New Human/Nature Exhibition at Harris Explores Urgency of Climate Action

AUGUST 02, 2022 | BY AARON ROSE

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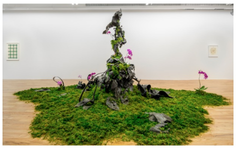
monument



monument by Regan Rosburg 2021. Materials include HDPE plastic ribbons and wings, virgin plastic, paint, antlers, moss, horse and deer skull, live orchids, rain smell (petrichor), and vaporizer, 48 x 48 x 96 inches. Photography by Evan Jenkins

It's hard to miss what's growing under the living sculpture that anchors the newly installed *Human/Nature* exhibition at the Keller Center. Beneath bright green moss and the delicate limbs of white and hot pink orchids, culled from varieties that have flourished on the planet for millions of years, emerge buckling, curling slabs of black plastic. Resembling remnants of rubber tires growing and looping out of the ground, this burgeoning mass rises triumphantly, calling to mind The Winged Victory of Samothrace. But the wings of *monument* are trapped, coated in the oily, hardened goo at the apex of this microcosmic landscape by artist Regan Rosburg.

Elements of the piece, natural and human-made, are familiar. What is new is their intertwining, the seemingly inextricable blending of the organic and the inert, that is startling and disquieting, that makes it impossible to know where the rubbery mass begins or ends. Does it end? Does the oily plastic have patterns of spread and growth all its own, for which we will have to invent new words, which we will have to study in order to comprehend and reckon with it as a new form of creation?

monument raises questions at the heart of the timely, compelling, urgently needed *Human/Nature* inquiry, an exhibition curated and presented through a partnership between the Weinberg/Newton Gallery and Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. The exhibition currently on display, which will be housed at the Keller Center, and is available for viewing online, features art works by four individual artists and an artist collaborative, as well as video of oral and written statements from scientists, artists, and concerned members of the public.

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists

UPCOMING EVENTS

Japan Harris Alumni and Students Summer Send-Off
SAT., AUGUST 20, 2022 | 10:00 PM

Applying To Grad School Series—Building Your Resume
MON., AUGUST 22, 2022 | 9:00 AM
A LINK WILL BE SENT TO REGISTERED GUESTS.
CHICAGO, IL 60637
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More events

Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists logo

Established in 1946 in the wake of atomic bombings that decimated the Japanese cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima at the end of World War II, the Bulletin was founded to encourage scientists to participate in shaping national and international policy and to educate public audiences about the consequences of atomic bombs. Since then, the organization has added two other global threats to its roster of concerns: climate change and disruptive technologies. Led by Rachel Bronson—with the involvement of Harris faculty and administrators—its mission is to "equip the public, policymakers, and scientists with the information needed to reduce man-made threats to our existence," based on the belief that because humans created the threats, humans can control them.

Bulletin leadership has always recognized the value of employing art and design to convey scientific data whose urgency is not registered by engaging the mind alone. Artist Martyl Langsdorf designed the original Doomsday Clock in 1947, which still serves as a vivid symbol to motivate the public to "acknowledge emerging threats, manage their dangers, and turn back the hands of the Doomsday Clock." The clock, prominently displayed on the wall opposite the entrance to the Keller Center, now in the shadow of *monument*, is set at 100 seconds before midnight.

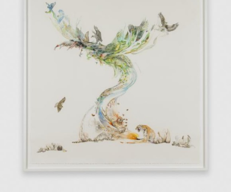
To mark its 75th anniversary last year, the Bulletin partnered with the Weinberg/Newton Gallery, whose mission is to educate and engage the public on social justice issues, to curate and present the *Human/Nature* exhibition, first displayed at the gallery. They recognized the imperative to engage, more effectively, the attention of public and specialized audiences on the dangers of climate change—including public policy students who, through their research and practice, will contribute to identifying and implementing solutions to the crisis.

The complexity of forces contributing to climate change, and the inter-related, cataclysmic global consequences of inaction, are still relatively new terrain to the human consciousness and imagination. Art, with its capacity to awaken the senses, reflect and project multiple dimensions of reality, and tell stories that convey truth and inspire hope and courage, is a vital guide in approaching this terrifying terrain. Bronson and David Weinberg selected Cyndi Conn, a Bulletin board member, artist, and curator, to curate the exhibition.

Curating *Human/Nature*

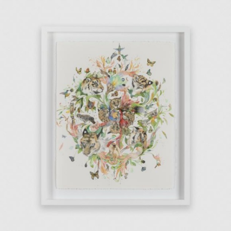
At first, Conn envisioned two separate rooms—one presenting a utopian, the other, a dystopian vision of the future—but realized that this dualistic approach neither addressed the choices, nor reflected the possible futures facing inhabitants of the planet. The challenges and conundrums of the 21st century are closer to the reality depicted in Rosburg's *monument* landscape, where our life-giving planet of abundance, the work of millions of years of astonishing evolutionary beauty and variety—with a balance both fragile and resilient—has been infiltrated and altered by human-made substances and manipulated by systems of structural and conceptual engineering. The same forces of industry, finance, and technology, of necessity and opportunism—clearing and drilling, building barriers and dams, claiming ownership of land and water—which are bringing us to the brink of annihilation, must be marshalled to establish a redemptive planetary rebalance. "We must learn to manage the risks of our technologies if we are to realize their benefits," Bronson notes. Science provides us with information; artists and art interpret facts, imagine possibilities, and inspire action.

Some of the artwork Conn assembled is, like *monument*,



Rebirth by Laura Ball, 2015. Materials include watercolor and graphite on paper, 51.5 x 50 inches. Photography by Evan Jenkins

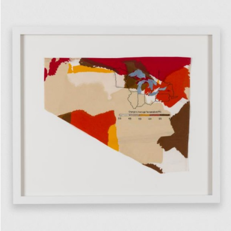
a gut-wrenching display of disturbing images of the consequences of climate change. The grotesque landscape of Regan Rosburg's *monument* makes itself known immediately; Laura Ball's paintings slowly overwhelm one's senses and sensibilities. Three watercolors on white backgrounds, *Wild Flower Mandala*, *Growth – Tree of Life*, and *Rebirth*, call to mind the ritual order and storytelling of spiritual iconography, and draw us in with their loveliness. But upon closer view, the benign sense of loveliness and order dissolves. Tigers, caribou, eagles and vultures, snakes, and other four-legged and winged ones, are in a state of utter bewilderment, terror and horror.



Wild Flower Mandala by Laura Ball, 2019. Materials include watercolor, ink, gouache, graphite and gold, 20 x 16 inches. Photography by Evan Jenkins

In *Wild Flower Mandala*, the eyes of a mighty tiger reflect helpless vulnerability, and a heartbreaking sense of betrayal. In *Growth – Tree of Life*, the face of an orangutan —whose population has been decimated by forest fires in the late 1990s that killed one-third of all orangutans, and relentless destruction, 80% to date, of their Southeast Asian rainforest habitat—is contorted by a scream almost too painful to acknowledge; even more difficult to forget. Ball, whose practice has included work with "endlings," the last known individual of a species or subspecies, has portrayed an existential response to the prelude to extinction, when the tipping point is reached, imbalance and then chaos ensue, and non-human creatures who inhabit the earth can no longer find their way across the narrowing bridges left for them to navigate their survival; when, in the depth of their bodies and beings they recognize that their homes, their paradise, and then their lives will be lost, forever. Having looked into their eyes, will humans face these truths about climate change?

Other work leads us slowly, by the hand, like the neophytes we are in this process, along a path toward understanding the danger of the collapse of ecosystems and the threat these collapses pose to all the typical, ordinary scenes and metrics of our lives: the seasons and our surroundings, our habitats and habits, cities and cultures that we know and take for granted as life, in a developed country, on Earth. Karen Reimer's fabric art uses everyday textiles, including a homey plaid, and embroidery threads to depict graphs of changes in average temperature and average maximum temperature, linking alarming statistics to familiar textures and patterns with the slow, methodical art of sewing. Can we better comprehend these realities if we see them

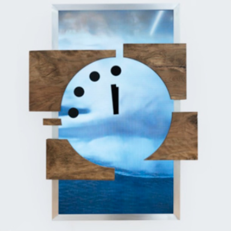


Change in Average Temperature (F) by Karen Reimer, 2019. Materials include embroidery on fabric, 13 x 16.75 inches, courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery. Photography by Evan Jenkins

woven into the fabrics of our lives? Yet, in these pieces, too, there are questions about and tensions between materials and messages. The seemingly random colors and patterns of found fabrics are used by the artist to reflect rising temperatures and convey the proliferation of massive algae blooms in Lake Erie. Can we distinguish between what has been and what will be? Will we simply learn to accept the blurring distinctions between what we have known and believed about life on Earth and changes to come?

Massive Algae Blooms in Lake Erie by Karen Reimer, 2020. Materials include embroidery on fabric, 19.25 x 23.75 inches, courtesy of Monique Meloche Gallery. Photography by Evan Jenkins

Artificial Intelligence and Climate Change



The DoomsdAI Clock by OBVIOUS & Stas Bartnikas, 2022. Materials include Generative Adversarial Networks interpolation, screen display, wood and metal, 37.5 x 49.5 inc, 56 seconds. Photography by Evan Jenkins

The technological capabilities of artificial intelligence (AI) offer new touchstones for understanding and acting on climate change. OBVIOUS, a collective of three artist friends in Paris, create art using AI. For the *Human/Nature* exhibition, they collaborated with aerial nature photographer Stas Bartnikas, who has taken many thousands of aerial photographs of landscapes around the world, including of sensitive ecosystems, to create The DoomsdAI Clock. Adapting the imagery of the Bulletin's Doomsday Clock to convey "criticism and a message of hope" in addressing climate change, the piece is an evolving, evocative artwork displaying an AI-generated video within a frame of aluminum and wood. The time displayed on the clock coordinates with the official time announced by the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists.

For The DoomsdAI Clock, OBVIOUS created an algorithm primarily using the landscapes of Iceland, along with photos of other remote places on Earth, to project a composite of landscape images in a process of rapid transformation. Just over 5,000 photos were required to produce an algorithm with high-definition results in 24 hours—a significant advance over what was possible a few years ago.

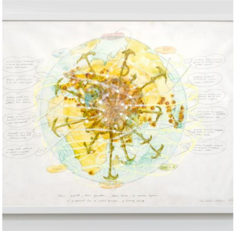
Today, AI research, or machine learning with the universal Python programming language, is used to predict changes to the earth's ecosystems as a consequence of climate change; and to devise ways to repair ecological damage, for example, to the barrier reefs, and to preserve the habitats of endangered species. Morphing images of landscapes in The DoomsdAI Clock, not representative of a particular place, but deeply evocative of Earth's magical beauty, suggest unknown possibilities for imminent changes to the earth's surface; and remind us that AI may reflect back to us something different, something more than human awareness is currently capable of perceiving or imagining.

As Misho Ceko, Harris COO who oversees art installations at the Keller Center, notes, "AI promises seemingly limitless potential for predicting environmental conditions and testing solutions to the climate crisis in ways that are safe and efficient, accurate and cost effective—they're not invasive or dangerous, nor constrained by time and physical resources. The AI work being done by OBVIOUS exemplifies the power and potential of art to convey complex scientific data to diverse public audiences—communities who urgently need to be educated and engaged in new ways about climate change."

This world, this garden, this time, or

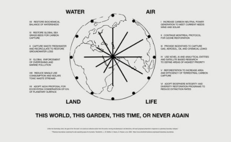
never again

Before leaving the exhibition, it's worth taking a second or third look at the work of artist and design innovator Matthew Ritchie. *This world, this garden, this time, or never again*, also known as the Life Clock, was inspired by the Planetary Boundaries Diagram from the Stockholm Resilience Centre research on planetary boundaries.



'*This world, this garden, this time, or never again' (Proposal for a world garden, a living clock)* by Matthew Ritchie, 2021. Materials include ink and graphite on mylar 31 x 25.25 inches, courtesy of Matthew Ritchie and James Cohan Gallery. Photography by Evan Jenkins

The work is in two parts. Ritchie created a hand-painted gouache of the earth, an abstract sketch for the second, digital piece. The imagery of the sketch suggests holistic interdependence, viewing Earth from a new, unified perspective. Instead of a world divided by continents, and further divided and color-coded into separate, static nations, the image conveys a single, pulsing ecosystem; anchor-like arrows illustrate dynamic movement and the flow of energy and resources. The image resonates with the heart and body, as well as the mind, and points toward an evolution in thinking about our earthly home.



'*This world, this garden, this time, or never again' (Proposal for a world garden, a living clock)* by Matthew Ritchie, 2021. Materials include vinyl installation 103 x 70 inches. Photography by Evan Jenkins

The second piece for *This world, this garden, this time, or never again, Proposal for a world garden, a living clock*, projected on a digital screen, amplifies the same template of Earth. Depicted in black and white, with 10 action steps in bold typeface, the image projects possibilities for coordinated planetary collaboration to manage the practices and reduce the forces contributing to climate change. As Ritchie points out, the environmental movement has struggled to develop effective messaging about climate change; world leaders have struggled to establish benchmarks for reducing dangerous carbon emissions. What we don't have is effective public education about Earth as an interdependent ecosystem. And we don't have clear plans for achieving climate change solutions.

The image evokes confidence, and hope. A response to the Doomsday Clock, "[t]he goal of the 'Life Clock,' Ritchie notes is to build collective action starting from the center, moving simultaneously, in all directions, with each proposal presented in response to a planetary boundary collapse."

Between scientists fully aware of the conditions producing climate change, and a public who seeks ways to address the crisis or who may despair of any useful action, are legislative and economic, social, media, and moral leaders who have the resources and power to galvanize workable international efforts. They need creative solutions, and will be aided in their design, development, and implementation by policy makers whose understanding of international relations, laws of commerce and industry, and negotiating skills, will be critical to preventing or minimizing reactive responses that pit fearful nations, regions, or communities against one another, or erect seemingly protective walls of exclusion between them. They need policy makers to facilitate collaboration that will enable the planet's inhabitants to evolve from consciousness rooted in nativism and nationalism, and the false dualism of us and them, to the consciousness of beings who share the earth. As extolled, and exhorted, by physicist Dr. Robert Socolow, a climate change expert who assisted with developing the Planetary Boundaries Diagram and whose statement about climate change is included in the original *Human/Nature* exhibition: awareness of the one world, the same biosphere we share as home is a critically needed new planetary consciousness and commitment.

Students of today and tomorrow, digital natives whose minds and experiences have been shaped in an age and by a world linked in real time, have the capacity to call into being a higher consciousness and response, not fragmented by superficial differences in nationality, language, or culture, but united by shared values and larger purpose of preserving our home. As the climate crisis continues to deepen, and the urgency to reverse or halt damage being done heightens, they will be ready to link minds and share strategies across archaic, historic divisions, to realize shared global interests and goals, and a vision as planetary beings.

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