

Biophilia: In Excelsis

An essay by Eleanor Heartney is a New York based art writer, cultural critic and curator.

How may art support a wholistic vision of the natural world? That question drives the artists in this exhibition. They are inspired by biophilia, literally the love of life, and draw on developments in environmental science, biology, politics and media to help us understand the interconnections that make up the web of life. Aware that facts alone are often insufficient to persuade a jaded public to act, these artists present their visions using some of art's most potent tools, among them beauty, metaphor, symbolism, and visual poetry.

They take a variety of approaches. Some journey to remote areas to investigate the impact of climate change on sensitive ecosystems. In the service of her dazzling paintings, Danielle Eubank has sailed every ocean on the planet. Eleanor Goldstein bears witness to the shrinking of the arctic glaciers. D J Spooky delves into the environmental politics of Antarctica. Diane Burko reflects on the climate science surrounding glaciers and the Amazon Rain Forest.

Such works remind us of the fragility of the conditions that make life possible. This is seconded by artists who warn of the consequences of environmental inaction. M. Annenberg uses a variety of visual metaphors to remind us that we are *Sledding Down a Slippery Slope*. Janet Culbertson pictures the dire effects of industrial overdevelopment. Noreen Dean Dresser evokes a biblical parable to address our disregard for natural limitations. Lisa Reindorf creates vivid paintings that evoke the clash between development and ecology. Ann Shapiro creates mournful beauty from the changing weather patterns of an increasingly inhospitable world.

Artists here also offer acts of mourning. Elisa Pritzker visualizes our *Isolation and Disconnection from Nature*. Babs Reingold and Kathy Levine memorialize trees lost to man-made disasters and deliberate destruction. Angela Manno makes icons of endangered species. Suzanne Theodora White creates environmentally charged *momento moris*.

Other artists home in on the irresponsibility of consumer culture, often using its products as art materials. Walter Brown transforms his own plastic waste into sculptures. Steven Siegel creates public monuments of discarded newspapers, plastic bottles and cans. Simone Spicer references sea melt with an igloo composed of plastic bottles. Cristian Pietrapiana makes collages that critique mass consumption.

And finally, artists celebrate the natural beauty that is slipping away but may yet be restored. Susan Hoffman Fishman documents the unsettling radiance of sinkholes in the Dead Sea. Lois Bender evokes the allure of endangered coral reef gardens. Cameron Davis's layered paintings suggest the interweavings of natural ecosystems. The luminous paintings of Krisanne Baker celebrate the environmental role of marine Phytoplankton.

In the end all these approaches reinforce each other. They serve as calls to action and reminders of aesthetic and spiritual traditions that counter the madness of Western culture's human-centric vision.

Eleanor Heartney is a New York based art writer, cultural critic and curator who has been writing about art since 1981. She is Contributing Editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and has written extensively on contemporary art issues for many other magazines. She has authored numerous books on contemporary art, including *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads*, *Postmodernism, Defending Complexity: Art Politics and the New World Order*, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, *Art and Today* and *Doomsday Dreams: the Apocalyptic Imagination in Contemporary Art*. She is a co-author of *After the Revolution: Women who Transformed Contemporary Art* and *The Reckoning: Women Artists in the New Millennium*. Heartney is a past President of AICA-USA, the American section of the International Art Critics Association. She was the 1992 recipient of the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism. In 2008 she was honored by the French government as a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.