CLIMATE

MICA

CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

CHANGE

CLIMATE FOR CHANGE

NAVIGATING THE POLYCRISIS

01.19-03.03.24
Pinkard Gallery
MICA

Curated by
María Alejandra Sáenz

GABRIELA BULISOVA
TODD R. FORSGREN
BILLY FRIEBELE
MARK ISAAC
KATIE KEHOE
YAM CHEW OH
SUE WRBICAN

CURATED BY
MARÍA ALEJANDRA SÁENZ

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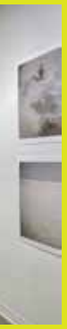
MAKING THIS TRANSFORMATION REQUIRES THAT HUMANS RECONNECT WITH NATURE–

THE FORESTS,
THE PRAIRIE,
THE OCEANS–



INSTEAD OF TREATING EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE AS OBJECTS FOR EXPLOITATION,

Climate for Change is the fourth in a series of evolving exhibits focused on the climate and environmental crisis by the seven artists of Atlantika Collective. Curated by Atlantika member María Alejandra Sáenz and exhibited in MICA's Pinkard Gallery from January 19 to March 3, 2024, the exhibition illustrates the current environmental emergency. It acts as a beacon that brings light to the possibilities of transforming our relationship with the natural world.

The latest iteration of the exhibition features new work that responds to the most pressing environmental challenges occurring in the contemporary moment. It also moves a step beyond the prior exhibits by highlighting the complexity of the threats we face and how these challenges interact with each other to complicate the path forward.

In doing so, Altlantika extends an invitation to relearn our ways of relating to nature. The artworks featured in the exhibition inspire and stimulate actions to help mitigate the critical consequences of climate change and be in communion with the environment. In the words of environmental scientist Suzanne Simard: "Making this transformation requires that humans reconnect with nature—the forests, the prairie, the oceans—instead of treating everything and everyone as objects for exploitation."[01] Despite the difficult reality that easy solutions do not exist, the artists strongly advocate for immediate and decisive action to minimize the likelihood of catastrophe.

Curatorial essay by
Mark Isaac and
María Alejandra Sáenz

01 **Simard, Suzanne. Finding the Mother Tree: Discovering the Wisdom of the Forest. Knopf, 2021.**

THE CLIMATE CRISIS AS A CENTRAL FACTOR IN THE "POLYCRISIS"

Sáenz, who has training as an architect, curated the exhibition from a distance by working with plans and photographs of the exhibition space. She chose to divide the exhibit into broad subject matter themes that immediately demonstrate the wide-ranging interests of the artists and the breadth of the challenges we face. Specific works related to these focal points, including sustainable development, waterways, and forests, were grouped in the gallery space.

Through its multiple subjects, vantage points, and artistic mediums, *Climate for Change* demonstrates that the environmental crisis we face is multifaceted and that the many threats we encounter interact with each other, compounding the negative impacts and complicating our ability to respond in a timely and effective manner.

In this respect, reference to the term "polycrisis" may be instructive. This term was recently popularized by historian Adam Tooze to reference the multiple global problems interacting with each other in the contemporary moment, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the climate crisis, the cost-of-living crisis, the energy crisis, superpower competition, and multiple active wars and hotspots around the globe.[02] Since then, other authors, including Christopher Hobson and Matthew Davies, have elaborated on the idea. For them, "Polycrisis is a way of capturing the tangled mix of challenges and changes that closely interact with one another, bending, blurring and amplifying each other." The World Economic Forum's Global Risks Report 2023 also raised concerns about the growing number of situations "where disparate crises interact such that the overall impact far exceeds the sum of each part." [04] All of these individuals and entities believe that the risk of multiple emergencies amplifying each other is mounting.

Other experts agree, but place the environmental challenges we face more at the center of the crisis. For example, Richard Heinberg, a senior fellow at the Post Carbon Institute, writes, "The global polycrisis is not just an unhappy convergence of many separate negative trends. Climate change, resource depletion, toxic pollution, and other facets of the polycrisis are directly or indirectly rooted in a single phenomenon—society's dependency on fossil fuels." [05] As a result of the interplay of these simultaneous threats, he believes we are entering a time in which "individual impacts are compounding to threaten the very environmental and social systems that support modern human civilization." Adding to this discussion, Thomas Homer-Dixon, a political scientist and executive director of the Cascade Institute in British Columbia, suggests that as human activity becomes more and more connected and standardized, human problems also become more interconnected. "Scientists have shown that ecological, technological, or social systems that are both highly connected and highly homogeneous are especially prone to cascading failures," he warns, "that is, to failures that resemble a row of dominoes falling over." [06]

The artists of Atlantika also place the climate and environmental crisis at the center of a worldwide polycrisis. Multiple aspects of the crisis overlap with each other, interact, and amplify each other, potentially spiraling into something far worse than might otherwise be the case. For example, higher temperatures lead to drought, which in turn makes forests around the world susceptible to fires. The growing number of wildfires not only damages the natural habitat of many valuable plant and animal species, reducing biodiversity and increasing the likelihood of extinctions, but it releases large amounts of carbon into the atmosphere, worsening warming and exacerbating health problems. Or, rising temperatures melt the permafrost in the far north, releasing large amounts of methane and carbon dioxide, which further raises temperatures and may ultimately lead to an uncontrollable feedback loop.

Climate for Change, Atlantika's latest exhibition, highlights the multiplicity of factors negatively impacting the world's ecosystems. However, the artists are not content with simply calling attention to the scope of the problem. In their work and through affiliated events and collaborations, they identify paths forward at a particularly difficult moment in our history. And they model a collaborative and inclusive approach that enhances our chances of succeeding.

02 **Tooze, Adam, "Chartbook #165: Polycrisis - thinking on the tightrope." Chartbook, October 29, 2022.**

03 **Davies, M., & Hobson, C. (2023). An embarrassment of changes: International Relations and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Australian Journal of International Affairs,* 77(2), 150–168.**

04 **World Economic Forum. "Global Risks Report 2023." January 11, 2023.**

05 **Heinberg, Richard. "From Climate Crisis to Polycrisis." World Literature Today, March 2024.**

06 **Homer-Dixon, Thomas. Why so much is going wrong at the same time. *Vox*, October 18, 2023.**

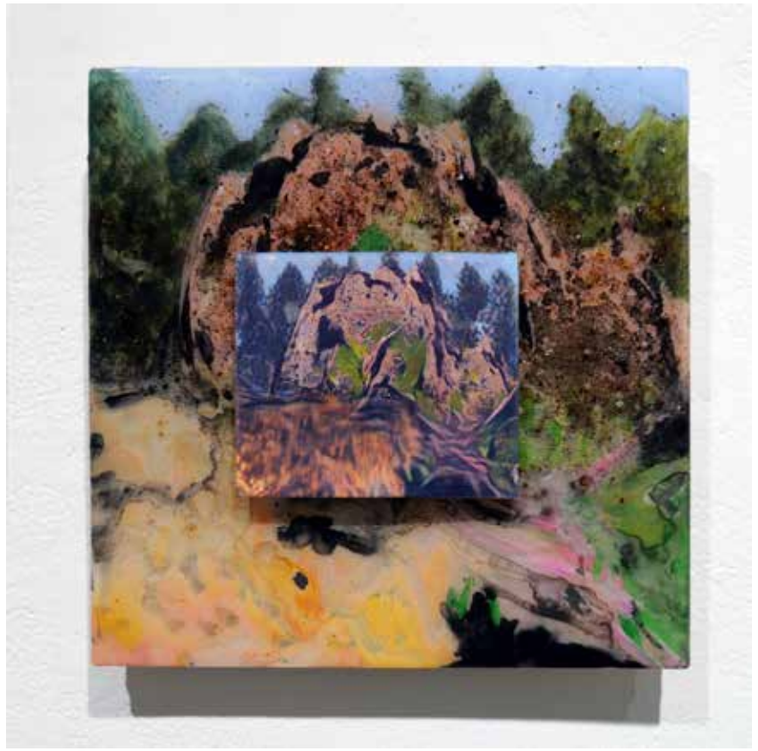
THEME 1: THE THREAT TO OUR WATERWAYS

Together, the artists weave a complex fabric of environmental impacts that must ultimately be understood together. To begin with, four artists focus specifically on the severe environmental degradation facing our waterways. Billy Friebele, an assistant professor at Loyola University Maryland who previously taught at MICA, has been working for 3 to 4 years on projects related to the Anacostia River in Washington, DC, and suburban Maryland. The river is well known for containing dangerous toxins and severe pollution, but it is also now the site of some successful clean-up efforts.

BILLY FRIE

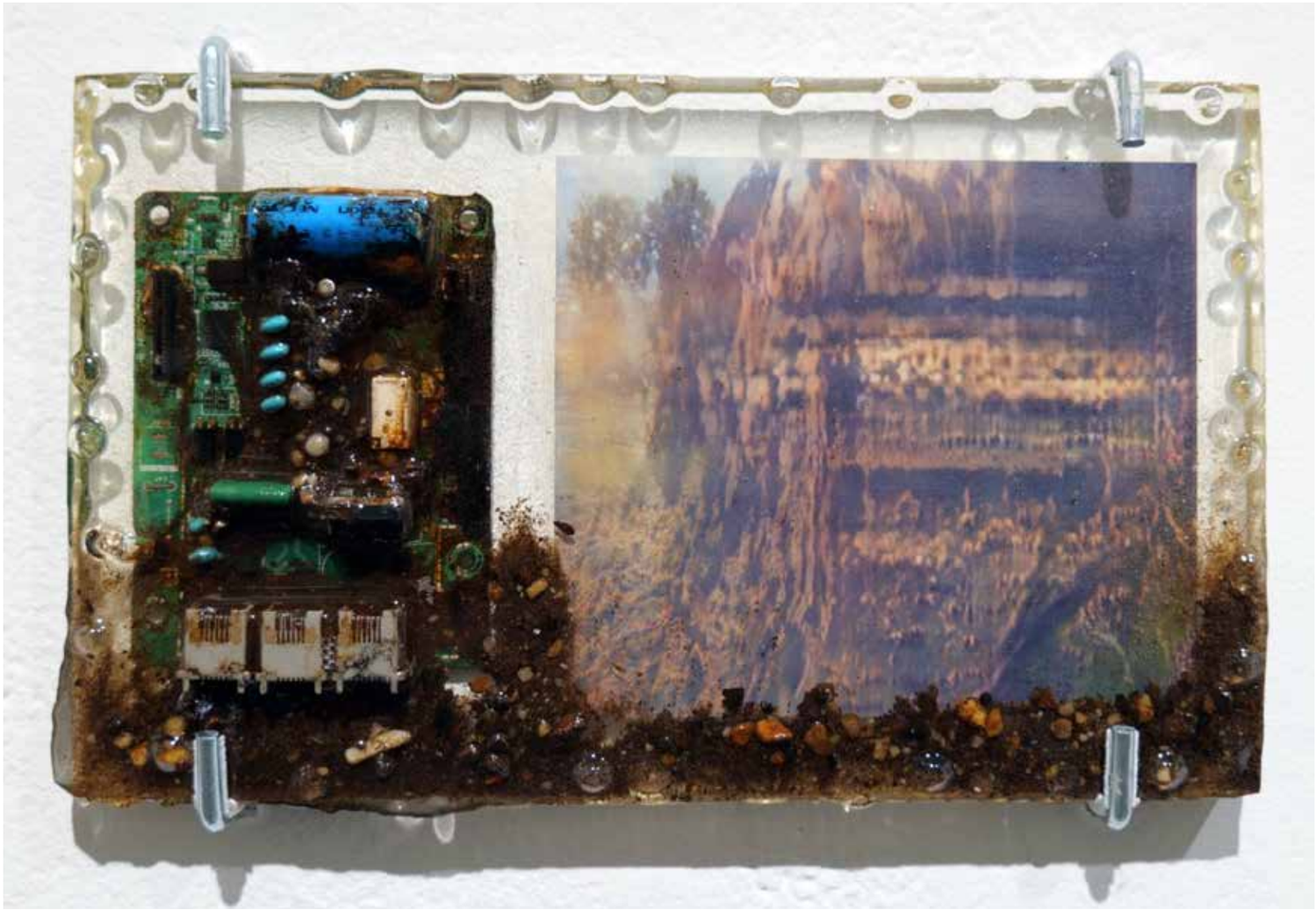
In his latest works, Friebele focuses on a printer that was thrown directly into the water, using it as a focal point for diverse outputs that explore the relationship between humans, technology, and the river. First, the exhibition features his underwater video of the Anacostia and its marine life, including fish, algae, and vines, interacting with the printer as a sort of micro-ecosystem. It also features complex, multi-layered images in which stills from the video were fed to an artificial intelligence (AI) and then placed over larger images that the artist created with paint and natural materials pulled directly from the river, including soil, water, and algae. Friebele also displays circuit boards salvaged from the water, still embedded with soil and detritus from the riverbed.

JY FRIEBELE



Friebele's work is a unique window into the complexity of the environmental crisis. "This technology that we use comes from beneath the surface of the earth," he explains. "We take it out by violent means, and when we're done with it, we throw it back into the earth." His work places a value on the non-human vantage point of fish and plants in examining the environmental consequences of human folly. But not content to stop with that, he also collaborates with a non-human actor, an AI, in creating his artwork.

This strategy also calls attention to the rise of AI in our world, which is already being acknowledged as another element in the polycrisis we face.[07] Although AIs likely pose multiple existential risks,[08] it's well-known that they use huge amounts of water to cool their systems, not to mention the massive carbon impact of the computing systems needed for them to function. [09] Friebele's work is not only a warning about the dangerous levels of pollution in the river, including highly toxic PCBs, but it also contains multiple reminders of our fraught relationship with technology and its impact on the natural world.



07 Soros, George. AI is at the root of the world's 'polycrisis'. *Financial Review*, June 12, 2023.

08 Thomas, Mike. 12 Risks and Dangers of Artificial Intelligence (AI). *Builtin*, March 1, 2024.

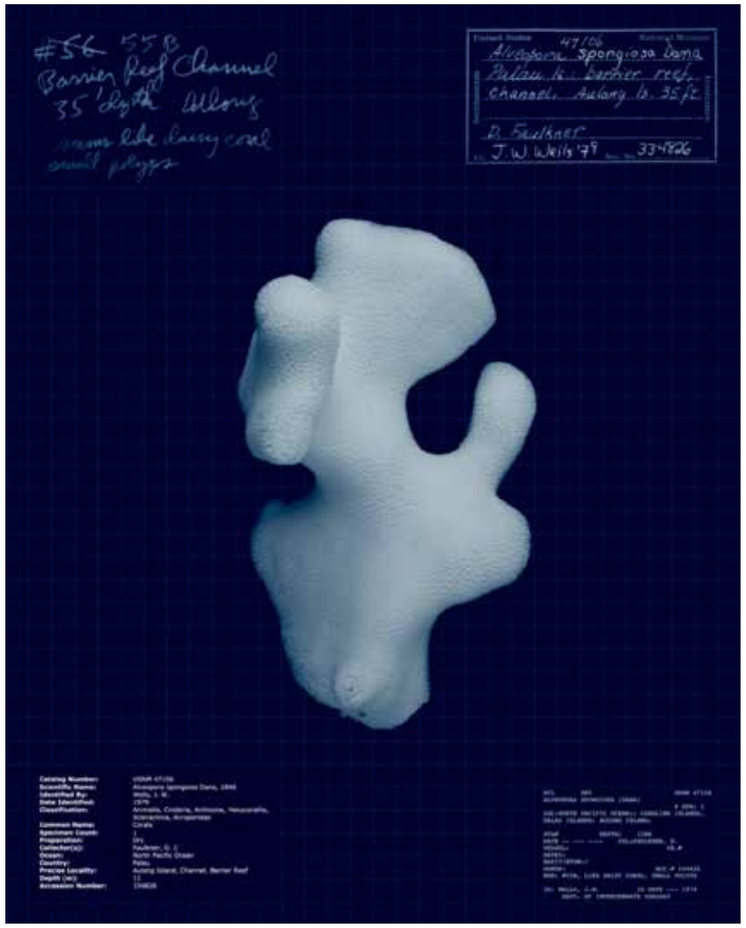
09 Berreby, David. As Use of A.I. Soars, So Does the Energy and Water It Requires. YaleEnvironment360, February 6, 2024.

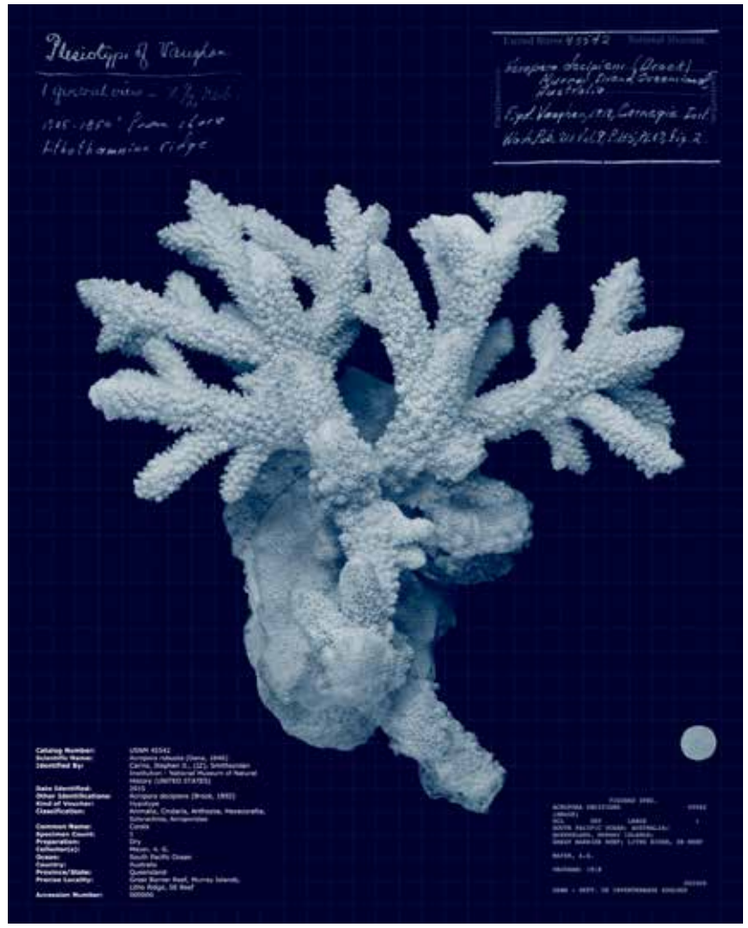
TODD FORS

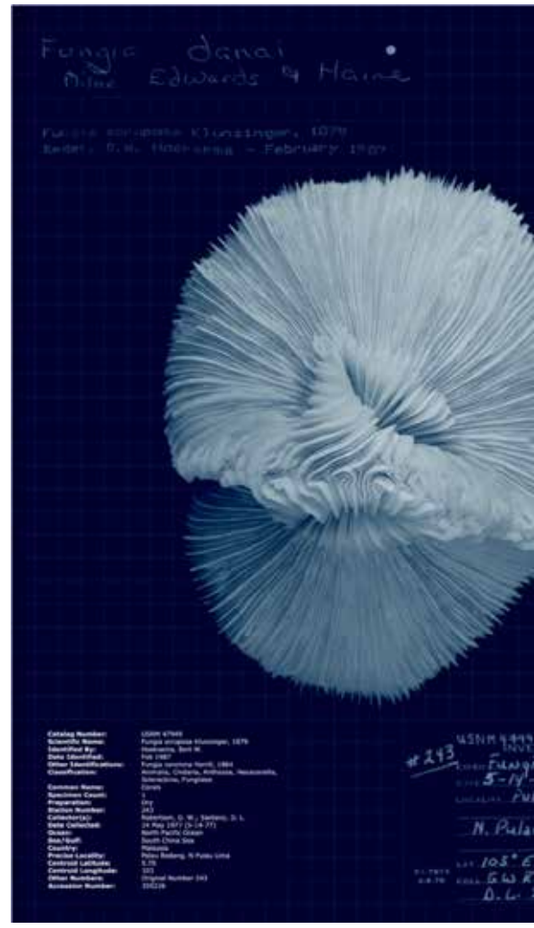
Todd Forsgren, who taught photography at MICA for years and now is an Assistant Professor of Art at Rocky Mountain College in Montana, included his work, Ex. Ex. Colonies, in the exhibition. This project is part of a larger, multichapter undertaking called Full Fathom Five, created over many years and focused on the myriad problems of the world's waterways.

In Ex. Ex. Colonies, Forsgren photographed samples of corals in the collections of the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC. The corals were collected at almost the same time as the advent of photography and also the first cyanotypes of algae created by Anna Atkins. [10] He chose to print them in the signature deep blue of cyanotypes, a color that is, of course, intimately associated with water.

OD FORSGREN

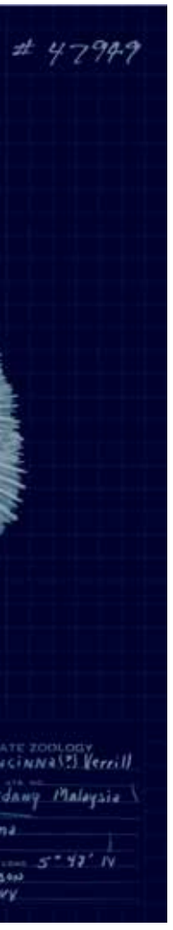






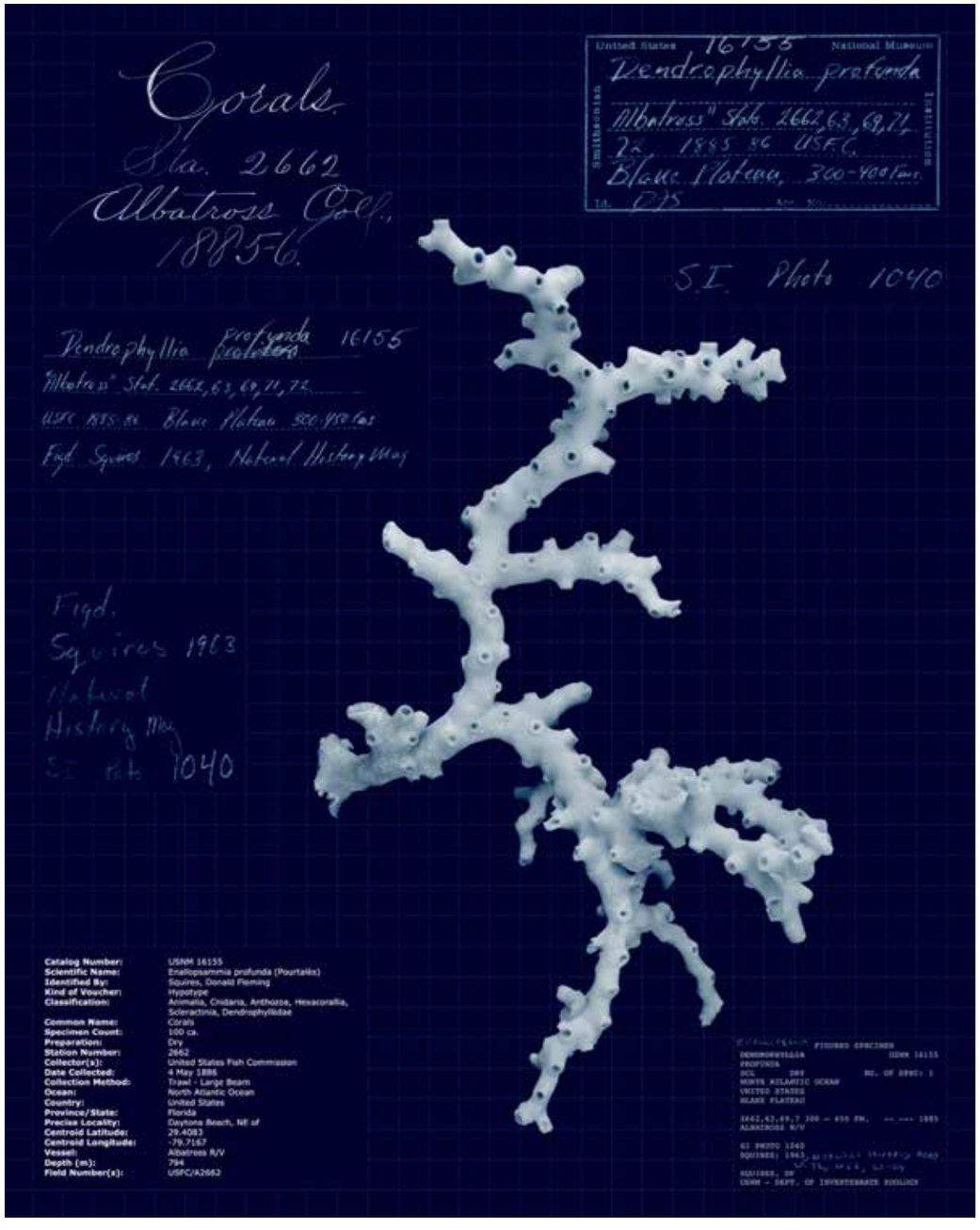
The samples were also collected at a time of colonial and scientific ambition for the United States. The word “colonies” has a double meaning related to the colonies of living coral themselves, but also to the colonial past that helped create the collection. The title also includes “Ex. Ex.” because these coral specimens suffered a sort of “double death” -- first in being ripped out of the ocean, and second as a result of serious ecological challenges, including acidification and rising temperatures, which have combined to produce unprecedented levels of coral bleaching in recent years.

10 **Lotzof, Kerry.** ***Anna Atkins’s cyanotypes: the first book of photographs.*** **The Natural History Museum.**



This strategy by Forsgren calls attention to the possible loss of species that rely on coral as their habitat. [11] In fact, approximately 25 percent of all marine species rely on coral reefs for their habitat , so the loss of coral reefs -- already a reality in many locations around the world -- would be truly catastrophic for the world.

The cyanotype images powerfully convey the remarkable beauty of these natural organisms. But at the same time, the images stir up a haunting feeling that we may be witnessing their transformation from a scientific record into a monument to loss and extinction. Overall, Todd's work is a unique primer on the interconnectedness of anthropogenic pollution, rapidly warming temperatures due to the climate crisis, and the advent of mass extinctions of species during the anthropocene.



11 Basic Information about Coral Reefs. United States Environmental Protection Agency.

GABRIELA BULISOVA & MARK ISAAC

Atlantika Member Gabriela Bulisova graduated from MICA's undergraduate and graduate photography programs and later taught photography at MICA and multiple other universities. Her husband and collaborator, Mark Isaac, also holds an MFA from MICA's graduate photo program. Both are now independent artists based in Prague, Czech Republic. In 2018-2019, the duo spent 10 months under the auspices of a Fulbright grant living in Southeastern Siberia near Lake Baikal, the world's oldest, deepest, most voluminous, and most biologically diverse Lake. [13] In their project titled The Second Fire, Bulisova and Isaac used experimental photography, three-channel video, writing, and music created from climate data in order to call attention to the growing environmental problems facing the Lake.

Although scientists believe the depths of the Lake are still relatively clean, Baikal now faces serious threats from increased development and tourism along its shores, which have caused serious pollution in shallow areas.[14] At the same time, rapidly rising temperatures in Siberia [15] threaten the entire ecosystem, from tiny organisms in the Lake to the world's only true freshwater seal. [16]

Lake Baikal contains one-fifth of all the world's freshwater, and at a time when over 2 billion people around the world face a lack of clean drinking water, [17] the preservation of the world's unique well of freshwater should be a top priority for all of us. Sadly, that is far from the case in Russia, where state officials are using the excuse of Western sanctions in response to the tragic war in Ukraine to reduce or remove environmental protections. [18]

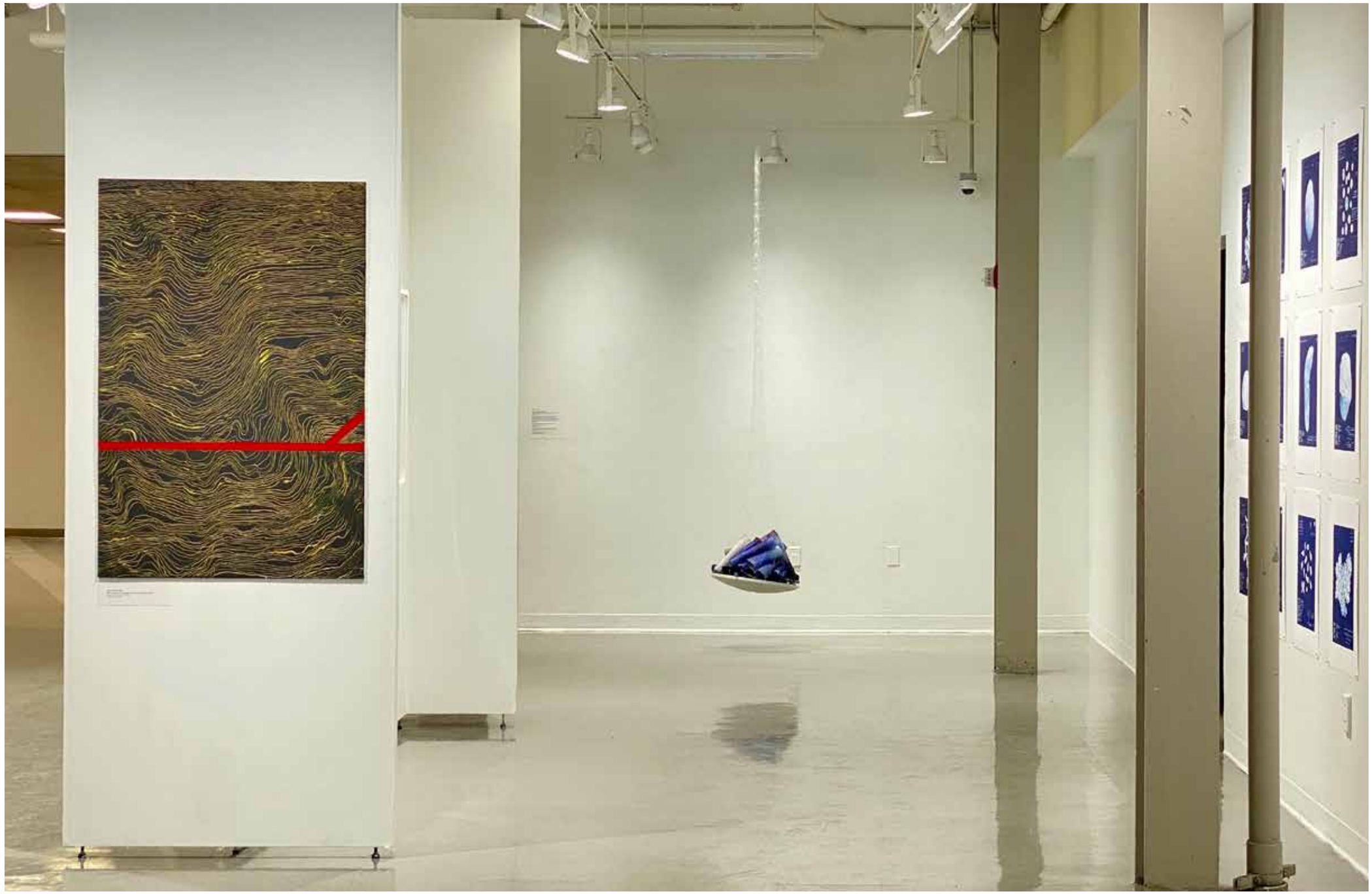
Bulisova and Isaac's semi-abstract, experimental photographs, often embracing complex layers and reflections, universalize the subject matter and remind us all that we have a stake in Baikal's health. And at the same time, they bring to the forefront the links between war and environmental devastation -- links that are increasingly prominent around the globe. In fact, academics are increasingly pointing to the connections between genocide and ecocide and suggesting that the study of these links may help us avoid both in the future. [19]

One of their videos, not included in this exhibition, is devoted to depicting the emerging threats to the Lake that can create a "feedback effect," rapidly accelerating warming and environmental damage. These include: the melting of permafrost, rampant wildfires, widespread legal and illegal logging, and dwindling flow of the Lake's tributaries. Scientists know these threats are approaching a tipping point more quickly than current climate modeling anticipates. In this way, the duo's project about Lake Baikal showcases the multiple threats to the Lake and also shines a spotlight on how they may combine to produce catastrophic outcomes unless we act now.

Untitled 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 & 6
***(from the series The Second Fire),* 2020**
Archival digital inkjet prints, 24 x 36 inches
Courtesy of the artists

THEME 2: RECYCLING AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The works of Sue Wrbican and Yam Chew Oh both call attention in particular to the unsustainable nature of our economy -- and at the same time link in important ways to concerns about our waterways.



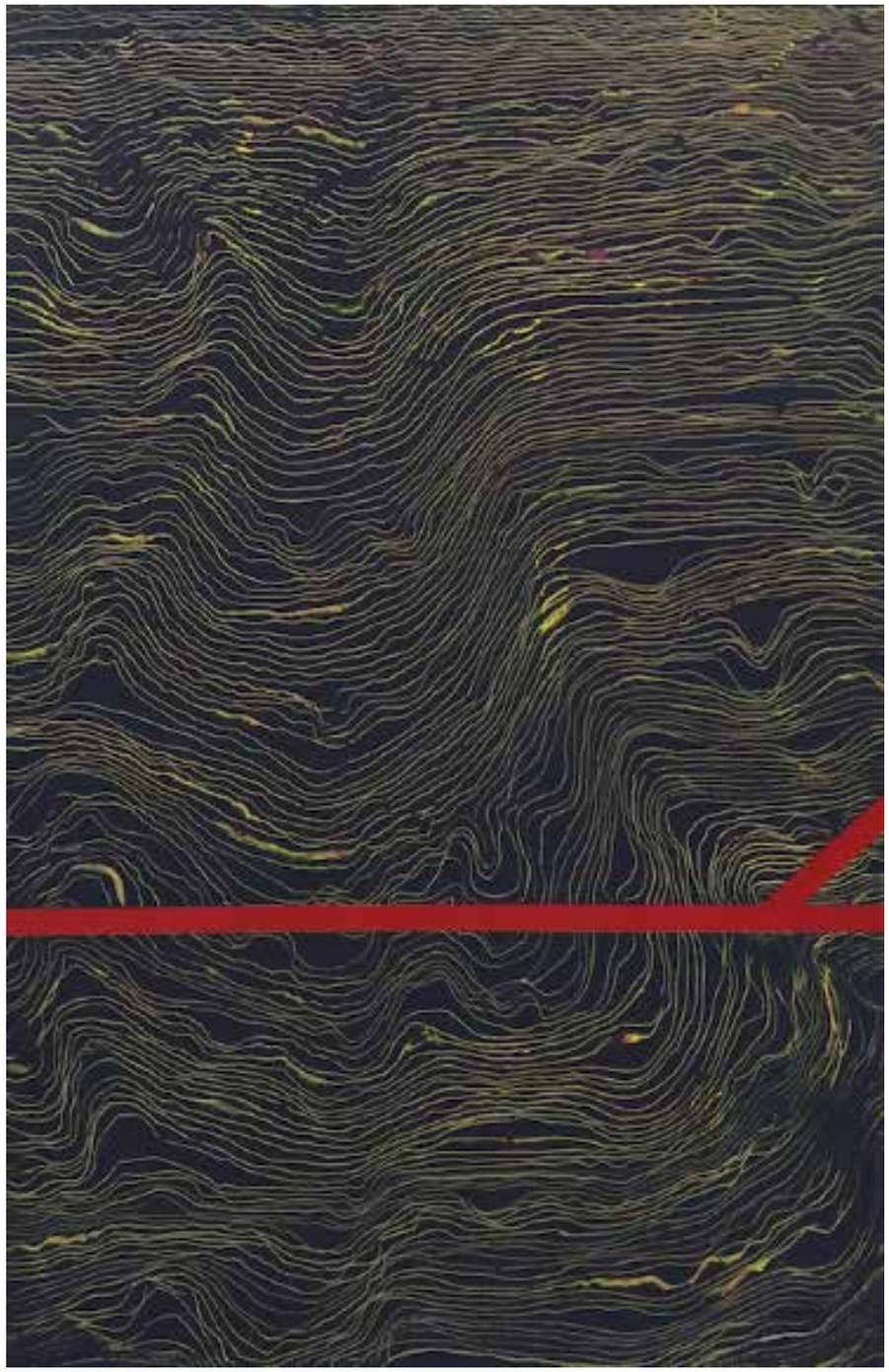
W OH

YAM CHEW OH

Yam Chew Oh, long affiliated with MICA, is currently an international admissions counselor at the Baltimore art school. His process-driven painting, “We’ll Cross the Bridge When We Get There,” is a reference to Robert Frost’s poem, “The Road Not Taken,” in which Frost writes,

> Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—I took the one less traveled by, And that has made all the difference.

The painting, reminiscent of a topographic map, contains a bold, red pathway that suddenly splits, suggesting alternative futures. To Oh, both the poem and the painting it inspired center on “the issues of choice and action, not dissimilar to those we encounter in fighting climate change.” Thus, the path also suggests the trace left by our individual and collective human actions.



His sculpture, “A Convenient Matter,” is a personal response to the excessive use of plastic water bottles during COVID-19 lockdown in Singapore, where he was born. He believes this challenge results from a “culture of convenience.” Around the world, 1 million of these bottles are purchased every minute, [20] and Americans send 38 billion plastic water bottles to the landfill every year -- a staggering 1500 per second. [21]

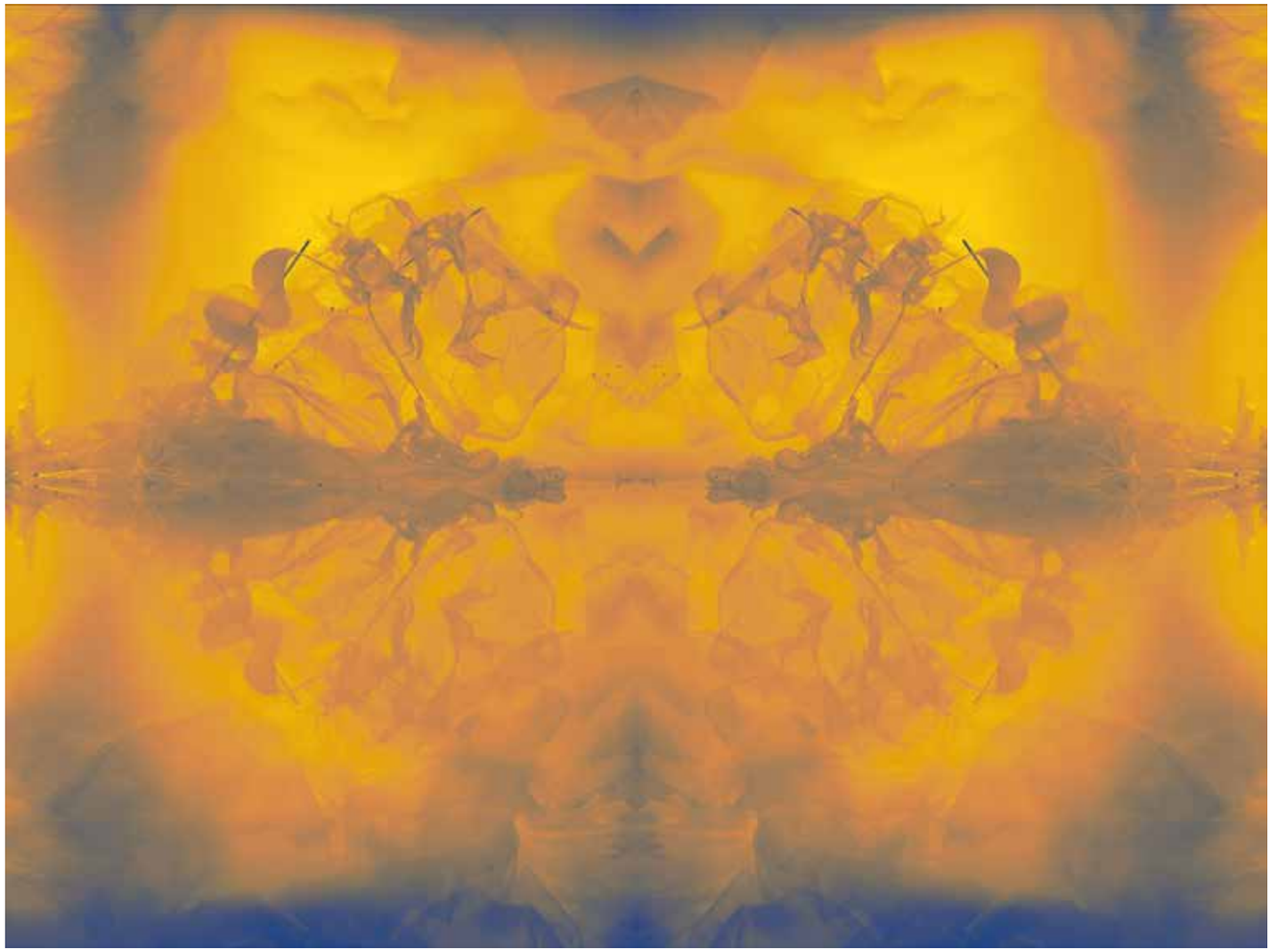
Oh’s inkjet prints of water bottles glowing in his kitchen at night are printed on second-hand vellum, allowed to roll while they dry, and secured with a single staple. The blue paper rolls might allude to water itself, to oceanic creatures, or to rolled incense offered to the dead in Singapore’s Taoist culture. They are contained by a porous and torn recycled Christmas tree netting, a material that alludes to the death of trees. And this plastic netting is in the shape of a large water drop, or even a teardrop, another reference to the losses we are experiencing in the natural world.

Oh has commented that his use of packaging material in this exhibition is associated with the ideas of “protection and containment.” Perhaps we are meant to think of the “protected” feelings associated with consumption and the many ways in which it makes our contemporary life more comfortable. But “containment” also suggests constraint -- anything from the restrictions imposed at the time of COVID lockdown, to more lasting and threatening restrictions on human rights that are increasingly more commonplace in many parts of the world, to limitations on our own thinking. Isn’t it the case, Oh seems to be asking, that we are too cautious and constrained in our response to the environmental polycrisis?

Sue Wrbican, Professor and Director of Photography at George Mason University's School of Art, previously also taught photography at MICA. Her photographic work at the Pinkard Gallery is a representation of her frustration about packaging material used to transport consumer products, most of which is not recycled.[22] In fact, in Wrbican's mind, the idea that most plastics are recyclable is a myth created by the oil industry to acclimate us to these highly damaging materials. In 2019 she started saving plastic and cardboard packaging in her studio, using them to create maquettes that form otherworldly seascapes, and photographing them digitally. This strategy also links her work to the artists focused more overtly on waterways. "In creating the sculptural forms, I envision them as surreal futures for objects that once had meaning, drifting away in unpredictable, mysterious currents," Wrbican says.

WRBICAN

SUE WRBICAN



Her large-scale photo titled “Before the Ghost” was specifically inspired by Lars Von Trier’s film, *Melancholia*, and her realization that, “if Earth vanished, all life and its histories would also vanish.” Some of the images, such as those from the “Mysterious Drift” series, are more abstract. Others, from the “A Ship Split” series and the “All Hands to the Crude Gathering” series, are more representational. Wrbican imagines that the sculptural forms she brought to life in her studio are “reforming themselves into their own regatta, or a parade of ships with nowhere to go.”

The works of Yam Chew Oh and Sue Wrbican are lessons in interconnectedness and the possibility of new beginnings. They not only question our lifestyle choices and dependence on consumer culture, but they reveal the damaging consequences of that culture both on land and in water. In making recycled and found material a key building block of their art, they inspire us to adopt a new and more ecologically aware posture in our own lives.

ME 3:

ESTS
ISK

A final section of the exhibition focuses on the world's forests, which are facing serious threats from wildfires and other sources, but may also play a role in reducing the impact of climate change.

THEME 3:

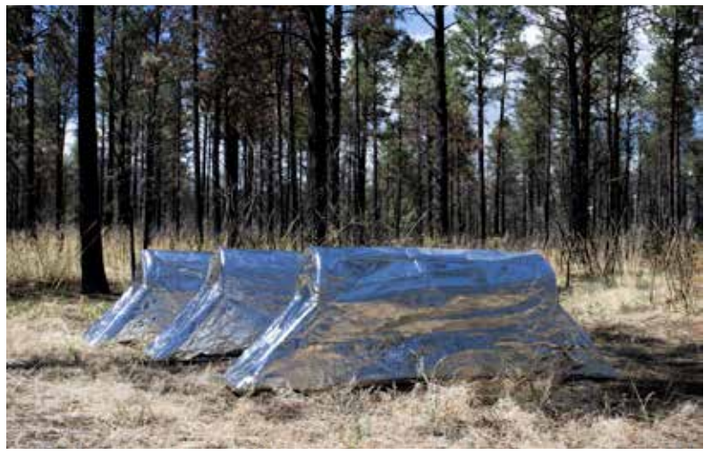
FORESTS AT RISK

KEHOE

KATIE KEHOE

Katie Kehoe is a multidisciplinary artist who graduated from the Mount Royal College of Art at MICA and currently teaches as an assistant professor at Florida State University in Tallahassee. Her artwork focuses on socially engaged performance and site-specific installation, and she creates "survival architecture," objects and wearables to use as props in performances and as elements in her site-specific installations.

For the Pinkard Gallery exhibit, she included one of her recent creations, a large portable wildfire shelter created during a residency at the Santa Fe Art Institute. The sculpture's shiny exterior is aesthetically pleasing, like some high-end camping product, but the viewer is immediately jarred by the realization that we, too, may need this or some similar strategy for protection from increasingly frequent fire, heat, and smoke threats around us.



During her residency, Kehoe installed this and similar shelters in the landscape of the recent Calf Canyon and Hermits Peak wildfire east of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The fire was the most serious in state history, destroying more than 340,000 acres of woodlands.[23] Photographic documentation of these installations was also included in the *Climate for Change* exhibit, along with identifying GPS coordinates that might allow viewers to find the locations on their own. "My objective is to engage the public to reflect on specific sites in relation to climate change and extreme weather events," she explains.

Her work makes clear that wildfires are not only about the destruction of our precious forests, which capture heat and remove carbon from the atmosphere. As wildfires grow in numbers and intensity, the impact on our health is increasingly a focus. One study soon to be published finds that increased wildfire smoke due to climate change may lead to more than 20,000 additional deaths per year in the United States.[24] New research also reveals that wildfire smoke affects the health of unborn babies, reduces the quality of learning in schools, and negatively impacts the economy, including worker earnings.[25] Kehoe's compelling and disconcerting work forces us to personally confront our own fragility and uncertainty in the face of accelerating climate-related threats.

Portable Wildfire Shelter, 35.70642°N, 105.40669°W, Santa Fe National Forest, NM, 2023
Photo documentation of a site-specific installation, 20" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

Portable Wildfire Shelter, 35.70672°N, 105.40667°W, Santa Fe National Forest, NM, 2023
Photo documentation of a site-specific installation, 20" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

Portable Wildfire Shelters, 35.63812°N, 105.42593°W, Santa Fe National Forest, NM, 2023
Photo documentation of a site-specific installation, 20" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

Portable Wildfire Shelters, 35.65349°N, 105.42825°W, Santa Fe National Forest, NM, 2023
Photo documentation of a site-specific installation, 20" x 30"
Courtesy of the artist

GABRIELA BULISOVA

& MARK ISAAC

Gabriela Bulisova and Mark Isaac also shared work that explores the multiple roles of trees in the climate crisis as part of their joint project A Tree for the Forest.

Like Kehoe, Bulisova focuses on the increasing threat posed by wildfires. “The fire season is longer, more land is burned, and fires are more destructive than before,” [26] she notes. “Each of these events releases more carbon dioxide, only worsening climate change.”

Her practice involves exposing an entire roll of medium format film as a single landscape affected by wildfires. She then selectively burns the negatives to further accentuate the impact of fires and prints them as large-scale panoramas that demand our attention -- and our actions. Many of her images were captured at the sites of extremely serious fire events in Cyprus and the Czech Republic. Both countries recently experienced the worst wildfires in their history. [27]

Isaac’s work focuses on a more hopeful aspect of the climate crisis -- the recent scientific discovery that trees communicate extensively underground through fungal networks. The new findings, originally made by a Canadian scientist, Suzanne Simard, were at first dismissed by other researchers. [28] But later her discovery that trees share warnings of danger and vital nutrients, such as carbon and water, was replicated by other scientists. It is now also widely accepted that “mother trees” support smaller, younger trees in their vicinity. [29] Because forests remove carbon from the atmosphere, these findings will help us improve the health of our forests, and in turn, reduce the impact of the climate crisis.

Untitled 1, 2, 3 & 4
***(details from the series A Tree for the Forest),* 2021**
Archival digital inkjet prints, 24 x 24 inches
Courtesy of the artists

Isaac approaches this topic by making panoramic photos of the crowns of trees, using them as a stand-in for the roots that lie below the soil. The panoramic camera makes many "mistakes" as it tries to knit together the branches, but these "accidents" help depict the lively communication that trees are engaging in without our knowledge. In Isaac's images, the trees vibrate with energy and may even be thought to sing, dance, and cavort with each other. But this lively exuberance is tempered by the stark black and white silhouettes in these images, which hint at the danger trees face from wildfires, disease, drought, and other sources. This treatment allows the images to enter into a robust dialogue with Bulisova's prints, supplying a more complex and complete vision of the role of trees in the world's ecosystems today.

In the Pinkard Gallery exhibition, due to space constraints, details from several panoramas focused on tree communication were exhibited. The full project also includes large-scale panoramic images, a video with original music composed by tapping a screen in the shape of the depicted trees, and selected artifacts recovered from the scenes of devastating wildfires.