

**The Gray Market**

## Why the Wave of Climate-Crisis Art Is More Than Just Virtue-Signaling, Even If It's Not Enough (and Other Insights)

Our columnist asks who will follow the lead of artists confronting collectors with the ecological crisis at even the most commercial events.



Melanie Daniel, *Still Falling 4 U* (2021). Courtesy of Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

Every Wednesday morning, Artnet News brings you [The Gray Market](#). The column decodes important stories from the previous week—and offers unparalleled insight into the inner workings of the art industry in the process.

This week, when messaging is no longer enough...

## THE OTHER 'NEW NORMAL'

The summer of 2021 made it official: anyone unwilling to accept that humanity has barreled through the guardrail into constant ecological crisis is either shamefully ignorant of the wider world, or intellectually and ethically bankrupt. It is no longer alarmist to state that, *starting now*, every government body and business sector on earth must dramatically reprioritize in order to minimize the suffering of everyone already alive, let alone future generations. The shift is no longer about undertaking a few big initiatives, either; it is about recognizing that the planet's health has become precarious enough to loom over every small choice too.

That's my gloss on the message driving writer, sociologist, and MacArthur Fellow Tressie McMillan Cottom's latest essay, "[The Disaster We Must Think About Every Day](#)." The mandate applies to the art industry at least as much as to any other industry, if not even moreso. The good news from the return of live art fairs so far this fall is that a growing number of artists is making it harder and harder to escape the blaring of the climate sirens at even the most sales-centered events in the art market.

The bad news is that these same artists are frustrated, angry, and/or scared enough to make ecologically harrowing work even for these venues—and that the rest of the art trade, from collectors and dealers to institutions and fair organizers, may think that exhibiting and consuming the work is enough to make a difference, when what's necessary instead are holistic changes in thinking and behavior.



A wildfire approaches the Olympic Academy in ancient Olympia in western Greece on August 4, 2021. Photo: Eurokinissi/AFP via Getty Images.

## TRAGIC SUMMER

It feels both impossible and overbearing to try to condense the climate horror of even the past two months into a few paragraphs, but the context is too critical not to try. Here in the U.S., the Dixie Fire (70-days-old and still burning about 50 miles north of Lake Tahoe as of my deadline) has incinerated nearly 1 million acres en route to becoming the largest single wildfire in the documented history of California. It is also currently only one of 10 active wildfires in the western states, according to the [\*New York Times\* Wildfire Tracker](#). (Related: We now live in a world where the planet's largest media organization has deemed it valuable to create a continually updating online wildfire tracker.)

In August, The latest in a string of heat waves punished the Pacific Northwest, pushing temperatures as high as 107 degrees Fahrenheit (42 degrees Celsius). The following weeks saw Hurricane Ida so thoroughly overwhelming the New Orleans power grid that roughly 100,000 residents were still without electricity three weeks later, before crippling the New York metro area's transit system and

killing more than 50 people in the Northeast corridor, including several New Yorkers drowned in their basement apartments.

Flash floods in Tennessee claimed another 21 lives at a minimum in late August. Then last week, tropical storm Nicholas lashed the Gulf Coast with Biblical rains made even worse by the sluggish velocity that increasingly typifies 21st century storms. Nicholas occasionally slowed to just two miles an hour per the Times, meaning it did more damage to each city in its path than otherwise-comparable storms back when temperatures were cooler, and the air was drier, than in today's ravaged climate.

The news since August 1 has been just as unsettling if you looked abroad. Pulitzer Prize-winning climate chronicler Elizabeth Kolbert noted the following fresh ecological hells midway through last month:

*The city of Siracusa, in Sicily, set what appears to be a new European temperature record of 119.8 degrees [Fahrenheit, or about 49 degrees Celsius]. More than 60 people were killed by wildfires in Algeria... Wildfires in Greece prompted the country's Prime Minister to declare a "natural disaster of unprecedented dimensions," and in the Chinese province of Sichuan more than 80,000 people were evacuated because of flooding caused by torrential rains.*

Oh, and if you're wondering about what motivated Kolbert's grim roundup, it was the release of a new report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a body cofounded by the United Nations and the World Meteorological Organization in 1988. U.N. secretary-general António Guterres summarized the group's findings as a "code red for humanity." But hey, people are still buying lots of art, so we've got that going for us!

It was against this devastation that McMillan Cottom talked to marine biologist and nonprofit founder Ayana Elizabeth Johnson for a recent episode of her podcast (with cohost and author Roxane Gay). Johnson's approach is defined by complementary urgencies: yes, the climate is deep into a state of emergency... and yes, we still have the capacity to make things better if we take actions on both individual and societal levels. (Her stance is well represented in the title of her own podcast, How to Save a Planet.)

What actions, though? One recommendation that made a strong impression on McMillan Cottom (and me) also seems salient for the art world. McMillan Cottom paraphrased Johnson by writing that “as creative people we have the power to create popular culture in which climate is the backdrop of everything we consume. Dr. Johnson added, ‘The climate should be the context of every story we tell.’”

McMillan Cottom continued:

*And that really hit at the center of my intellectual and creative soul. That every story I tell, every talk I give, every book and every article I write, the context of that should be that we are living amid rapid, currently declining trend lines of climate disaster and change that are impacting how people can self-actualize and flourish in human societies. That should be the backdrop of everything, from laughing about Tinder dates, to thinking about whom we vote for, to the chorus in a pop song. Everything should have that backdrop.*

To me, it’s starting to feel like a larger and larger chunk of contemporary art *does* have that backdrop. In one sense, that shouldn’t be surprising. Almost everyone’s level of exposure to the climate crisis proceeds from their level of economic precarity, and all but the most financially secure artists live more precarious lives than even the average member of the (shrinking) middle class.

In another sense, though, conventional wisdom would advise artists who are intent on actually selling their work to set aside scary subjects for lighter, or at least non-apocalyptic, fare friendlier to collectors. It should both hearten and disturb all of us that they are increasingly unwilling to play this game—even at art fairs, the most unflinchingly commercial fixtures in the primary market.





Artist Augustas Serapinas with his installation *Mudmen* (2020), presented by Emalin as a part of Art Basel's Parcours section. Courtesy of Emalin.

## SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND

Recent examples of climate-crisis art abound all the way from the emerging end of the fair spectrum to the apex level. At last week's upstart Future Fair, Brussel's Stems Gallery brought multiple works by Toronto-based Tristram Lansdowne depicting ominously empty T.V.-newsroom sets where the video screens display imagery evoking different crises. The most striking of these was *Greatest Hits* (2020), a painting featuring a surreal weather map showing five past hurricanes (Dennis, Emily, Katrina, Rita, and Wilma) converging in the Gulf of Mexico. In a nearby booth, Asya Geisberg Gallery of New York dedicated one wall to a large canvas by Melanie Daniel, whose quasi-psychedelic paintings center on humans trying (not always successfully) to adapt to a natural world made increasingly unnatural by ecological trauma.

It was no more difficult to find pieces contending with climate catastrophe at this week's Art Basel, either—even though I'm at my desk in Brooklyn instead of in Switzerland, and even though I could

only peruse its Unlimited and Parcours sections (for large-scale and public works, respectively) online while researching this column Monday.

The latter group includes Emalin gallery's presentation of Augustas Serapinas's *Mudmen* (2020), an array of would-be snowmen instead made out of soil, hay, and water; the artist originally created the piece for the 2020 Riga Biennial with the help of city residents during another eerily warm winter filled with rain rather than frost. In *Surra* (2021), a Parcours installation presented by Galerie Nagel Draxler of Germany, Pedro Wirz has installed a disquieting hive-like form descending from the ceiling of one of Basel's libraries. The title refers to both the *marimbondo surra*, an especially nasty species of wasp native to the Brazilian region where Wirz grew up, and the Portuguese word *surra*, meaning "a beating"—a combination that links the alien den to the artist's frequent themes of ecological and civilizational devastation.



Pedro Wirz's *Surra* (2021), presented by Galerie Nagel Draxler in Art Basel's Parcours section. Courtesy of Galerie Nagel Draxler.



Climate peril is getting the supersized treatment indoors in Basel's Unlimited Section too. Prime among the qualifying works is Mumbai-based Jitish Kallat's *Palindrome Anagram Painting* (2018–21), which presenting gallery Templon describes online as a foreboding “speculative abstraction” pointing toward the decline of life across land, sea, and sky. Reinforcing the unsettling imagery is the artist’s decision to arrange the seating for Unlimited viewers so that it mirrors the hands of the Doomsday Clock, the symbolic device maintained by a collection of renowned nuclear scientists to quantify civilization’s proximity to oblivion each year.

Although here Kallat has set the seats-as-clock to two minutes to midnight (i.e. Armageddon) to match the “time” when he commenced the colossal painting in 2018, the actual clock’s keepers have since moved it ahead another 20 seconds—as near as humankind has ever been to the end in the device’s 74-year history.

Reached for comment, Templon executive director Anne-Claudie Coric called Kallat’s piece “a poetical exploration of our complex relationship to the environment, science, and the fragility of the universe.” As for the gallery’s role in addressing the climate crisis, she said, “I think our main responsibility as art dealers is to promote the voices that artistically question and reflect on these issues. Artists have a unique ability to raise consciousness through discourse and forms that differ from classical political discourse.”



Jitish Kallat, Detail of *Palindrome Anagram Painting* (2018–21). © Jitish Kallat. Courtesy of Galerie Templon.



But one fact true believers in art must recognize is that consciousness-raising is only as valuable as the actions it inspires. “Art isn’t activism,” said Melanie Daniel, the painter whose ecological dystopia was on view in Geisberg’s Future Fair booth last week. “Maybe it’s watered-down, soft activism” at most, she allowed, but no more than that. And Daniel, who was born in Canada but relocated to Israel as an adult, knows from direct experience that we’re past a point where soft activism is enough.

“I used to tree-plant many years ago and saw the devastating effects of clear-cut (non-selective) logging on the wilderness in British Columbia. When I return to visit my family in the province every year, I’m horrified at the accelerating changes in that part of the world,” she said.

“As a child growing up there, we rarely experienced fires on this scale. Now, with the heat-dome effect and temperatures soaring to 50 degrees Celsius (120 degrees Fahrenheit), forests and towns are incinerated in minutes. Last summer, we couldn’t see the sun and wore masks outside because of the smoke, not because of COVID.”



Melanie Daniel, *Goat Love in a Digital Age* (2018). Courtesy of Asya Geisberg Gallery, New York.

It has become a regular part of life for ashes to fall from the sky “for months” in British Columbia, Daniel said, and the lake near her family’s home has become too warm to support any of the aquatic life it used to.

Yet the vital point is that being forced to adapt to a climate nightmare like this is no longer just some frightening future possibility for a small minority of the population somewhere else. It’s already the present reality for millions of people, including some of us in the niche art world.

So no, art alone isn’t enough to solve this problem, no matter how good the work is or how widely it is shown. But even though I think much of the art world tends to overrate visual art’s power to change minds and motivate action, I also still strongly believe that narratives and impressions are stronger than even the most harrowing facts.

Maybe artists can’t convince either elite collectors or the rest of the industry that our climate reckoning is here, and that the only hope we have is to shape every daily decision in response to its threat. But even if so, it looks like artists won’t let the art market escape that fact anymore, either, no matter how much some of its other members might just want to buy, sell, and socialize. Good on them, because if we stay on this trajectory, soon enough no amount of commerce or networking will save anyone.

[The New York Times]

That’s all for this week. ‘Til next time, remember: death by a thousand cuts works on a planetary level too.