

Civilization's Homestretch

The impossible task of explaining our own existence and defining its length has always been a fascinating exercise. Gods were invented and religions and governments formed to tell us how we came to exist on this planet and how to behave and what to expect. These reassurances and predictions are fallible as those who create them, especially since claiming such knowledge often accompanies a bid for power of some sort. And to control the unruly human race there have always been consequences for bad behavior. The definition of bad has changed as times have, but the reality of punishment meted out has been a constant. Death, torture, war and economic deprivation are penalties that still shake their primitive fists. And the ecological fallout resulting from political power plays has slowly become evident on our planet. The word apocalypse has come to mean the end of the world as we know it, perhaps the most complete punishment of all. But the Greek word apokalypsis actually means revelation - literally the lifting of the veil which allows a select few special knowledge that is hidden from the general populace.

This exhibition presents beautifully composed images of our planet short-circuiting. The sixteen photographers come from all over the globe, use different approaches and yet share a knowledge of the violence and careless decay that is gnawing at our world. Sometimes the gnawing is literal, as in Bogdan Konopka's photograph of grain storage tubes where rats have chewed large holes. Or sometimes nature is sending us a message visible only to a few. David Maisel's photographs are taken from a low-flying plane over the Great Salt Lake in Utah where Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty is once again visible. Maisel's photographs often are totally abstract, raw and lyrical at the same time. The lake is unrecognizable in many of the photographs with the colors from the natural minerals mixing with man-made toxins leeching into the water from industrial sites nearby. In the Russian territory of Altai, Jonas Bendiksen has photographed cows in a landscape that defines bucolic. But like a Constable painting gone wrong these cows have toppled over and died, poisoned by rocket fuel in the soil. These photographers present landscapes that appear wounded and altered in a surreal manner. The scenes pictured are both beautiful and strange, like dreams that have sprung up in real time so we may step into them.

The above photographs illustrate the slow tempo of some destruction. Others works in the exhibition picture the slam of a direct hit. Lucian Perkin's photograph of a donkey in a burning oil field during the Gulf War is reminiscent of images in the Book of Revelations. The scorched earth and rearing beast unsettle the viewer like a biblical folk tale come to life. Lori Grinker's photographs taken on 9/11 at the World Trade Center site show a world shattered in a matter of minutes with personal items blasted into a landscape of dust. A delicate skeletal form appears in the sky in Trent Parke's photograph where it is flying foxes, not humans, on the attack. The strangeness and speed of this assault underline the absurdity of our attempts to control nature's moods.

Both Clare Langan and Dodo Jin Ming have a cinematic approach to their work. In this exhibition a still from Langan's video Too Dark for Night shows a sand-filled landscape. Hand painted filters distort the forms and colors and the viewer watches a lone figure travel in a dreamlike atmosphere in what looks to be an abandoned world. There is nothing more natural than a disaster in our time when nature behaves more and more frequently in unpredictable and violent ways. Langan describes a world where nature has regained control and humans can only explore the results. Dodo Jin Ming takes negatives from shots of the ocean and sky and

combines them in one print. The resulting image is off kilter, like looking at a film being run backwards. The movement seems flipped and the merged sky and sea illustrate the topsy turvy feel of a planet where pre-conceived notions of nature's alignment are eroding.

In all of these photographs there is a sense and sometimes outright depiction of the inaccessibility of what was once available. The bricked up windows in Konopka's picture taken in Wroclaw where no one can enter, or Bendiksen's photograph of an elderly woman returning to her bombed out apartment where she continues to live make the diminishment visible. Perhaps the most poignant photograph is by Stephen Vaughn. He shows an iceberg slowly melting, sitting in calm beauty, while its structure gradually disappears. We know what this single image represents. Its power lies in the contrast of its still mood with the harsh repercussions of its creeping fadeout.

So the veil has been lifted and we are able to see, with the help of these images as well as many others, just how we have chosen to punish ourselves and our planet. The plagues and violence that visit us have been created by our actions, although often unwittingly. Apocalyptic literature describes the human race being punished for believing in the wrong god or ruler and tells us that escalating global disasters are the results of a cosmic conflict between God and Satan. But, we do not need godlike figures to wreak havoc on the planet, we can do that ourselves.

Mimi Thompson
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