

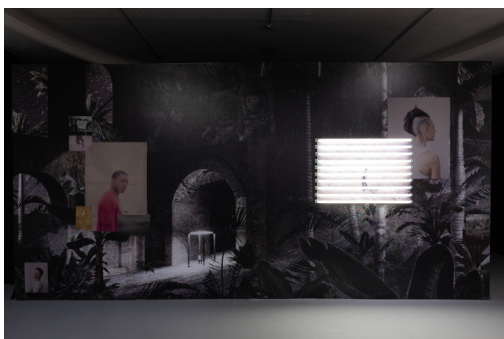
HYPERALLERGIC

ART

The Haunting Image of Home Amid Climate Change

In the face of natural disaster, artists question how the overwhelming anxiety of environmental degradation can be harnessed into creative action.

Rosa Boshier October 15, 2019



SMITH x DIPLOMATES, "Desideration (prologue)" (2019), wall paper, photographs, fluorescent tubes, installation view at LACE (Collaboration with Galerie les Filles du Calvaire, Paris, photo by Christopher Wormald)

LOS ANGELES — How do we mourn a broken home? *Paroxysm of Sublime*, currently on view at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), attempts to answer this question. The planet is still here, though bruised and broken, grown over by human intervention. When our places of origin become more and more unrecognizable, our homes begin to haunt themselves.

The concept of "solastalgia" — existential distress caused by environmental change — provides the underpinning for *Paroxysm of Sublime*, an exhibition in partnership with France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX). Theorist Glenn Albrecht writes that solastalgia is "a form of homesickness one gets when one is still at 'home.'" In the throes of this pre-loss, one mourns home before it is truly gone. *Paroxysm of Sublime* troubleshoots the turning point when all that is familiar begins to morph into something grotesque and nightmarish. The dystopia, it seems to say, is now.



Paroxysm of Sublime, installation view, France Los Angeles Exchange (FLAX) at LACE (photo by Christopher Wormald)

When walking into LACE, one is immediately confronted with a mini-forest of tree trunks sewn with golden thread and carved with architectural precision. For a moment, nature is indistinguishable from the industries that manipulate it. The piece, Sara Favriau's "Miel," is accompanied by a quote from environmental historian Jared Farmer that tells the story of how early settlers in California decided to "repair" its lack of greenery by planting myriad

non-native trees (including tens of thousands of palm trees in Los Angeles). The state we call home is in many ways a monstrosity of utopian thinking.

Amid environmental turmoil, we have sleep apps that simulate the sound of the ocean. Our exercise machines can take us on a simulated journey through Zion Natural Park at the press of a button. [Carmen Argote's](#) photograph "Marks of Birth" accentuates a (possibly irreversible) exchange between nature and its manmade interventions. Closing in on a hillside charted by a mess of blue lines, Argote accentuates the tension between the architecture of Colombia's capital Bogotá and the Andean hill of Monserrate that it sits on.



Carmen Argote, "Marks from Birth" (2018), printed photograph, framed, 27 by 17.5 inches (photo by Christopher Wormald)

Featuring a number of international and diasporic artists, *Paroxysm of Sublime* deftly illustrates the cultural specificity behind our reactions to environmental horror. Laura Huertas Millán's short film "El Laberinto" mines the relationship between Colombian drug trafficking, its consequent damage on the Colombian rainforest, and the influence of Western opulence. A quasi-documentary of found footage, "El Laberinto" details the downfall of Evaristo Porras, one of Colombia's

most prominent drug lords, who died penniless in 2010. Oscillating between shots of Porras's mansion, a reproduction of the fictional Carrington family's mansion in the hit American 1980s drama *Dynasty*, and clips of the actual show, Millán points to the romanticization of the American excess that drove Porras's narco-capitalist ambition. Porras's mansion now stands in ruin due to lack of use, a

symbol of greed gone sore. Yet amidst the tragedy and destruction, the film shifts to poetic vignettes of the Colombian Amazon, highlighting the enduring possibilities of Pre-Colombian environmental stewardship practices.

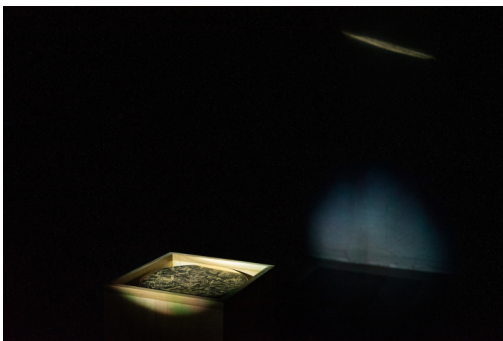


Laura Huertas Millán, "El Laberinto (The Labyrinth)" (2018) (still), 16mm, found footage, HD. 21 minute loop (photo by Christopher Wormald)

Beatriz Cortez exposes cultural bias around contemporary Indigenous life. Her sculpture — a collection of unearthed branches — pushes against the common moniker for Indigenous ancestors as our “roots” — Cortez maintains that this label, “...erases [Indigenous people] from the present and the future.” The piece suggests a deeper study of the subaltern, of the life below our feet that we often take for granted. It implies that Indigeneity, “our roots,” is still growing, thriving, and full of life.

In the face of natural disaster, *Paroxysm of Sublime* questions how the overwhelming anxiety of environmental degradation can be harnessed into creative action: Can we make friends with the monstrous, reinventing it into possible futures? Do we turn it inside out and analyze the language, materials, and social constructions that got us here?

By providing a narrative beyond environmental collapse, SMITH's piece “Desideration,” a collaboration with multidisciplinary architecture studio DIPLOMATES, envisions a new beginning, around the corner from the end. “Desideration” details an emancipatory fiction in which a new human race finds an “organic link with the stars” amidst the debris of apocalypse, becoming literally connected to the universe. The sweeping photographic collage situates SMITH himself as the first member of this new humanity.



Candice Lin, “Meditations on Last Philosophy (in which the possibilities of a coevolutionary, spontaneously generated, parasitic future are demonstrated)” (2015), alien hologram,

Candice Lin, with a bit of humor, exposes the legacies of patriarchy and colonialism in science. The audio book featured in Lin's piece, titled *Meditations on Last Philosophy (in which the possibilities of a coevolutionary, spontaneously generated, parasitic future are demonstrated)*, ruminates on the “infection of femininity” and invites the listener to “hold tight while you can to your patriarchy.” The book tracks the nature of parasites and the

gold, copper, circadian clocks, wood, plant material, sugarpaste walnuts with Jesus' Vagina (a miniature book), audio text (Ghebaly Gallery, Los Angeles, photo by Christopher Wormald)

possibility of “two alien kinds of creatures making a new disease,” implying that social degradation begins in the ways we name our social and scientific practices.

Instead of artist names and work titles, quotes from writers such as Ursula K. Le Guin, Anna Tsing, and Octavia Butler appear throughout the gallery. These quotes run the lifeline of contemporary theory, ranging from calls to action like *e-flux journal's* urging to “build new worlds,” to Donna Haraway's insights on multi-species co-existence. In *Paroxysm of Sublime*, theory becomes a kind of homecoming, both stabilizing and generative. The study of theory is a harbor from which to contemplate environmental calamity, leading to critical and creative responses to it. In other words, *paroxysm* — a sudden “attack” of expression — is catalyzed by thought.

However, I can't help but wonder if all the thematic tangents potentially block rather than cultivate emotional responses to climate change. The press release's mention of Los Angeles as a synthetic landscape leads viewers to believe that the works will be in conversation with the city, yet this allusion isn't realized in the exhibition itself.

With some patience, though, you'll find that *Paroxysm of Sublime* successfully detangles the cultural, political, and historical threads that led to the current state of the planet. The show offers no universal solutions, but rather suggests that remediation to climate change can be found in individual response. By understanding ourselves and our national contexts, perhaps we can begin to forge a path out of environmental collapse.

[Paroxysm of Sublime](#) continues at the Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (6522 Hollywood Blvd, Hollywood) Los Angeles) through November 3.

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