

HABITAT:

story by EMILY BEENEN

Exploring Climate Change Through the Arts

“When it comes to the care of our ‘common home,’ we are living at a critical moment of history.” Pope Francis

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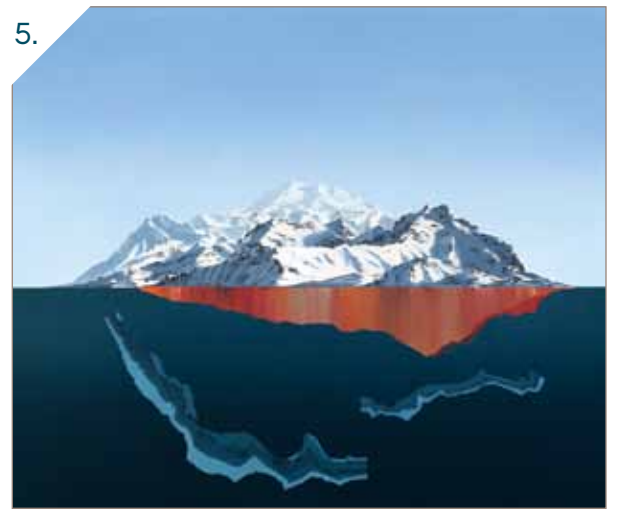
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1. Scott Greene, *La Bajada Bluff*, 2013, oil on canvas 30 x 50 inches, Courtesy of Catherine Clarke Gallery. 2. Cedra Wood, *Lemmings*, 2014, graphite on paper, 17 x 13 inches. 3. Beau Carey, *Aquife*, 2015, Oil onCanvas, 44x52. 4. Beau Carey, *Breach*, 2013, oil on canvas, 48x60. 5. Beau Carey, *Regolith*, 2015, oil on canvas, 46x54.

In November, Executive Director Suzanne Sborge of 516 Arts unveils the second half of the collaborative season of public programming for the city-wide project titled HABITAT: Exploring Climate Change Through the Arts. The project, at least a year in the making, was launched in late August with the dual exhibitions *Off the Charts* and *Knew Normal*, the latter curated by co-collaborator Nancy Zastudil, owner of Central Features, a gallery just around the corner from 516 that hosted an additional satellite exhibition as part of the initial opening. With equal measures of determination and timeliness, HABITAT leaves no educational or artistic stone unturned, inspiring dialogue and questions such as “How are we interpreting what we witness as the climate and our environment shift?” And perhaps more importantly, as these shifts occur, “What are the creative adaptations necessary to re-establish our place, our habitat, on this Earth?”

Visual arts dominate the second half of the project; 516 Arts will feature the concurrent solo exhibitions of Albuquerque artists Scott Greene in *Bewilderness* and Beau Carey in *Rise*. Tricklock Theatre hosts *Climate Change Theatre Action*, a collection of one to five minute plays, poems and songs by 50 writers from all six livable continents, and the Guild Cinema presents *No Impact Man*, which details one family’s attempt to live “eco-effectively.” However, if you favor listening to looking, attend Ruben Arvizu’s talk on “Cultural Perspectives in the Global Quest for Water.” Or if you prefer to experience than heed, sign up for kid-friendly, hands-on workshops to learn about bioluminescence, create an erosion sculpture, or discover how an excursion into the Ojito Wilderness influences the artistic process. And for those who desire a gustatory education, the ideal consciousness raising experience is Chef James Campbell Caruso’s pop-up dinner in the 516 gallery, featuring dishes and ingredients that relate to climate change.

Despite the prevalence of fomenting conversation about climate change, Suzanne Sborge notes that when she initially talked about the HABITAT project, much of the response was, “Well, that sounds depressing.” But it was a topic very much on her mind, and she could see climate change becoming more important and relevant. Thus began the collaboration with Nancy Zastudil, and this synergy propelled them to a place where, “Suddenly,” Suzanne says, “I began to see opportunities everywhere to raise awareness with this issue in the arts and create more and more programming.” By the time the show opened on August 29th, the topic of climate change had blown up in the mainstream media. Details of President Obama’s recently released Climate Action Plan opened with the line, “It is clear that no challenge poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change.” And Pope Francis hadn’t been in the United States for more than several hours before imparting these words at the White House Welcoming Ceremony in September: “Mr. President, I find it encouraging that you are proposing an initiative for reducing air pollution. Accepting the urgency, it seems clear to me also that climate change is a problem which can no longer be left to a future generation. When it comes to the care of our ‘common home,’ we are living at a critical moment of history.” And then there’s the upcoming 21st session of the Conference of the Parties, or COP 21: the United Nations Climate Change Conference, where the governments of more than 190 nations will gather in Paris to discuss a possible new global agreement on climate change.

One of Suzanne’s goals for HABITAT is to help connect Albuquerque and New Mexico to the rest of the world; to showcase local in the context of a larger world. “Despite media’s attempt at times to focus only on the local angle, we are not insular,” Suzanne says. She wants to get the dialogue going and make Albuquerque feel more connected to what’s going on around the world. “The timing [of HABITAT],” she ascertains, “came together really beautifully and it’s been great to feel like what we’re doing here is really part of an international moment that is gaining momentum.” So not only is Paris connected to Albuquerque, but Albuquerque will soon make its mark on Paris. Suzanne recently learned that the HABITAT project has been accepted as part of an enormous global arts exploration and celebration

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Photo: Kyle Zimmerman

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6. Scott Greene, *Bear Market*, 2015, oil on canvas on panel, 30x40, courtesy of Catherine Clark Gallery. 7. STEMarts Lab@ThePASEO workshop 2014, Projecting Particles Instructors: Marcus Dorninger & Agnes Chavez. This image references "Projecting Climate Change", a youth workshop presented by 516 ARTS and Explora on December 9, 2015, 4-8pm at Explora.



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For the full schedule of HABITAT events and further details, visit 516arts.org.

called *ArtCOP21* (artcop21.com), which seeks to remind the citizens of the world that climate change issues cannot solely be resolved behind the often closed doors of science and policymaking.

Much of the HABITAT project contends with the initial reactions many people have to the subject of climate change—feelings of apathy, fear of the unknown, or immobilization in the face of such an enormous challenge. What can I possibly do to make a positive impact in this catastrophic situation? This is where the message of Mel Chin—featured artist, climate change activist and keynote speaker for the HABITAT project—steps in to inspire our best selves and, as Nancy Zastudil puts it, “do what the arts and humanities have always done, which is highlight our sense of humor, sensitivity, grieving, romance—all of these very human qualities that will help us adapt and help us survive.”

Nancy also notes that the voice of London-born author Zadie Smith is inherently present, though not directly included, in the project. Smith contends in her essay, “Elegy for a Country’s Seasons,” that there is all of this scientific and ideological language for what is happening to the weather, but hardly any intimate words, despite all the ways in which climate change affects us on an intimate level. The go-to euphemism to describe all that happens to us is to say, “This is the new normal,” however, Smith encourages us to appeal to the sense of intimacy in order to “create the necessary traction in our minds...to turn from the elegiac what have we done to the practical what can we do?”

What we can do, according to Mel Chin, is “expose people to something awesome...the role of the artist is to expose people to something awesome and ultimately convert their consciousness.” Suzanne describes the “bombastic” project Mel is working on for Paris, where he’s bringing an Inuit sled driver to the French capital to tell people, “The Arctic is here, the Arctic is in Paris and the melt is already affecting you. Everything you know about where you live will be different now, the Arctic is no more.” But the sled driver will be driving a sled led by standard poodles trained to run through the streets of Paris. It’s a very dire message, but it’s done in a very funny, theatrical way, like he’s creating a public service announcement. Mel, Suzanne says, doesn’t believe we can stop climate change, but we have to look at connection and adaptation, or we won’t make it. So, his ultimate message is, “Let’s get busy, people!” It’s a really positive call to action.

Suzanne notes Chin also reinforces Martin Luther King, Jr.’s message about creating change: “From time immemorial we have been taught to value self-preservation first. It’s false. The rule of life is the preservation of the other. You can apply it to anything we’re doing, including art and climate change. How do you preserve the life and mindset of someone else? It’s a powerful lesson in how to be human.”

Since the HABITAT project began, Nancy explains, the language around climate change has started to shift from, “This will happen in the future,” to, “This is happening right now.” And it’s these subtle changes that can really get people to feel that urgency. At times both Suzanne and Nancy feel stuck, wondering about the relevance of the HABITAT project, asking, “Are we just raising awareness or are we trying to change policy?” But that type of binary thinking can be limiting, and where the arts are most successful, they decide, is somewhere in between.