Louis on the Air, January 29, 2021

www.locksgallery.com/artists/tim-portlock



▲ Tim Portlock, *Just Steps Away*, 2020.
Archival pigment print, 43.5" x 59.38"
Courtesy of Locks Gallery

▶ Tim Portlock, *Sundrenched*, 2020.
Archival pigment print, 43.25" x 58"
Courtesy of Locks Gallery



Likewise, the open, natural spaces in our cities are disappearing. Without trees, their roots, and surrounding soil, more CO₂ and less oxygen will be released into the air, increasing global warming. Tim Portlock's digitized versions of urban landscapes fascinate and terrify us because they pit glittering new forests of glass, steel, and metal against what little is left of our greenspace. Heat-reflecting monoliths, pavements, and construction equipment crowd out pedestrians, parks, and plant life. His futuristic cities become uninhabitable without the synergies that take place among organic life forms. The traditional bucolic landscape has been replaced by a computer-generated, re-configured utopia/dystopia? of soaring engineering marvels and artificial green roofs. But where are the living, breathing, human communities? Portlock's images force an emotional connection with the ideas of abandonment, dislocation, and extinction, all of which are very real consequences of the climate crisis.



◀ Stacy Levy, Photo-documentation of *Missing Waters*. Flushing Bay Kayak and Canoe Launch, Marina Road Corona, New York, 2020. Chalk and water on pavement, 120 yards x 15 yards

It is not just cities that have been paved over, bricked up, and mortared with impervious materials. Many of our watersheds have been covered, dammed, and lifted above the tidal range, disrupting their natural ebb and flow, and displacing wetland organisms essential to the marine ecosystem. Sculptor and installation artist Stacy Levy focuses on our underappreciated or unseen waterways, and infuses them with new life through artistic interventions which are unexpected, dynamic, and colorful. At times her installations are participatory, such as *Missing Waters*, documented here in video and photographs. Pedestrians strolling on pavement near the water's edge come upon spiraling, wavy light blue chalk lines that run over one hundred yards. Like ancient Minoan ocean-inspired decoration, the lines represent the vivacity of currents underneath them. While viewing this expanse of subjugated waterways, we are reminded of the degree to which we have tampered with Mother Earth, who seems to be taking her revenge through intensified flooding, cyclones, and drought.



Stacy Levy

Artist Statement

My pieces are direct collaborations with the force of water. For several years, I have been making chalk paintings to give people a sense of the invisible watershed running under the grid of our cities. These temporary paintings are full scale maps, done with a community of people who paint with water-soluble chalk paint directly onto the paved surfaces of streets and parking lots.

In many temperate areas, climate crisis is driving more frequent rain events that drop more rainwater from the sky. This increased amount of rain is falling on the human-made fabric of parking lots, warehouse roofs, turfgrass backyards, corporate parks and golf courses, and the monocultures of

farm fields. All of these surfaces prevent rainwater from soaking into the ground. Without this interlude in the soil, the rain takes a faster route towards the sea: rushing through our cities and suburbs, and often reclaiming the old routes of historic creeks that have been contained by stormwater infrastructure and capped by roads. The temporary chalk drawings map these hidden historic watersheds and show how the ghosts of these streams and wet edges are re-covering the urban areas we had thought would remain dry.

www.stacylevy.com



In sum, each artist tries to give shape to an uncertain climate-impacted future. Their narratives lie somewhere between tragedy and hope; between exposing what has been fractured and why we must repair it. They reflect our own disorientation, our pre-conscious memories of untamed land and sea, our paralysis in the face of environmental degradation, and our stubborn perpetuation of a nature culture binary (not seeing nature and humans as one entity). The aesthetic experience in *Risky Beauty* is a negotiation between our sensual selves who place value in the beauty and drama of the picturesque, and our moral and enlightened compasses which recognize disturbing truths about the consequences of human actions. The works hold us spellbound, if only for a moment.



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WIND



WATER



Sandy Stewart

IN-KIND

