

ART

At DU, a climate change exhibit that's thoughtful, shocking and sometimes even humorous

By [Ray Mark Rinaldi](#), Special to *The Denver Post* · Mar 16, 2017, 3:33 pm

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Anthony Porcaro imagines mystical sea monsters who just happen to be dying from consuming all the junk we toss into our oceans. He works in ink on paper and this piece was recreated directly on the wall at the the University of Denver's Vicki Myhren Gallery. Photos by Ray Mark Rinaldi

Like everyone else these days, I want the art I take in to be relevant. There's a time and place for pretty pictures and happy love songs, but it isn't right now, not when the surrounding political and social discourse feels so urgent.

Art has a rare power in these times to lead the discussion, not by taking sides or indulging in whiny, personal politics, but by helping us understand each other thoughtfully and reminding us of common truths. It takes a little bravery — like wading into controversial border issues as the Denver Art Museum's current "Mi Tierra" exhibit does, or confronting racism and violence as Dáreece Walker's drawings do at the Colorado Springs Fine Art Center — but art performs a real community service when it dares to be thoughtful and of-the-moment.

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An art work couldn't be more of-the-moment than Brian House's "Animas," which transforms scientific data — collected in real time — into a sound sculpture that is part of the group exhibit "Storm Warning: Artists on Climate Change & the Environment" at the University of Denver's Vicki Myhren Gallery.

House worked with researchers monitoring chemical levels in the Animas River in Western Colorado, which gained notoriety in the summer of 2015 when an accidental wastewater release turned it bright orange. Their readings are captured as vibrations that activate metal panels and create a haunting hum that fills the Myhren Gallery.

The piece provides a magical bit of translation. It's not a pro-environment rant by any stretch, but a tool that allows non-science types to share in the task of keeping watch over an important body of water.

"Storm Warning" is surprisingly entertaining that way, wrapping hard facts about the planet into thoughtful pieces that capture a variety of emotions. Curator Jeffrey Keith covers a lot of ground, everything from pollution to rising temperatures to recycling, but it's a cohesive exhibit that deftly shows how artists process current events.

Some of the work is, indeed, shocking, like Chris Jordan's video "Gastrolith," for which the artist collected the undigested remains from the stomach of a camel who died from eating plastic rubbish in the Arabian Desert.

Or Edward Lane McCartney's "Ursus Maritimus Petroleum Acclimate," which essentially takes a precious, little plush teddy bear and covers it in icky, synthetic rubber, as if some child left it on the banks of a river that was then contaminated by a massive oil spill. These pieces need little explanation to get across their points.



Visitors can enter Regan Rosburg's "The Relentless Memorial" and communally work through their grief over the loss of a healthy planet. Photo by Ray Mark Rinaldi

But "Storm Warning" is a mature effort that more often under-sensationalizes the topic of climate change rather than screaming about it or pointing fingers. There's no room, really, for those who might deny that it exists, but the pieces present ideas in a way that allows us to remove the hyper-politics that can overtake the subject and simply talk about it.

Regan Rosburg sets this tone most viscerally with her installation "The Relentless Memorial," a round room made from delicately cut-out paper that viewers are invited to enter. Inside, they can communally process their grief over the loss of a healthy, vibrant planet Earth, in the same way all memorials help us move forward. There's a wink to the work — the planet isn't quite done yet — but it comes off as essential and necessary; it actually feels good to make peace with melting glaciers and disappearing honey bees. What choice do we have?

This gesture of finding serenity, or even beauty, in the demise of the environment is a recurring theme of "Storm Warning." Photographer J. Henry Fair makes stunningly handsome images of things like sulphur waste pits and ash deposits at coal plants. Steve Wiman turns trash — discarded rubber gloves, plastic spoons and combs — into colorful 3-D collages that could fairly be described as delightful. Anthony Porcaro (who is just 17, by the way) draws imaginary, mystical sea monsters, who just happen to be dying from consuming all the junk we toss into our oceans.

"Storm Warning" pushes the limits by moving into actual humor. Katherine Ball's "Seed Fireworks" are miniature rockets that carry seeds that actually fare best when the climate tanks. The seeds of the green leaf manzanita, for example, are activated by forest fires, and smoke causes Colorado beardtongue seeds to germinate.

Gary Sweeney makes light of heaping landfills by recycling old commercial signs into a clever saying. Here, a dozen or so discarded signs are pieced together to quote Francis Bacon: "The job of an artist is to always deepen the mystery."

Humorous takes on a difficult topic might go a bit far for some; they do seem to strive a little too hard to keep "Storm Warning" attractive to those whose attention might wander from an important discussion. On the other hand, not enough people are paying attention, so good for curator Keith for going there.

If you are going to be relevant, you've got to draw a crowd — and the Myhren Gallery will with this show. Its subject matter should lure students campus-wide who regularly pass the building without noticing there's an actual art gallery inside.

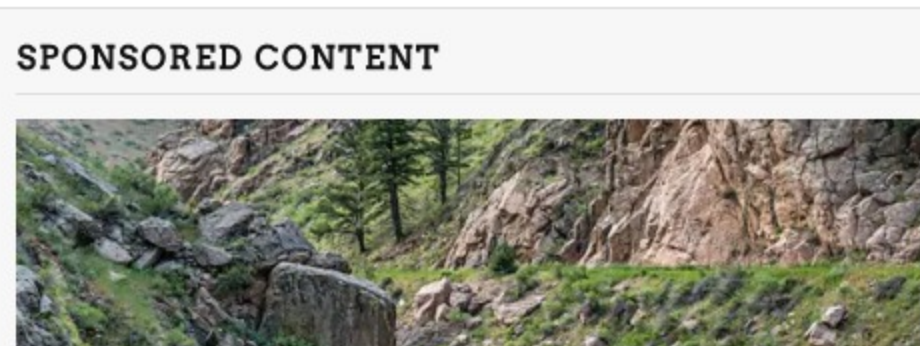
More importantly, it's the kind of exhibit that employs art at a time when we desperately need it to do its thing. And it does so at a high level, worthy of a university setting where open dialogue is the goal, and measured conversation keeps things interesting.

"Storm Warning: Artists on Climate Change & the Environment" continues through April 30, at the University of Denver's Vicki Myhren Gallery. It's free. Info at 303-871-3716 or online at vicki-myhren-gallery.du.edu.

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