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Can art change minds where science can’t?

Art reflects back the crisis we’ve created. Simon Hennessey: Sunset over Metropolis

“Artists are shape-shifters and in this there is a perennial, ferocious hope; the hope which transforms, which whispers of possibility, of vision, of change and radical healing. Existing art about climate change has this characteristic, acknowledging the truth and severity of the issue but also affirming within it something of grace, seeing the starlight within the night.” – Jay Griffiths, 2009

How can art communicate to a sceptical public the current state of climate? Scientists agree human influence is paramount in explaining climate change, but the public at large is not drawn naturally to science education. With this in mind, art’s power to target the emotions of an audience could be particularly effective.

Metro Gallery in Melbourne has been running an exhibition, “Climate Change: The Wonder and the Dread”. We are investigating audience response to the art works (and whether the art persuades in a manner not otherwise achieved through intellectual means), and the processes involved in the art making itself.

We think insights communicated in images and metaphor might contribute to the development and implementation of environmental policy by communicating in ways that have not been achieved by science communication.

The artists in the exhibition responded to the idea of climate change in diverse ways.
Antarctica Stormie Mill

Stormie Mill’s vast spread of blue with ice fringes at its base is spectacular in its impact. The melting ice is the subject and yet the first response is one of wonder at the beauty perceived in what is indeed catastrophic. The painter produced what was in some ways an abstract painting (titled, “Antarctica”), but it simultaneously brings to mind the experience of melting ice on a vast scale. The depth and allure of the blue expanse seduces the viewer and leads inevitably towards reflection.
Vincent Fantauzzo, in contrast to Mill’s engagement with water, creates a painting of fire. It is fire unlike any fire one has ever seen: it seems to embody the concept of fire itself. It is intoxicating in its drawing power – one wants to enter it, even knowing its deadly power. Of course fire was, we are reminded, stolen from the gods by Prometheus to aid us as functioning humans. Its beauty and its terror is immanently embodied in a land that human beings continue to misuse and abuse. The fire becomes, of our own making, a brutal avenger. And so the thoughts around the painting emerge as groups that surround it at the exhibition discuss its impact on them.
Inferno Daniel Smith

Daniel Smith’s “Inferno” deals directly with a fire that is in the process of destroying homes and lives. This painting in the super-realist mode shows that the actual event of fire belongs by nature in “the super real”.

End of the Line ELK

Evolutionary knowledge is the perspective drawn on by ELK. In painting man’s evolution from the ape, he simply leaves a long space after man. Man does not evolve beyond himself as he becomes defined in history as ultimately self-destructive.
Each of these responses to climate change deals with different aspects of it and yet creates debate amongst their audience that leads to, we believe, greater awareness of how we are involved in a world that is becoming increasingly warmer which is having dire effects.

Furthermore these paintings remind us that climate change is due to the way we use our natural resources and how we live with little concern for future generations.

Michel Peck’s “The Land Stood Empty” is a multiplicity of “windows” with different parts of the human body erratically categorised. It is a view of our own vivisection and our refusal to learn that harmony and unity is the way to understand our ontology and its place in nature itself. It’s what humans do – we are always prepared to make sense of the world via inappropriate systems.
As JKB Fletcher reminds us in his “subject”, the body, our body, is not in charge of nature to tame and destroy through ignorance or greed, but, instead, it is of nature itself. And thus on a woman’s body he paints the drought inflicted land.
I Remember the Bay Deborah Walker
Deborah Walker’s “I Remember the Bay” and John Olsen’s “Popping Blue Bottles” might be called “memory” paintings as each presents landscapes from their pasts. Olson shows us what we have to lose in his rendition of sea, sand and sky. Walker, in investigating the poetics of space, travels back in time to a childhood fraught with both pain and promise. Her work heralds destruction whilst reminding us of our human capacities to make connections and to create knowledge.
John Forrest’s “Somewhere over the Rainbow” and Ben Howe’s “Interval” deal more with allegory and utilise either myth or philosophy to enact the dread and the wonder of climate change. Forrest dramatises the Yellow Brick Rd from The Wizard of Oz, and has Dorothy turning her back on the American dream that was fuelled inappropriately by the world’s natural resources. The road of yellow bricks in the foreground focuses on broken dreams as it contrasts with a modern city drenched in pollution, presented here in the same hues as the road.
Interval Ben Howe

Ben Howe created archetypal figures in clay and placed them in a crowd of aimless, chaotic walking. The existential angst of relentless seeking is evident. But this extraordinary painting of people (yet people as clay) moving somewhere and nowhere has in its midst one figure that confronts the viewer from its centre. This is where the eye focuses and it is to an invitation to take action, to merge as a community – to take responsibility for the world that we have in our care.

Can art be a problem solver? We believe it has a part to play in alerting the human imagination, in concert with an emotional response to images, to debate and therefore to give further voice to what we can all do to protect the natural world from further unnecessary destruction.

This exhibition proposes that art can change human consciousness in revolutionary ways and as such has a place in human history as an agent of change. We may prefer to affix dark sun glasses to hide behind, as well as avert the glare of our reality; but as Simon Hennessey portrays in his painting, “Sunset Over Metropolis”, the glass reflects back to us and on us a world in a state of crisis.

As Ben Howe’s central figure demands: it is time for action.