

Deborah Oropallo

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Deborah Oropallo's mesmerizing videos of environmental calamity at Catharine Clark Gallery

By Sam Whiting
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Deborah Oropallo, *Removing Red*, 2018. Photomontage, pigment print, paint on paper. 50 x 80 inches.

Last October, when Deborah Oropallo smelled the smoke from the North Bay firestorm, she looked out the window on her Novato dairy farm and saw a sky that was dark and orange at 6 a.m. She is an artist before a farmer, so she realized that this calamity fit perfectly into an ongoing video project about oil and its effect on the climate.

Floods, oil wars, the diminishing polar ice cap and now the wildfire. All of these dire warnings come into play in “Dark Landscapes for a White House,” an absorbing multimedia exhibition with musical soundtrack, which commands the entire floor space at Catharine Clark Gallery, in the “DoReMi” arts district of San Francisco .

The four videos, varying from two to six minutes, are all political in that Oropallo would like to see them decorating the walls of the White House in Washington, D.C., hence the name of the show.

“I want the president to see the effects of his inaction, and look at the amount of suffering that is caused by each of these incidents,” says Oropallo, who received a master of fine arts degree in 1980 from UC Berkeley, where she became politically aware.

While making the commute from Novato to Berkeley, Oropallo says she couldn’t help but notice the oil refineries in Richmond. And the more she drove past them, the madder she got. She began sourcing news images that could be linked to oil and layering them into photomontages. The show comprises eight of these montages, 30 images each, to complement four videos of up to 300 images each.

“It’s quite amazing, because there is this incredible dialogue going on between the still images and the moving images,” says Catharine Clark, gallery owner. “The show is asking us to slow down and be a witness.”

When you walk into the gallery, you hear Johnny Cash’s “Green, Green Grass of Home.” On the video screen is “Blazes,” Oropallo’s response to the October fires. Dissolving on the screen are 100 news images, each a white shingled home with a green lawn in front. As the video progresses, so does the fire, from a doorway in flames to multiple houses ablaze to finally a blackened ruin. But the lawn always remains green.

“The message is that you really can’t return home,” says Oropallo, who grew up in a white shingled house in Mahwah, N.J. “It’s not about the fire; it’s about the extreme loss of not being able to return home.”

After “Blazes” come “Crude,” and “Meltdown,” which show the effects of offshore oil rigs and melting Arctic ice. The final video, “Oval O,” features all the American presidents of Oropallo’s lifetime posing with the same Frederic Remington sculpture of a bucking bronc that has decorated the Oval Office for generations.

“When you overlay news images, they look like 17th century paintings,” says Oropallo, who has been working in video for 10 years. A prior piece, “Going Ballistic,” about the arms race set to Jimi Hendrix’s “The Star-Spangled Banner” was shown last year at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

In the audience was Andy Rappaport, a musician who is also co-founder of the Minnesota Street Project. He was so blown away he bought the piece, on the condition that he be allowed to remix the sound. This led to a collaboration, with Rappaport designing sound that encompasses both his own compositions on keyboards and bass, and classics like Marvin Gaye’s “Inner City Blues (Make Me Wanna Holler.)”

“You could call all of these works mashups,” says Clark.

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“Dark Landscapes for a White House”: 10:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday. Through June 16. Catharine Clark Gallery, 248 Utah St., S.F. 415-399-1439.

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