

The New York Times

Keenan, Annabel. "What Would Inspire Climate Action? Perhaps an Orange Sky." The New York Times, October 18, 2023



Aaron Morse, *Cloud World (#3)*, 2014

What if people could see what is driving climate change? Months before fires raged across the globe, that question was posed by the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas, leading to its group show, "If the Sky Were Orange: Art in the Time of Climate Change."

The exhibition's guest curator, the climate writer Jeff Goodell, said the show title was inspired by a comment a scientist made to him nearly two decades ago: If greenhouse gasses turned the sky a different color, humans would be more aware of the accumulation of carbon emissions and better understand the consequences.

The exhibit features work by over 50 artists depicting generations of human activity that led to climate change. The show runs through Feb. 11 in two sections, the first pulling from the museum's collection with pieces from as early as 1619 (two of the printmaker Jacques Callot's etchings of the seven deadly sins: gluttony and greed), as well as recent paintings, photographs, works on paper and sculptures.

The second part expands beyond the collection with contemporary artists whose practices consider human impact on the environment using a variety of media including sculptures, videos, paintings and photographs. To accompany these, Mr. Goodell selected nine renowned scientists, activists and writers to create wall labels, writing one himself.

The Blanton joins a growing group of museums engaging with climate change, but the interdisciplinary nature of the show goes deeper with its engagement, presenting several points of entry — the artwork, the writers' interpretations and didactics with historical and scientific context — all of which make one fact clear: Humans caused climate change. The question is, what are we going to do about it?

"The hardest question is, what will inspire change?" Mr. Goodell said in a tour of the show with Simone Wicha, director of the Blanton, and Carter E. Foster, the museum's deputy director for curatorial affairs. "Twenty years ago, everyone said, 'When a hurricane wipes out a major American city, we'll wake up.' Well, that's happened."

The museum had hoped for years to organize an exhibition addressing climate change. "We considered several traveling shows, but these take too long to plan," Ms. Wicha said. "This is a complex conversation that changes rapidly. We didn't want to rely too heavily on art history or science to tell the story; Carter suggested we bring in Jeff."

Mr. Goodell was uniquely positioned for the job: He has been writing about climate change for decades, including his recent

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Aaron Morse
Prairie Fire (#2), 2022
Acrylic on canvas
20 x 24 in
50.8 x 61 cm

book "The Heat Will Kill You First," and he's married to Ms. Wicha.

While planning the exhibition, the team found a piece in the permanent collection that reminded Mr. Goodell of the scientist's statement from nearly 20 years ago: Aaron Morse's "Cloud World (#3)" (2014), a painting of puffy orange clouds and a foreboding seascape devoid of human life.

"I always thought it could be either the deep past or future; I never considered it present," Mr. Morse said in an email. "The image is a stylized picture, but its visuals are grounded in reality."

Mr. Morse's image recently took on new relevance as skies across the world actually turned orange. In June, Canada's wildfire season started early. Dry, warm and windy conditions stoked the blazes with such intensity, smoke blanketed much of the northeastern United States. Photographs of New York City against an amber sky went viral, fueling conversations about the ticking clock that is climate change.

In mid-July, and then again in August, deadly wildfires consumed Greece. On Aug. 8, a ferocious blaze devastated Maui and claimed nearly 100 lives. In September, tens of thousands of acres burned in Louisiana in likely the worst fire season in more than half a century.

"Wildfires brought climate change to everyone's mind, but this issue isn't new," Ms. Wicha said.

To build a historical narrative of climate change, the museum drew from its collection, seeking out works that explore the idealization of nature and the romanticism of the hunt for energy, as well as the impact of fossil fuels on society: imbalance of power, consumerism and migration.

"Jeff gave us guidelines of what climate change means," Mr. Foster said. "We pulled what we felt might work, and he narrowed it down. It was an enlightening process. Pieces I thought didn't fit climate change were spot on, and some that I thought were perfect didn't make the cut." It was a process that paralleled the multiple perspectives and approaches being brought to the climate issue itself.

That part of the exhibit now includes Claude Lorrain's "Pastoral Landscape" (circa 1628-30), a pre-fossil-fuel image of nature that still bears evidence of human intervention with architectural ruins enveloped in vines, as well as "Onion Soup" (1968) by Andy Warhol, expressing the commoditization of resources. Other works include representations of the early days of the search for oil — a significant part of Texas history — and the harnessing of wind for

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Aaron Morse
Cave Beasts, 2022
Acrylic, oil and glass beads on canvas
60 x 36 in
152.4 x 91.4 cm

power.

As the exhibition dives deeper into the consequences of climate change, creative responses shift to addressing power, money and activism, factors still significant in the present-day fight against climate change. Emblematic of these is a 1987 photolithograph by Donald Moffett. Based on his poster for the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP), the work depicts an orange bull's-eye and a black-and-white photograph of President Ronald Reagan above the words "HE KILLS ME," invoking the monumental repercussions of Reagan's initial inaction in the AIDS crisis.

In wall text featuring a timeline of climate change, Mr. Goodell has highlighted major historic moments — positive changes, significant missteps — dating from around 300 B.C. The bulk of the timeline is dedicated to the last 150 years. Reagan makes another appearance, this time for removing solar panels that President Jimmy Carter had installed on the White House in 1979, his gesture of support for the fossil fuel industry.

The contemporary part of the exhibition underscores how climate change will continue to affect the world, causing further destruction and displacement as humans and animals seek refuge. Making a poignant connection between the past, present and future is Jessie Homer French's painting "Mojave Burning" (2021) that depicts Joshua trees ablaze in the Mojave Desert during the 2020 Dome Fire. A resilient species and symbol of survival in an environment relatively removed from human activity, Joshua trees withstand extreme heat, cold and drought, but they have virtually no protection against fires.

Ms. Homer French said she had been painting fires since the 1980s. "Every year, I say I'm not going to paint fires, and every year the world is burning," she said in a video call. "Now there's more interest in the topic. I guess the world caught up with me."

In his text responding to Ms. Homer French's work, the climate writer John Vaillant reflects on an evening in 2015 when he awoke to see the coastline of the Pacific Northwest rainforest burning. An area he had lived in for decades changed overnight. His anecdote mirrors many stories, often tragic, about the sudden consequences of climate change built up through generations of breakdown.

The exhibition arms visitors with knowledge, but raises the question, what do we do about it? "The conversation of solutions doesn't apply to climate change," Mr. Goodell said. "A profound, planetary-scale transformation is needed to fix the damage. What I want people to take away is curiosity. Understanding the issues helps plan for a better future than the messy world we're in now."

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Aaron Morse
Winged Creatures, 2022
Acrylic and watercolor on paper, unframed
35 x 26 in
88.9 x 66 cm

If there's a glimmer of hope, it's in a video by Cannupa Hanska Luger. "I'm not a fan of the word hope," he said in a phone interview. "However, I am interested in how we develop that hope and belief in our existence in future spaces."

The show includes his "Future Ancestral Technologies: New Myth" (2021), a science fiction series that features monster-slayers similar to heroes in popular culture, but derived from Indigenous myths that the artist re-contextualizes in a distant future.

"As an Indigenous person, I grew up with the notion that my entire existence is of historical importance and talked about in past tense, but not present," Mr. Luger said. "Trying to express that we're still here isn't enough; I want to see myself and our cultures in a future context."