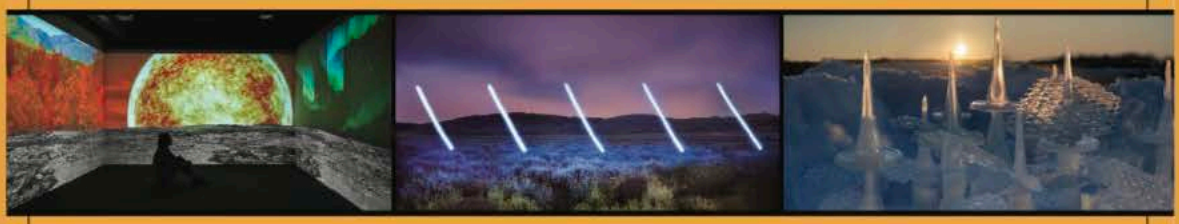
FLICKERING
AT THE EDGE OF
ANTHROPOCENE

CURATED BY

DARREN LEE MILLER



FEATURING WORK BY

KATHRYN VAJDA
ROCHESTER, NY

BARRY UNDERWOOD
CLEVELAND, OH

ALLISON MARIA RODRIGUEZ
BOSTON, MA

OCTOBER 2 - NOVEMBER 21

BLOCKFORT
162 N. 6TH ST. COLUMBUS, OH 43215

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH FOTOFOCUS

FLICKERING AT THE EDGE OF ANTHROPOCENE

This exhibition was originally scheduled to be part of the fifth *FotoFocus 2020* Biennial. We are grateful that FotoFocus has generously pledged its financial support to make this show possible even though the biennial has been canceled due to the pandemic. This year's theme, *Exploring Light and Its Contrasts*, considers the implicit signification of the word, "light." According to Kevin Moore, FotoFocus Artistic Director and Curator, "Light implies a force of good, and it conjures hope, clarity, and rational thought." "Flickering" evokes a flashing light, and indicates a warning sign as we exit the Holocene, the geological epoch of climate stability that gave rise to agriculture, civilizations, and our global economy.

The three artists in this exhibition contemplate our entry into the Anthropocene (Kolbert), an era when human activity is the dominant influence on the environment. Climate change is a social justice issue. Accelerating sea level rise and species extinctions, persistent droughts and flooding, food scarcity, lead poisoning – and other environmental catastrophes that disproportionately impact people of color, and the poor, mostly non-white inhabitants of the "global south" – are essential considerations in a time of social injustice, healthcare insecurities, and rising political discord.

When Allison Maria Rodriguez starts a project, she examines her intuitive emotional responses while simultaneously doing scientific and historical research. Using old family pictures, digital animations, drawings, NASA weather satellite images, and new footage shot in front of a green screen, Rodriguez draws connections between losses in cultural diversity and declining biodiversity. Elements of her video installations are often rooted in the contingencies of her Latinx and American identities, and how these are echoed in species extinctions and habitat degradation. While the content can be heavy, it is not without a sense of playfulness, mysticism, and hope.

Barry Underwood's background in theatre influences the ways in which he uses carefully placed lights to interrupt and transform landscapes, creating a proscenium stage for the monocular view of his camera. The glowing lines and shapes reference histories of land use, and the naturally occurring features specific to each location. All of Underwood's luminous interventions are based on research done during his immersion on the site, usually during an artist's residency. The resulting images mix available light with illumination from Underwood's site-specific installations to create uncanny, constructed photographs that tell the story of each place's present and past.

Kathryn Vajda's images of icescapes slowly melting in the late winter sun look like futuristic, extraterrestrial colonies. The structures document both Vajda's deployment of accumulated ice and snow as an unconventional sculptural medium, and the time-based diminution of such a fugitive material in the environment. Upon closer inspection, the images explore the impact of disposable plastic and polystyrene packaging that are the molds from which the artist builds the frozen sculptures. Working with multiple exposures as stacks and layers in Photoshop provides Vajda with the opportunity to move beyond pictorial considerations, to create collages of time.

But time is not on our side. Even though this decade may be the last remaining off-ramp before we are locked into a feedback loop of ever more warming, 2020 allows us to clearly see the possible good we can still do. Congress is spending trillions for COVID economic recovery, but it's hard to know just how much the US will spend to address climate change. Assuming politicians now understand the reality of an exponential curve, they should apply that awareness to the climate, and lead the way to a future in which subsequent generations can live. I hope that art – especially that which raises awareness, effects positive change, and calls us to action – is part of the legacy we leave behind. The planet doesn't have to crash, we can still pull back before we reach the brink. Will we?

Work Cited: Kolbert, Elizabeth. The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History. New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2014.

Interview with Allison Maria Rodriguez

Darren Lee Miller: You use the words, "Magical Realism" to describe your work, which is a term I associate with 20th century Latin American literature. You've said there's no clear beginning, middle, or end in your works, but is there an element of fabulist narrative in your installations? Are your works in conversation with the works of writers like Gabriel García Márques and Isabel Allende?

Allison Maria Rodriguez: Journalists who've reviewed my shows have compared my work to both of those writers, and I come from a literary background. My undergraduate education was not in visual art, and at the time I didn't envision taking this path. I am creating spaces where the goal is for people to connect with what they're looking at. It's ultimately about how "the real" is fantastic. Everything around us is magical and miraculous, and it's disappearing. We're destroying it.

DLM: Does that sense of reverence spring from your evolving spirituality?

AMR: Yes. The thing about Magical Realism is that by creating something fantastical, you can show something that's more real than real. That feels spiritual / supernatural to me.

DLM: Something that has disappointed me is that facts about climate change, which enjoyed bipartisan consensus in the 1980s, have been buried in favor of opinions that aren't based in reality. In light of this elevation of ideology over facts, who is your audience?

AMR: After your lead-in, that wasn't what I thought you were going to ask. I've gotten this question before, "How do you make work when everything is so awful, when the facts about climate change are so depressing?" Making the artwork is how I process and manage the reality of that. It's how I survive. I think a lot of people feel overwhelmed and cut off from their emotional reactions because the numbers are too much or too depressing to think about. I'm probably connecting with people who already understand the realities of climate change but who feel disempowered to do anything about it.

DLM: How do you think that creating these contemplative spaces offers viewers a sense of empowerment, even if just for a moment?

AMR: It can be scary, but the idea that every living thing in the world is interconnected makes you a part of something larger than just yourself, and reminds you that you have an important place in it. When people feel seen, when they feel like they belong, that's empowering. I wonder how we might live differently in the world. How can we change the predominant ways of doing things? I do feel like I want to raise awareness and motivate people to learn more about climate change; but my bigger questions attempt to shift the colonial way we look at everything as economic resources. I want us to reposition our concept of nature so that it is who we are, and we are part of it.

All images are courtesy of the artists. Thanks Ellen Bütz and Jaime Santiago Cajigas for assistance with editing, and Blockfort

Interview with Barry Underwood

Darren Lee Miller: During my studio visit with you last fall, you named Richard Long, John Pfahl, Agnes Martin, and several others as your influences. How do you think we should understand contemporary photography in relation to movements like Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, and Landscape Art?

Barry Underwood: I make marks in an environment, or rather a space. I use various types of ropes, from 1.5mm accessory cord to static line, as well as baling wire and spiderwire. The light sources are EL wire and LED lights. Richard Long created marks by walking in a landscape, showing how delicate the environment is. John Pfahl created photographic work that pushed and pulled space optically. Agnes Martin made work that was a reaction to a landscape. My conversations with painters and conceptual artists are often about how analogy and metaphor operate in the work.

DLM: Do you think your work is photography?

BU: Not holistically. I make constructed photographic images, but I am also interested in Land Art and painting. The way most people see Land Art is through the photographic image, so it's a kind of record. If you had been at MacDowell when I constructed that installation, a viewer could walk through the installation; now, the only way someone experiences it is through the photographic document.

DLM: Are you referring to architectural forms in your works?

BU: I started thinking deliberately about how light interacts with architecture when I was an artist-in-residence at the Josef & Anni Albers Foundation in 2018. One of the images I made at the Albers Foundation, *Linear Construction 5*, was inspired by the way light shone through a window. I wanted to recreate the way the light raked across the wall but show it in the landscape with a fallen tree limb. The blue lines are beams of sunlight that I drew in my sketchbook.

DLM: Do you connect your interest in the built environment to the theme of this show, climate change?

BU: When developers and real estate agents look at a lot for sale, they don't see an ecosystem but an asset and resource. They get to make the land whatever they want it to be without regard for what it already is. It could be the future location of a strip mall or a high-rise or a farm. I'm making poetic gestures. That's why I like Agnes Martin's work. She offers interpretations rather than direct representations. Maybe that's why my work is paid attention to more by painters, because I'm not making literal representations of things. Work that is quickly read can be too easy for people to push back against. There are artists photographing industrial run-off, garbage, clear-cuts, and strip-mines. I think that kind of work either shuts people down or is preaching to the converted. Instead, I'm working to be persuasive without being obvious.

Studio and Gallery for hosting and supporting this exhibition. The interviews have been edited and abridged to fit the format of this pu

Interview with Kathryn Vajda

Darren Lee Miller: Is it important for viewers to know where your photos were staged? Can you talk about the clues you're giving us in the titles of the works?

Kathryn Vajda: I think both the location and the material are important. Naming the location is a way for me to record when and where it happened. I take dates and locations and go to the National Weather Service and NOAA websites to view records of temperature and weather. It's not just a way for me to reconstruct patterns from the past, but I can also use the data to compare the local averages to the global averages on a monthly and yearly basis.

DLM: Another thing about your process is that you think of this work primarily in terms of printmaking, instead of photography. Colloquially we say, we are "taking pictures." But you work with multiple image files as stacks and layers in Photoshop to "make pictures." How does that change the way your images communicate?

KV: This year, for whatever reason, I chose to leave the camera's aperture wide open early in the season, and I'm really enjoying the shallow depth of field in the individual images. Things are either really crisp, or they fall out of focus quickly. Tiling those images allows me to place the sharp edges where I want them to be. It appeals to a sense of image-construction that is common in painting.

DLM: I'm hearing you say that instead of having a recording machine determine where the plane of focus lies and how deep the focus goes into the image, we make more subjective, intuitive decisions about line, texture, scale, and focus when we create images by hand.

KV: I want to accentuate subtle temperature changes as I stitch the images together. Again, I equate this to drawing. Yes, we are making one image; but, if we are doing observational drawing from life, our bodies move in space, our heads move, our eyes are moving. We do not have a literal fixed point. We are not a single aperture recording information. We're breathing, our blood is flowing.

DLM: What ideas do you hope the works will raise for our viewers in Columbus, Ohio?

KV: We can't negotiate with the laws of physics. We can't barter a better deal. The planet is not going to bargain with us. There are certain limitations we've been able to engineer around, but we can't alter the properties of matter. Our only hope is to create a collective response. Everyone needs to understand the monumentality of this. We need to put aside our everyday concerns to understand that this is the biggest problem facing all of us. Climate change is a bigger crisis than anything we have ever faced before. We need to collectively process that, and get serious about it.

ublication. Full texts of the unedited conversations can be found at https://www.darrenleemiller.com/blog/flickering-interviews

Allison Maria Rodriguez is a first-generation Cuban-American interdisciplinary artist. Her work has been supported by grants from The CreateWell Fund, the Boston Cultural Council, the Arlington Cultural Council, The Archie D. & Bertha H. Walker Foundation and Assets for Artists. She has attended numerous competitive artist residencies, is a grand prize winner of the Creative Climate Awards, and was recently awarded an Earthwatch Communications Fellowship. In 2019 she was honored by WBUR's The ARTery as one of 25 millennials of color impacting Boston's arts and culture scene. She received an M.F.A. from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, and holds a B.A. in Language, Literature and Culture from Antioch College. She lives and works in Boston, MA.
(Photo by Melissa Blackhall)

Kathryn Vajda is Assistant Clinical Professor of Art at Alfred University. She has exhibited in Beijing, China, PS1 in Queens, NY, and many other national and international venues. She taught at Anderson Ranch Arts Center, and her technique of manipulating layers in Adobe Photoshop was cited in "Exploring Color Photography From Film to Pixels" fifth edition by Robert Hirsch, Focal Press (2011). Other publications include "Insatiable Streams," Beijing Contemporary Art Center, Beijing, China (2007) and "Open Source/Digital Media Arts: Artists from the Institute for Electronic Arts," Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing, China (2003). She received an M.F.A. in Printmaking from Indiana University in Bloomington, and holds a B.F.A. in Printmaking from the Cleveland Institute of Art. She lives and works in western New York State.

Barry Underwood is Associate Professor of Photography and Video at the Cleveland Institute of Art. He was recently awarded the Creative Workforce Fellowship through the Community Partnership for Arts and Culture, The Cleveland Arts Prize for Visual Arts, and the Ohio Arts Council Individual Excellence Award. He has attended numerous competitive artist residencies. Underwood's work has been exhibited in museums and galleries across the country, and has appeared in numerous print and online publications. His works have been acquired by museums, academic galleries, foundations, and private collectors. He received an M.F.A. in Photography from Cranbrook Academy of Art, and holds a B.A. in Theatre and Photography from Indiana University Northwest. He lives and works in Cleveland, OH.
(Photo by Sarah Kabot)

Darren Lee Miller is an artist, educator, curator, and writer. He is Chair of Photography and Associate Professor at the Columbus College of Art & Design. He was recently awarded a Fulbright Research Fellowship to conduct a community art project at the São Paulo State University in Brazil. His teaching, curatorial work, and artwork have been recognized through numerous residencies and exhibitions. His writing and artworks have been published in print and online, and acquired by museums, academic galleries, and private collectors. He received an M.F.A. from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, and holds a B.F.A. in Photography and Printmaking from Alfred University. He lives and works in Columbus, OH, and San Juan, Puerto Rico.
(Photo by Jaime Santiago Cajigas)