

Sustainability and Public Good

The exhibition title, *Sustainability and Public Good*, brings to mind the urgent issue of shifting the downward spiral of climate change through sustainability efforts, in tandem with the idea of “public good” as an intention to move us toward social justice. The responses to the topic offer a glimpse of current attitudes presented through painting, sculpture, video, and installation work created by MFA candidates from California art programs. As a viewer and co-curator with Cal State LA Fine Arts Gallery Director Mika Cho, I can’t help but look at the work of the twenty artists and attempt to find some understanding of this extreme, political moment. “Sustainability” is commonly linked to sun and wind vs oil and coal, or some stylish water bottle, recycling or hybrid cars. Here, to sustain is also posited in longing to keep faith in human potential. And, just hearing the term “public good,” a duality is formed that creates a surge of hope for the optimist, and a fearful prediction for the cynical.

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Many of the works in the show balance on these dual expressions. Mariah Conner’s glass forms contain trash ranging from plastic bottle tops to tampon applicators that have been chewed up by fish and the sea, then spit back onto the beach. Stacks of hand-blown glass pods housing the colorful plastic shards resemble the tumbled, smooth stones that we find on the beach. Hovering over the floor-bound installation, we are forced to teeter between seeing these as beautiful magic candies, and being conscious of the horrific reality of all that junk we use and pitch all day long.

In a related fashion, Meganne Rosen’s *Slough*, attracts us with shiny gold within the crisp, shed skin of what appears to be an enormous snake. Any metaphoric value of shedding, as in a spiritual transformation, is usurped by the delicate, translucent skin stuffed with gold sheets of paper like so much crumbled cash hidden in a mattress. Again, the contradictory messages leave us with an unnerving set of choices when we relate it to our own interactions with what we habitually call “the natural world.”

The grandness of the world is presented by Emily Budd whose mirrored *Pangaea* glows fluorescent red from behind. This important detail changes everything, and redirects the viewer from the reflective surface, to the emerging glow and the portrayal of the tectonic shifts that took place 270 million years ago. Our relationship to mirrors, as our narcissistic viewing plane, is cut with the shape of the great supercontinent, forcing us to contemplate our smallness.

Julia Pontes also depicts our relationship to the earth in a selection of pigment prints about her family home in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Her works respond to the destruction of open pit mines, and in particular, the November 5, 2015 catastrophic collapse of a mining dam that sent mud and



Emily Budd, *Pangaea*, 2017, Mirrored Acrylic, Plywood and Paint, 76x48x1 inches, California College of the Arts

mining waste enveloping towns throughout the region.¹ Julia begins her statement saying that, “Mining is so deeply rooted in the Brazilian State of Minas Gerais, that it runs in the blood of almost every single citizen – including my own.” In this, one begins to hear the complexity of a life well-worn, and the force of a social shift as the land is worn out.

Melancholy like this weaves in and out of the exhibition, but the bold visuals of the art consistently override it. Fragmentations like JinSeok Choi’s body parts mixed with weathered furniture elements remind me of the conclusion to Kurt Vonnegut’s 1952 novel, *Player Piano*. After we destroy everything, Vonnegut supposes that the first thing we will do is to put the remnants back together again, not necessarily to fix anything in particular, but rather to show that our impulse to create is perhaps as strong, maybe stronger, than our impulse to destroy.

Charisse Pearlina Weston’s layers of imagery on transparencies quite literally reconstruct her previous artworks as her process. She explains that, “Materials re-articulate themselves through

¹ Bruno Weis, “Dam collapse in Brazil destroys towns and turns river into muddy wasteland,” [Greenpeace International](#) November 17, 2015

decay of their prior selves.” One artwork decays and breaks down, yet becomes the source material for the next piece in her studio production. Philosophically, it pushes the idea of sustainability as a metaphor for the continual transformation of the self and our surroundings.

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Ruxue Zhang’s interpretations of the universe, proceed with a combination of scientific apparatus (the telescope), in combination with painting that responds to many types of images of “outer space.” For both these artists, an intuitive process seems to align with reason in a desire to relay an experience to the rest of us.

Michael Roman’s drawings take the grit of urban living and are so elegantly drawn and composed that the portraits uplift with a spiritual clarity. He offers us imagination and symbols so that the hate we have come to know too well, is replaced with an authentic vision of something higher. He is looking for a “manifestation of divine beauty” as he calls it. And he finds it.



Michael Roman, *Super-Predator as Pantokrator*
#LambInWolfsClothing, 2017, Charcoal over Pen and Ink,
18x26 inches, California State University, Northridge

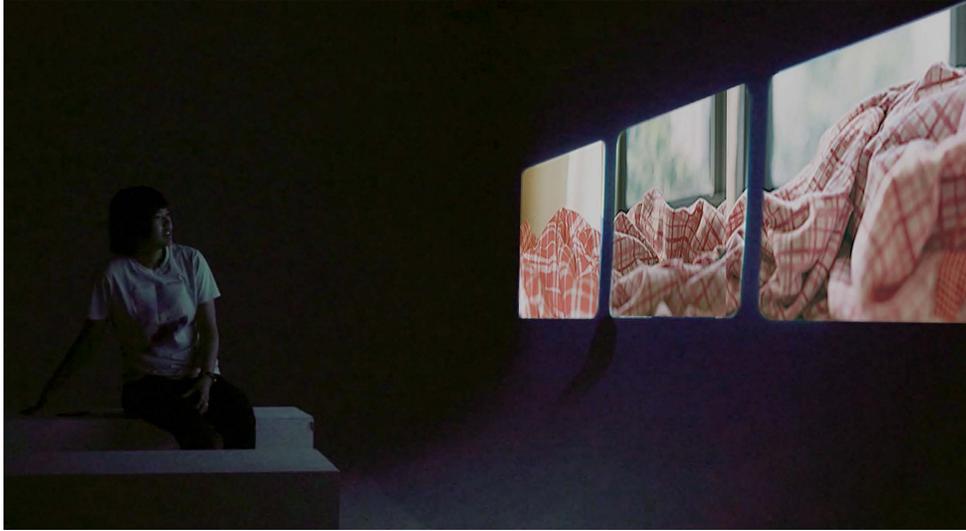
Many of the artists point to memory in order to locate reveries for truth. Hannah Varamini understands that 2016 and 2017 were so impactful to our psyches that the ticking clock was replaced by physical space (or a void). Hannah's somber first-person narration is inspired by Simone Weil, intertwining a history of individuals and heartless governments. This narrative poem is heard in profound contrast to the video-projected news headlines with their cold, clinical aesthetics, regardless of the severity of their political content. Her poem is a reminder that our personal actions are in fact relevant.

As in Varamini's video projection, an overarching theme in the exhibit is a contemplation of people and ideas left behind. In the work of Hande Sever, this loss takes on a physical form: the earthen mound as both burial and revival. Her father's library of books, banned during the 1980 Turkish military coup, were buried in their backyard as a way to protect him. Her installation and performance present the audio narration of the books to be heard by laying on the soil.



Hande Sever, *And the Iron Curtain Fell on His Library*, 2017, Installation, California Institute of the Arts

The sustaining endurance of thought also features prominently in Coffee Kang's video installation. The train as a metaphor for time's continual passing is used as a framework for the more potent expression of memory: landscapes created with changing shapes of her bedsheets, a history of those used since her childhood and presently. Autobiography is a passageway that inspires many of the artworks in the exhibit, and in particular family histories provide the foundation or muse. An installation like John Wu's *Learning Art and Art Learning Society*, presents a building block of simple, wood structures painted in the three primary colors. We are inclined to make quick assessments of the content, but it unfolds through the detail components as a tender and empathic familial narrative.



Coffee Kang, *Into the Corner of Time*, 2017, Single Channel Video Installation
California Institute of the Arts

The contemplation of loss is a subject in Patricia Chow's work, where cultural intersections include her interest in loss of place and language. Her studies in ancient languages influence the resulting imagery in her paintings. She explains that her title, *Outremer*, refers to several translations including "overseas," its reference to French territories, and by extension the nuclear weapons testing in the South Pacific during the 60s and 70s. Tahiti for example was "exposed to 500 times the maximum accepted levels of radiation."² Alexandre Dorriz approaches these intersections as a collision course. In each of these cases, we are reminded that we are on the threshold of re-defining what it is to be an individual in a world where our essence is very rooted to our family histories.



Patricia Chow, *Outremer*, 2017, Oil Pigment
Stick on Canvas, 60x48 inches, Claremont
Graduate School

² Angelique Chrisafis, "French nuclear tests 'showered vast area of Polynesia with radioactivity'." The Guardian July 3, 2013



Alexandre Dorriz, *1986 Nissan 300ZX Hatch, or How transnationalism is never the sum of diaspora (Daughter VII)*, 2016-17, Metal, Glass, Rubber, Fiberglass, Archival Inkjet Print, 54x44 inches, University of Southern California

Where many works embrace personal responses to environmental events and its relationship to social justice, Stacey Alexander's carefully rendered *House Hunters International* and Ricki Dwyer's *Lone Palm* employ a humorous form of cynicism to comment on our current state of miserable affairs. Dwyer's installation mixes an irreverent palm tree spray painted directly on the wall that peeks from behind the op art weaving.

Terry Kelly's painting, *Self Portrait with Low Online Rating* presents the struggle with an elusive yet massive enemy, the internet. I'm reminded of the "Nosedive" episode on the UK-originated show, *Black Mirror*. In the episode and in Terry's painting, every social interaction gives way to a waterfall of anonymous judgement. His multiple self-portraits as screen captures are balanced by the larger one that is personable, and more human with its casual pose. Unlike

images viewed on our phones and computers, we seem to agree in the reality in a painting by virtue of the human hand present in the strokes.

Given the enormity of the natural and human-made disasters worldwide, it is not surprising that there are no deck chairs to rearrange here. Instead there is a contemplative and bold intention. This is where we are in the process of looking for the “public good.”

Andrea Welton’s approach to landscape requires her work to be large so that the gestures are painted with physical strength. You’d be missing something if you did not imagine the action behind the resulting canvas. k. Flint’s *IceBridge (Black)*, though stylistically miles apart from Andrea’s work, seems motivated by the same desire to feel and touch landscape. Here, chemical reactions in the process are experiments to speak about the disappearance of the Arctic ice due to human impact on the environment. Zara Kuredjiiian’s sculpture, *someday*, is a cast concrete pillar holding a small bowl of soil. She states that “through unseen performances of labor and repetition, I use the struggle of my body as a vehicle for understanding...the effects of industrialization and cultural trauma.” One can imagine all three of these artists’ processes as rituals to conjure their interior connection to the earth.

Despite the fact that so much of the work is morose or sobering, when walking through the space, there is an undeniable sense of determination and presence in each piece. The jurors³ are to be thanked for making this selection of the best of the work submitted from MFA programs. I would also like to think that these are representative of a zeitgeist in the air. Given the enormity of the natural and human-made disasters worldwide, it is not surprising that there are no deck chairs to rearrange here. Instead there is a contemplative and bold intention. This is where we are in the process of looking for the “public good.”

- Kim Abeles 2018

³ The 2018 CAA's MFA Exhibition, *Sustainability and Public Good*, includes the current MFA students' work from 11 different MFA programs in northern and southern California. Twenty MFA students were carefully selected by five invited eminent Los Angeles galleries: Corrina Peipon of The Pit & The Pit II, Eden Phair of HONOR FRASER, HK Zamani of PØST, Mary Leigh Cherry of Cherry and Martin, and Peter Mendenhall of Peter Mendenhall Gallery.