

Chester Arnold



Visual, Environmental Impact

By Betsy DiJulio, November 22, 2014

SF

248 Utah Street
SF, CA 94103
+ 415 399 1439

NY

313 W 14th Street 2F
New York, NY
By appointment only

WEB

www.cclarkgallery.com



To be sure, this traveling exhibition of 75 pieces in a wide range of media by some 32 artists accomplishes its dual stated goals: 1) to recognize, document, and share the work of leading contemporary artists who chose to focus their work on global as well as local environmental issues; and 2) to heighten public awareness and concern about the degradation of diverse environments through the power of art.

In their extensive exhibition essay, Dancing Star Foundation president and executive vice-president, respectively, Michael Charles Tobias and Jane Gray Morrison, describe the exhibition as “broad yet focused.” Yet, while, overall, I certainly found the show focused on a wide spectrum of environmental degradation as stated, a few outliers made me wonder if the curatorial point of view couldn’t have been tightened, if only slightly.

Produced and curated by David J. Wagner, subjects are many: dump sites, abandoned quarries, industrial scale consumption/development, oil spills, perils of nuclear energy, global warming, interstate cloverleaves, pollution, developed farmland, genetic engineering, destroyed habitat, colony collapse, and copper mines and smelts. But also included are interdependency of species, hunting into extinction and zoo and circus

animals. Though one could argue that virtually everything in our world is connected, related, and plays a role in the delicate balance of nature, I felt the show perhaps needed one more round of editing, as a very few pieces seemed unnecessary to the exhibition thesis and/or a little far afield of environmental degradation (if you will pardon the bad pun).

That said, the technical and compositional skills of all of the artists are beyond reproach. Visitors will find exquisitely crafted and often ambitiously scaled paintings, photography, sculpture, and mixed-media pieces in a range of styles. The broad sweep of Wagner's curatorial approach means that everyone is sure to come away having been moved by something.

Further along in the essay, Tobias and Morrison write that viewers will experience "the beauty, the turmoil, the levels of ambiguity and mixed message." Very true; but, at times, I would have preferred a bit more ambiguity. Among the pieces that suffered from a lack of it is a pair of "Gulf Life" watercolor paintings of a pelican and a blue marlin splattered with splotches of black, unnecessarily heavy-handed statements about oil spills. Similarly, a beautifully painted mound of trash thrusting skyward and pushing a bison to its certain death was also a bit too blatant. Artists who take on social issues—and thankfully there are many who do—walk a fine and precarious line between content that is too obvious or, conversely, that which is too obtuse.

A case in point is Michael Meilahn's "Reality," though it alone was worth the drive from VA Beach to the Peninsula. Farmer and artist "Mick" Meilahn's three monumental ears of genetically modified corn suspended from the ceiling with their withered leaves and stalks cast in bronze were joyfully exuberant with brilliant color, richly intertwined ribbons of "silk," and bulbous protrusions, ominous in their robustness, suggestive of genetic engineering gone awry. However, a single blown glass die affixed at the base of one of the cobs seemed an unnecessary "rolling of the dice" whack on the head. Nonetheless, that would not stop me from seeking out an opportunity to experience Meilahn's installation "Corn Zone."

Three of the many artists that, to me, got it just right are Sayaka Kajita Ganz, Ron Kingswood, and Chester Arnold. Ganz's large "Travelers (Polar Bears)," 2013, is suspended from the gallery ceiling in front of Kingswood's "Takken in het bos" (Forest

Succession),” 2005, creating a striking site line. The three swimming bears fashioned from kitchen utensils, coat hangers, and other discarded plastic items camouflaged beneath a coat of white paint are a particularly convincing and arresting version of something we have all seen before: sculptural figures fashioned from recycled materials. Like other work in this genre, the sculptures are a subtle reminder of the impact our refuse and cast-offs make on animal habitats.

For its part, Kingswood’s painting reads initially as a nonobjective, linear and reductionist composition in white and gray. A closer look—as well as a peek at the exhibition label—reveals it to be a wintry interpretation of saplings emerging after large timber has been clear cut, a hopeful note about regeneration.

Another large painting, set off to advantage at the top of the Ascending Gallery, reads similarly as a large abstraction, though this time one of organically curving lines and shapes in a palette of rich neutrals and complementary blue-green and red-orange. Closer inspection, however, makes apparent that Arnold’s “Holding Pond,” 1996, is an aerial view of a dried and cracked industrialized landscape terraced with ribbons of roads and dotted with commercial vehicles, fires, and billowing smoke: a cleverly veiled morality tale of man vs. nature.

Environmental Impact is as diverse as the environmental movement itself and, as such, offers an opportunity to more clearly discern subtle differences along the heavily philosophical and political value scale of very light to very dark green.