

Time Versus Technology: A Review of Nathaniel Stern at MOWA|DTN

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What will my laptop, phone or tablet look like in a million years? How might we imaginatively repurpose our e-waste? Where might electronics lead our environmental and economic politics? Can we plan and act for a sustainable future? These questions are the core of Nathaniel Stern's exhibition "The World After Us: Imaging Techno-Aesthetic Futures," currently on view at MOWA|DTN.

Stern's proposal is grand. He has cooked, smashed, melted, stacked and carved out phones, desktops and other e-waste and transformed them into an imaginary future in geologic time.

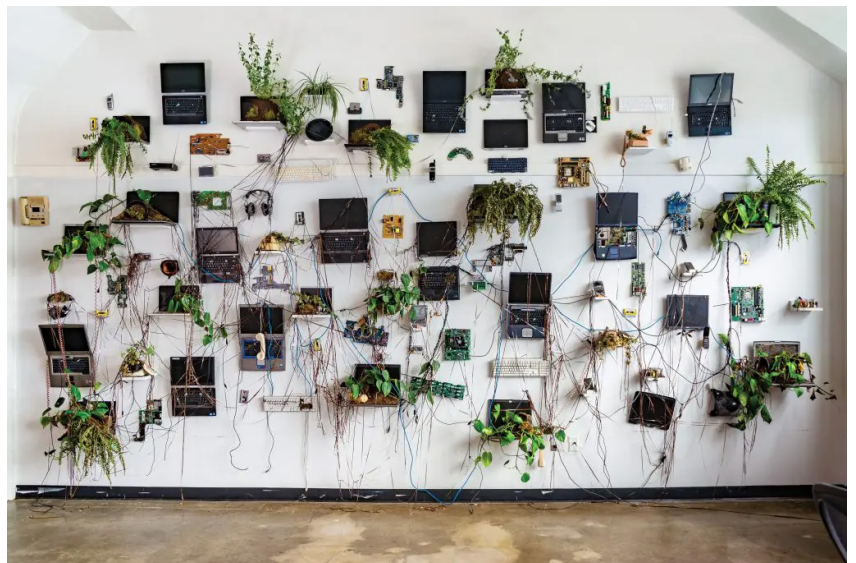
Stern is following the thread of Alan Weisman's 2007 book, "The World Without Us." In it, Weisman imagines how the natural world would reclaim our mechanized detritus in the absence of humans. Stern has created a visual document of this process. "The Wall After Us" is a network of screens, desktop computers, phones and cassette tape interwoven with ferns, potting soil and other greenery. The effect is of the damp, drippy understory of a forest that emerged from someone's former office space.

Other sculptures in the exhibition show expand on themes of degradation and rebirth. A pile of remote controls, receivers, fans and a pirated CD of David Bowie's "Blackstar" are partly submerged in a terrarium filled with water. A dismal tube eternally dribbles water over this mass. As I leaned in I could smell the plastic and metal interacting with the water. It was vaguely noxious, the splashing water wafting decomposition into the air.

Elsewhere cellphones have been pressed and heated into a vestige of ash and carbon. These sculptures were powerful. Seeing what happens to objects we are so intimately connected to reduced to literal rubble had the effect of looking at a corpse.

In addition to describing the result of time on our technological devices, Stern also remarks on possibilities for repurposing them. Carapaces from Apple computers have been formed into a hammer, a wrench. The aspirational concept of beating swords into ploughshares is poetic, though undercut by Stern's cheeky title: "Applecations."

Interestingly, the strongest work here emerges in photography and film. Stern has a designer's eye behind the camera, and at times his photos of plant life growing from our old gadgets has a greater



"The Wall After Us," Nathaniel Stern.

impact than the objects themselves. The color and light in the photos give them an atmospheric romanticism and a greater visual impact. The artist also includes a documentary where he eloquently presents his proposal. There is an irony in this, however, as the film is of course projected from a sleek, sexy flat screen.

At times the exhibition felt overly familiar, reminiscent of other art and literature describing the world emerging from the tide of mechanical reproduction, though ultimately it remains an important message. Our crisis of electronic consumption is happening now. Stern tells us there are ten billion phones produced per year, more than there are people to use them. Art can, and should, be a vehicle to expose this crisis to ourselves. (Rafael Francisco Salas)

"The World After Us: Imaging Techno-Aesthetic Futures" is on view at MOWA|DTN in the St. Kate Arts Hotel, 139 East Kilbourn, Milwaukee, through March 25.



"Applications," Nathaniel Stern. paint on paper