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Seeing come between dread and poetry

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🎨 Multidisciplinary

Peak temperature at 49 ° C in Australia, drought in India, likely hit points in the melting ice in Greenland, one of the news becomes the chronicle of a planet that breaks up with global warming. We have now entered the era of the Anthropocene, a new geological era marked by the telluric impact of human activity on Earth. The stratigraphic surveys and the meetings of the International Union of Geological Sciences on the Anthropocene did not have a priori vocation to enthrall the crowds and mobilize the creativity of the artists. And yet, it is necessary to note the speed with which this concept is affirmed in the public discourse, the humanities and also the world of the art. By affirming and objectifying the consciousness of a rupture, the Anthropocene becomes like a mirror in which other ways of perceiving and inhabiting the world are reflected. The exhibition at the Harn Museum in Florida is an exploration of new sensibilities developed by artists to invest what looks more and more like a new planet.

Couples pose in front of their home in a slightly stiff and primed posture. The context is less so since all are immersed to varying degrees in the water that floods their home. We are in England, Haiti and South Africa. These three photos, from the *Drowning World* series by South African artist [Gideon Mendel](#), open the exhibition and set the tone in a context and on a subject where reluctance must be lifted. Florida may be one of the most vulnerable states in the world to global warming, including sea level rise and floods, but there are still many uncomfortable truths and eyes to unravel. Global warming can be seen as a global phenomenon and distant, but it will introduce one day at home seems to warn us this series.

The first part of the exhibition, entitled "Deluge", focuses on the hydrosphere and the cryosphere. Glaciers liquefy in paintings by Brazilian artist **Sandra Cinto**. While opposite the gallery stands a huge glacier in Patagonia that gets lost in the clouds of altitude. On the moraine, now open, a small tree is already emerging. The photo of **Frank Thiel** captures a discrepancy of times when a massive glacier, but in suspension, alongside an insignificant tree but promise of a forest to come. Geological processes are in progress, everything is already in transformation. In a long video of the Austrians [Nicole Six & Paul Petritsch](#), a man tries to dig with the pickaxe the frozen lake on which he stands until the ice gives way and the water engulfs him. Further, the images of [Laurencia Strauss](#) show waves relentlessly erasing the phrase many times rewritten by the artist on the sand: "Do not Ask Do not Tell" ("Do not ask, do not tell"). The setting is posed: imminent threat on one side and blindness on the other in an apnea development model.

The following two sequences on raw materials and consumption are tackling little by little and in a sensible and convincing way to reveal the dead ends of our development model and its consequences on the lithosphere. The Congolese artist **Sammy Baloji**, in his *Mémoire* series, highlights the relationship between capitalism and colonialism through montages that superimpose current mining sites with scenes captured during the time of the Belgian colony. Ghosts haunt the landscapes of the present. To reveal the invisible destruction of the Congo, in which he immersed himself for five years, [Richard Mosse](#) uses film for the capture of infrared waves. This technique makes it possible to accentuate the contrasts as a function of the temperature of the materials. In *Stalemate*, the earth at the edge of a red forest seems disemboweled and

bleeded by a bulldozer seeming to sink into the mud as if what destroys was called to be in turn.

The Chinese [Liu Bolin](#) photograph a miner whose dress and face have taken the color of the coal he has just extracted. We know today that the extraction of this ore is one of the main contributors to the disruption of the carbon cycle. We have all become subjects of coal. The extraction of natural resources is the counterpart of our mass consumption which is the subject of the following sequence. [Edward Burtynsky](#) and [Mishka Henner](#) want to grasp the geological impact of economic models, whether it is real estate on artificial islands in Florida for the first or the breeding of cattle fed hormones and antibiotics for the second. They use the aerial photo and a compilation of screenshots on Google Earth, respectively. The human presence translates into a complete hold on a territory that evokes a retracted and obsessive geometry in Florida or a purulent and still raw injury in Texas. Both nature and animals are exploited and monetized. And terraformed landscapes.

The issue of waste is evoked by the Chinese **Yao Lu**, whose mountains of garbage covered with blue tarpaulins evoke the classical Chinese landscape painting. Highly committed to issues of social system change, educational and ecological utopia, the American [Mary Mattingly](#) plays with the figure of Atlas in *Life of Objects* to suggest a world where man would carry his garbage on his shoulders. Empty and distorted cans of Coca-Cola or ceramic Asahi beer from Japan's **Kimiyo Mishima** evoke fossils found by future archaeologists in the indelible layer left by humanity on the earth's crust. The mass production of artificial materials, such as plastics, polystyrene or aluminum, results in massive destruction downstream and upstream of our economic development model.

The consequences of the Anthropocene on the biosphere are discussed in the sequences on extinction and justice. The baobabs, some of the oldest organisms in the world, seem to pose for eternity in the photos of [Beth Moon](#). They are today part of endangered ecosystems. They rub shoulders with the white tiger that is spinning in his cage somewhere in an Arkansas zoo and whose piercing gaze scrutinizes us in a photo of [Taryn Simon](#). Further on, a rhinoceros, also white, captured by [Maroesjka Lavigne](#), seems to be extinguished in a plaster-colored desert, as if the figure and its background were destined to merge. In his *Midway series : Message from the Gyre*, American [Chris Jordan](#) recounts the ravages of plastic waste circulating in the oceans with his portraits of corpses of birds whose bones mingle with the many small objects they have inadvertently ingested. Corks or lighters then appear as weapons of mass destruction for many animal species. Evidence that our consumption processes are unsuspectably interconnected with remote ecosystems.

The section entitled "Justice" is entirely dedicated to the Amazonian peoples and their threatened ecosystem in Ecuador, Colombia and Brazil. It is hot news, while the President of Brazil has just entrusted the management of indigenous territories to the Ministry of Agriculture in the perspective of productivist exploitation of new lands. After discovering it years ago a manuscript of the XVIIth century locating the paradise in the Matto Grosso, the artist [Sergio Vega](#) devoted himself to researching and describing this paradise. The exhibition shows a series of photographs where Eden is on fire. The American anthropologist Loren Eiseley equated humanity with a flame that spreads and transmutes everything it touches. Our ecological signature is inscribed in the most remote regions of the world, paradise now in combustion.

The sequence devoted to the future imaginary is not entirely convincing in its intention. She mixes dystopian motifs on surveillance technologies, with artists such as **Allan Sekula** and [Trevor Paglen](#), with works that suggest new symbiosis between organic and inorganic, techno-sphere and biosphere. The magnificent sculpture South Korean [Haegue Yang's](#) *Ornamental Mountains and Seas-Monster and Clouds* combine Asian mythology with electric current to create patterns that connect the different kingdoms of nature, earth, sea, water and fire. . Nothing is fixed, everything is process and transformation in its cycles that let appear today a monstrous face.

One might think that curator Kerry Oliver-Smith gives us her last word here, but the heart of the exhibition is rather lined up in the center of the gallery in a sequence entitled "Symbiosis & Multispecies", the most

fascinating of the proposal. Florida's colonial past and the illusions of mastery of others and nature seem to emerge from the Everglades, like a cabinet of curiosities in suspense, in a striking video of [Dana Levy](#) (*our opening photo*). The instruments of power that were the globe, the map, the writing and the hourglass are adrift and the prey of a snake. Animals and plants, humans and animals, plants and humans create new symbiosis in the works of **Gabriel Orozco** , **Huma Bhabha** , [Jackie Nickerson](#) or [Wifredo Lam](#) . Portuguese artist [Pedro Neves](#) imagines encounters of new types between a plant and a robot or an android and a transgenic cornfield. We are thus invited to create new entanglements and intertwining with other beings or entities and to be attentive to all forms of symbiogenesis, including when they do not include humans.

If the concept of Anthropocene currently dominates scientific debates around global warming since it was proposed in 2000 by the atmospheric chemist Paul Josef Crutzen and the biologist Eugene Stoermer, it is also more and more part of the artistic news. Many exhibitions today start from this concept to question global warming, such as this autumn in Lisbon or right now in Toronto, Ottawa and Maine. This rapid diffusion is also accompanied by important criticisms and disputes. For the most part, these questions the idea of a humanity that is uniformly responsible for the situation of the planet. The Anthropocene thus becomes a court where the alleged perpetrators parade and in the first place capitalism. The claim of the term can be as ambivalent. One can thus point to the enlistment of the concept in technocratic logic aimed at controlling the climate by geo-engineering techniques, at the risk of reconstructing the Promethean account of humanity that has already precipitated us in the current catastrophe. The strength of the exhibition, however, is to take the measure of the Anthropocene event, without ignoring the debates of which it is the subject. *The World to Come* relies first on this fundamental knowledge of how the Earth system works to enable us to measure the unprecedented geological crisis that humans have unleashed. It is from this point of view the result of a collaboration with various departments of the University of Florida which includes the Harn Museum.

In a sensitive and poetic way, we become aware of the interaction and the coevolution of all the spheres of the planet. A global phenomenon is diffracted in multiple geographical contexts and fits into bodies, beings and landscapes. In short touches, the curator of the Harn Museum also invites us to question the responsibilities of this situation and to find different forms of engagement with non-humans. It makes us share a whole series of emotions: from anger to mourning, from laughter to fear.

At the Anthropocene Perspective, *The World to Come* adds others, eco-feminists and eco-visionaries, as developed by thinkers like Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing. Based on recent microbiology, they emphasize the way in which multiple temporalities and changing assemblages between humans and other agents that are also forms of life are formed. The most surprising texts of the remarkable catalog of the exhibition belong to this sensibility. These include Natasha Myers, who calls for an alliance with plants, the "lungs of the earth", to counter the deadly logics of the Anthropocene. Seeing comes, it is not accommodating insensitively to the existing. It is to detect the multiple signs of our planet which together portray a burning world. It is recovering the sight and our minds on the blind points of modernity. It is to invite us to seek other forms of life on a renewed planet, to connect different modes of knowledge and to act.

The next article by Franck Bauchard will be devoted to *Southbound: photographs of and about the New South* , at the Halsey Institute of Contemporary Arts in Charleston, United States.