2020

Unsustainable: A Planet in Crisis

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UNSUSTAINABLE

a planet in crisis

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Cover image of the Earth from Space: NASA’s Earth Observatory, 2002
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Unsustainable
A Planet in Crisis

Unsustainable: A Planet in Crisis is organized in support of the University of Tennessee College of Arts and Sciences’ Apocalypse Semester and coincides with the McClung Museum of Natural History and Culture’s exhibition, Visions of the End. Medieval and Renaissance artists on view at the McClung Museum, inspired by The Book of Revelations which was written by John of Patmos circa 100AD, utilize subject matter such as terrifying beasts, plagues, and natural disasters to capture the attention of their audience and to warn of an apocalyptic future. Likewise, Unsustainable: A Planet in Crisis warns of an apocalyptic future. As new year and a new decade begin, 2020 coincides with the McClung Museum’s exhibition, Unsustainable: A Planet in Crisis. By sharing their concerns, observations and awareness of current crises, a sustainable future for our planet is possible if we acknowledge these crises and begin to take appropriate action.

In an exhibition project of this scope, there are many people to thank for its success. I would like to recognize all of the exhibiting artists and scientists for the loan of their works and their enthusiasm for this exhibition. I acknowledge the Ewing Gallery staff Sarah McFalls and Eric Cagle for their curatorial suggestions, their assistance with the exhibition’s design and layout, and their contributions to publicity and documentation of the exhibition. With the assistance of other School of Art staff members Mike Berry, Erin Tucker, Jake Ingram, and Christopher Spurgin, they were able to achieve a remarkable exhibition of work that was demanding in its installation.

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Lastly, I again thank Sarah McFalls who also designed this catalogue and Eric Cagle who also coordinated the shipping of the works included in Unsustainable: A Planet in Crisis.

As the Medieval and Renaissance artists on view in the McClung Museum’s exhibition Visions of the End offered hope for their viewers, so do these contemporary artists exhibiting in Unsustainable: A Planet in Crisis. By sharing their concerns, observations and awareness of current crises, a sustainable future for our planet is possible if we acknowledge these crises and begin to take appropriate action.

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BRANDON BALLENGÉE, PHD

We are in the middle of a biodiversity crisis, often referred to as the Holocene or Sixth great extinction. Species are disappearing at upwards of a thousand times the natural rate. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of animals have disappeared from the Americas in recent centuries. Such extinctions started when the Europeans first colonized these new lands and have continued until today with recent losses like the Eastern cougar (2013), the Pinta Island Tortoise (2012), The Florida Fairy shrimp (2011) and many others.

Responding to this cataclysm, I physically cut images of missing animals from historic prints and publications printed at the time in history when the depicted species became extinct. For example, in RIP Pied or Labrador Duck: After John James Audubon (1856/2007), the image of the birds was removed from an original 1856 Royal Octavo (hand-colored by one of Audubon’s sons) printed at the same point in history as the actual species disappeared. The resulting image minus the subject is what I refer to as a Framework of Absence.

Acquired over several years, these prints, dating from 1640 to 2014, reflect the long-term and continued decline of biodiversity. The cut animal images are burned and ashification remains are gathered. Participants are then asked to scatter these ashes in memory to species gone. This action is intended as a transformative event for individuals: at once representing species loss at a personal level and also importantly an innovation towards a conservation mindset to counter future extinctions.

Above: RIP Eastern Cougar: After Randy Fehr, 1993/2015
Artist cut and burnt chromolithographic magazine cover, period inspired frame, ashes, and etched funeral urn 18 x 15 7/8 inches
Photo: Casey Dorobek
Courtesy of the artist and Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York

Opposite: Frameworks of Absence
2006 – ongoing altered prints with etched glass urns and ashes Ewing Gallery installation dimensions variable
MICHELE BANKS

My work explores the world through the interplay of art and science. I create art exploring themes from science and medicine, including images such as viruses, bacteria, and plant and animal cells. I’ve looked at how these organisms affect humans, and in turn how we affect them, through climate change, antibiotic use and other impacts on the earth.

In climate change, artists confront the greatest threat to life on earth as we know it. With this piece, The Arctic Bride, I try to connect a familiar and traditional symbol – the white wedding dress – to the ravages of a warming climate. When I began researching climate change in the Arctic several years ago, the photographs of glinting white, wind-driven drifts of ice and snow reminded me of the pristine folds of white satin in a wedding dress. I then imagined what would happen to the dress as climate change continued its current course.

My Micro/Macro series of ink paintings is an abstracted look at the melting of glaciers. Along with the ice, this melting takes with it the contours of coastlines, the history trapped in the air bubbles of the ice, and a whole way of life for the Arctic.

Above: Macro/Micro 1-4, 2014
Ink on Mylar
24 x 36 inches

Opposite: The Arctic Bride, 2017
mixed media
Ewing Gallery installation
dimensions variable
The pathogenic bacterium Pseudomonas aeruginosa grows within a Petri dish and develops over time into a wrinkled colony biofilm. This is a multicellular-like form of the bacterium, in which the millions of cells inside are connected to one another by a complex extracellular matrix.

When a human hand is pressed against a growth medium inside of a large dish, invisible bacteria and fungi on the hand are left behind in the dish. Then, after that dish is incubated for several days, colonies of various shapes, colors and sizes grow and become visible, representing some of the diverse microbes that live on our skin.
Brandon Donahue has created this memorial wall, similar in concept to Maya Lin’s Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial, to commemorate local victims of homicide. Using information gathered by Tennessean reporter Natalie Neysa Alund, he has carefully airbrushed the names of 96 murdered Nashvillians: 85 in 2018 and 11 in early 2019. Over 85% died from gunshot wounds. The deceased include five- and eight-year-old sisters Samil and Sammarree Daniel, who were killed in their front yard in the Cumberland Gardens neighborhood; Jamie Samartonas and Bartley Teal, who were robbed and shot at a bar in East Nashville; Daniel Hambrick, who was killed by a police officer in North Nashville; and Akilah Dasilva, DeEbony Groves, Joe R. Perez, and Tauren Sandlin, massacred at the Waffle House on Murfreesboro Pike. Some of these deaths were reported on extensively in the media, while others received very little attention.

Donahue, a graduate of and former assistant professor at Tennessee State University, worked in a T-shirt shop and wrote graffiti as a youth in Nashville. Honoring each victim through very individualized airbrushing brings a sense of gravitas to imagery that one might associate with tourist souvenirs without knowing the context. This elevation of everyday items and popular culture into a gallery context is also part of Donahue’s studio practice.
Nowhere Else Exists is a sculptural installation of pod-like clusters suspended from the ceiling of the Ewing Gallery of Art + Architecture. It considers the full range of interactions of nature with human health and illness at the micro level. I meticulously record the miniscule shifts of cellular biology coaxing these images into dimensional shapes, gathering them into unsystematic clusters that form new organisms whose consequences for human health, like so much in nature, remain to be discovered.

The installation implies several infectious diseases including influenza, vector-borne diseases like Malaria, dengue, West Nile, as well as water related illnesses of Cholera and E. coli.

The spread of infectious diseases is being affected by climate change. How could it not be?

Rising temperatures, more extreme weather, rising sea levels, increased CO2 levels — bring about extreme heat, severe weather, air pollution, changes in vector biology, increasing allergens, water quality impacts, water and food supply impacts and environmental degradation. Diseases, injuries, isolation, and mental health impacts are the outcome. Heat-related deaths, asthma, cardiovascular disease, respiratory allergies, Lyme disease, Chikungunya and Zika virus, 'climate refugees'

We are here. It is now.
This is a new body of work derived from Jogakbo stitching: a traditional, vernacular Korean folk art.

As a child, I was introduced to Jogakbo by my aunt who owned a Hanbok (Korean traditional garment) shop. Jogakbo developed as a way for lower class people to wrap gifts for weddings and other celebratory events in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Scrap pieces of fabric were stitched together, much like quilts, to create attractive wrappings. My aunt was particularly talented at this, and her Jogakbo were lovely and visually sophisticated. Examples were gifted to family members, and my mother passed hers down to me.

In updating this traditional Korean art form, I am stitching together pieces of commercial plastic bags from New York City and Seoul and also drug baggies that I find on the streets of my neighborhood. As in traditional Jogakbo, the scrap elements have all been used, and are sewn together to create compositions influenced by the lived reality of neighborhood folk.
I created Bounty Pilfered for the GYRE project of the Anchorage Museum, primarily of material collected during GYRE expedition in remote Alaska. This work reflects on my experience seeing the bounty of the earth pilfered by corporate greed, and personally witnessing the destruction wrought by the Deep Water Horizon Disaster in the Gulf of Mexico.

In creating Anchor (our albatross) I was thinking about sinking and floating, escape and rescue; primarily from experiences working with the refugee crises in Lesvos, Greece.

Above: Bounty Pilfered, 2014
Ocean plastic from Alaska, Greece, Hawaii, Costa Rica on the Gulf of Mexico; steel armature and driftnet floats from the Pacific North Gyre. 136 × 84 × 54 inches

Opposite: Anchor (our albatross), 2017
Ocean and urban plastic from Hawaii, Costa Rica, Greece, California, Gulf of Mexico and Atlanta; survival rescue blankets and life vest straps recovered from Lesvos. 168 × 144 × 28 inches
Dan Mills is known for paintings and works on paper that are full of observations about historic and current events. His artistic practice includes conducting extensive research on topics such as current wars and conflicts, colonialism, and life expectancy by state, and creating work that visualizes data/information on the subjects. Mills frequently uses maps as the space to explore these ideas. He began incorporating maps into his work in the early 1990s while researching the quincentennial of what is euphemistically referred to as The First Encounter. Since then, topics he has explored include current wars and conflicts, data about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, the contested histories of colonization, international claims on Antarctica, and the paradox of relative invisibility of Native Americans to most other Americans versus the ubiquity of geographic features named after Native Americans or with their words.

Above: Current War$ and Conflict$ by Contenent, Belligerents and Supporters, 2016
ink on printed map on paper; 11 3/4 x 15 inches

Opposite: Current Wars and Conflicts by Continent, Belligerents and Supporters Book 05, 2017
ink and watercolor on atlas; 9 x 7.25 x 1 inches
JOHN SABRAW

These abstract explorations focus on natural phenomena, the earth’s ecosystem as a whole, and our role within that. These investigations have led me to incorporate ever more sustainable practices in my studio, in my life, and when possible actively engaging the public on the matter.

In this body of work, painstaking painting methods are coaxed into interacting and amalgamating over durations of up to several months. The result is complex, luminous, mysterious paintings that strike a beautiful balance between controlled and organic processes.

These works primarily use water-based paints, dry pigments, and acrylic media. pigment manufacturers and types are chosen with permanency and sustainability in mind. This goal is more attainable now since I have been partnering with Ohio University engineer Dr. Guy Riefler to develop paints with pigments derived from toxic runoff from abandoned coal mines – acid mine drainage or AMD for short.

Above: Chroma S4 Dragon, 2017
mixed media and acid mine drainage pigments on aluminium composite panel 48 x 48 inches

Opposite: Chroma S4 Tribute, 2017
mixed media and acid mine drainage pigments on aluminium composite panel 48 x 48 inches
I read The End of Nature by the environmentalist Bill McKibben 30 years ago. His writing on climate change was vivid and alarming. I couldn’t stop thinking about how our air and water were being corrupted. To keep my anxieties in check I began to make drawings and installations about global warming.

In 1991, I was offered a large section of the Ewing Gallery for the installation titled To the Greenhouse. It was a multimedia installation comprised of video, drawings and objects, a few of which are included in the current exhibition. Some of the works on paper have deteriorated and echo the deterioration of our environment. It is sad to think that in 30 years we are still debating carbon emissions. Although the car models are different today the images are still, (alas) relevant.
The following pages contain Ewing Gallery of Art + Architecture installation photographs.