

Exploring human influence on the Earth through an artistic lens

By Rafael Francisco Salas, Special to the Journal Sentinel | May 27, 2015



*Amy Balkin, New York City Collection, from "A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting."
Installation view of "Placing the Golden Spike" at Inova.*

The imprint of human activity on the earth has created phenomena equal in scale and scope to that of glaciers, volcanoes or floods. Scientists are given to calling our epoch the "Anthropocene." "Placing the Golden Spike" at Inova uses art as a lens to view this period in history. The show is dense and wordy, at times lacking imagination, but still worth a careful look. I left with a sense of dread and sadness.

The title is inspired by golden markers that scientists have placed in sedimentary rock in locations around the world to mark periods in geologic time. The Anthropocene, for better or worse, belongs to humans. It is the era during which human beings have had an impact on the Earth, and scholars debate vigorously when that time began, and where to place that golden spike, so to speak.

For this exhibit, artists have proposed landscapes where the golden spike might dwell— a sinkhole created by oil extraction, irradiated soil, or perhaps the digital landscape we have more recently created.

As I walked through the exhibit I was reminded of an important shift. In the past human beings have reacted to changes in the world. At some point, our role became more proactive. We can change or destroy nature. Perhaps we can save it. This is the greatest paradigm shift to have occurred since our naked bodies sought shelter from the elements in our nascent form. We are subject to nature, but are stewards of it as well.

Trash is a prevalent subject matter here. Set out on tables and floors, the detritus is transformed into a museum of artifacts. It is as if humans have already fled, leaving their waste behind. In "A People's Archive of Sinking and Melting," artist Amy Balkin focuses on land affected by changing water patterns. She has collected flotsam onto a table – an old slipper, broken glass, a bottle cap collected on the beach in Senegal. They are laid out forensically and correspond in number to a world map, each location an area affected by too much, or too little, water. They emerge as random elements, all equal as a record, given importance from the simple fact that they were recovered from a tenuous environment.

Marina Zurkow has gathered plastic trash on the floor and invited individuals to propose its significance in the future, as it will indeed exist for millennia. A bag of disposable breakfast articles — styrene cups and plastic plates and forks, is labeled as having currency for no one in the future, as being "beyond abject." Forsaken prescription bottles are imagined to house a snail or mollusk on the sea floor. To reflect on this pile of plastic ephemera and how it will exist in years ahead is sobering and poignant. I felt physical revulsion and shame in bending down to examine it.



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Other works by Zurkow are also jarring. Her series "Necrocracy" includes an animated drawing of a massive sinkhole that has developed in the oil fields of Wink, Texas. The drawing envisions it in the future, a barren landscape with smokestacks burning in the background and a bitter wind scraping across. Plastic bags with smiley faces are blown about as an owl quietly wings its way overhead. A coyote sniffs at the stunted vegetation. It is romantic, bleak and very sad. Nearby are two uncanny and chilling figurative works, child sized mannequins dressed in HAZMAT suits.

Roderick Coover and Scott Rettberg have designated a tortured coastline to receive a golden spike. Their work is testimonial and a documentation, mostly devoid of decoration or art. A map of the Delaware Estuary describes over 200 active petro-chemical industries and cleanup sites. On the other side of the wall are personal accounts of

the legacy of Hurricane Sandy in that region. Mops, rubber boots and rain gear hang on the wall and family photos are scattered around the maps. Though lacking visual strength, the writing was compelling and tragic.

The digital landscape, entirely of our own creation, was investigated by Xavier Cha in a one-night performance. Two dancers move in response to "users" online traffic patterns, in their scrolling and clicking, in checking email or using social media. The users faces are projected on the screens behind the dancers that embody their virtual movements. The dancers reflect the neurotic, compulsive loops of digital traffic. The performers evoked a frenetic lack of focus and the automatic, repetitive restlessness of animals in captivity. The soundtrack, however, songs by Bjork interwoven with digital bleeps and radio advertising, seemed like a somewhat clichéd reference to technology. I felt I had heard these gestures in other robotic pop songs.

Similarly, if there is an overarching difficulty with the show it is in our familiarity with the concept of dystopia in other media. Though curators Sarah Krajewski and Dehlia Hannah have collected a thoughtful group of artists who reflect on this topic in earnest, at times the work felt recycled. Eve Laramée's installation reflects on the Yucca Mountain nuclear waste disposal site. The work contains science fictional characters inhabiting the irradiated southwest and discusses radiation sickness and physiological development. Though perceptive and in keeping with the show's theme, the work did not rise above other offerings of post apocalypse in film and literature.

While far from faultless, this show still kind of blew my mind. It is a testament to our present interaction with, and responsibility to, our epoch on Earth.

"Placing the Golden Spike: Landscapes of the Anthropocene" is on view at Inova, 2155 N. Prospect Ave., through June 13.

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