

The
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Art about climate change Chilling

The future is uncertain. It is also inspiring

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A SHORT film called “The Drowning Room” features a seemingly ordinary family dining together. The scene is mundane, silent but for the sharp tick-tock of a clock. But there is something eerie about the way it looks. As air bubbles escape from their lips, it becomes clear: they are under water. Created by Reynold Reynolds and Patrick Jolley, “The Drowning Room” is haunting. These people don’t seem to know that they are drowning.

“The film is a good metaphor for climate change,” says Klaus Biesenbach, director of MoMA PS1, the contemporary wing of New York’s Museum of Modern Art. He included it in a summer-long arts festival that attempts to address the ecological challenges of the 21st century. Among the other provocative works in this show, called “Expo 1: New York” and sprawled across several city venues, is an installation by Olafur Eliasson, a Danish-Icelandic artist, called “Your Waste of Time”. This is a frigid gallery filled with 800-year-old chunks of ice that had fallen from Iceland’s largest glacier; when the show ends they will be left to melt. Another installation called “Rain Room” by Random International, a London-based group, lets visitors “control the weather”—that is, walk through a room of falling water and stay dry (see picture). The most moving exhibit, however, may be a group of large photographs of the American frontier by Ansel Adams, which blaze as beautiful visions of untainted land.



MoMA PS1 had been planning a big show that deals with political themes. But after Hurricane Sandy in late 2012—which destroyed New York’s coastline, ruined many art galleries and left locals feeling vulnerable—the show’s environmental concerns became more urgent, says Mr Biesenbach. At a time when climate is vanishing from the political agenda, he believes art can “touch and disturb” in ways that charts and articles cannot.

The idea that art has the power to move, persuade and even inspire change is an old one. “Art is not a mirror to hold up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it,” declared Bertolt Brecht. But climate change poses some tough problems for artists: as a concept, it has long seemed too big, too grim, too abstract, too political and too far away. Efforts to portray it quickly become too preachy, too scientific, too shaming. Few can make a living from making people feel bad about themselves and doomed about the world.

Yet the MoMA PS1 show seems to be part of a trend. As extreme weather events seem to turn the distant threat of global warming into something tangible, cultural meditations on climate change are becoming more popular. In January Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt began what it calls “The Anthropocene Project”, a two-year culture programme that considers the human impact on the natural world. In October Toronto’s Royal Ontario Museum, one of the largest in North America, will host Carbon 14, an art exhibition and four-month programme of plays, talks and seminars about climate change. In apocalyptic fiction, climate change is steadily replacing nuclear warfare as the doom-monger’s cataclysmic threat of choice.

We need to “rethink the way we live and rethink our values. That’s culture,” explains David Buckland, a British artist. His view that climate change is ultimately a cultural problem inspired him to create Cape Farewell, an organisation that sends artists on expeditions with scientists to witness the effects of climate change first-hand. British participants are an impressive who’s who of unlikely swashbucklers, including Antony Gormley, Rachel Whiteread, Robyn Hitchcock and Ian McEwan. There have been ten voyages since 2003, most of them to the Arctic. The next one sets sail in August around Scotland’s northerly coasts and islands, as part of a four-year project to explore climate-related changes closer to home.

These expeditions have yielded a motley array of works. Mr Gormley cast himself in ice and left the sculpture to melt; Jarvis Cocker crafted a song called “Slush” (“if I could, I would refrigerate this moment”); and Mr McEwan wrote the 2010 farce “Solar”, an uneven book that took a rather wry view of the idealists who believed a climate solution was possible.

Cape Farewell has reached more than 250 artists, whose work can be seen around the world. After joining an Arctic expedition in 2010, Paul Miller (aka DJ Spooky) composed

“Of Water and Ice” for string quartet, which he performed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in the spring, and just released as an album. “Unfold”, a multimedia exhibition with work by 25 participants, is now at the Nanjing University of the Arts after showing in Beijing and travelling extensively. A high point of the show is a piece called “Polar Diamond” by Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey, which involved creating a diamond from a polar-bear bone. Many of these works pose more questions than answers. That is the point.

The Lisbon earthquake of 1755, which struck when most people were in church on November 1st, All Saints’ Day, is often seen as the beginning of modernity. Its terrifying destruction inspired a fundamental rethink of humanity’s place in the world (and moved Voltaire to write his God-snubbing “Candide”). Some see climate change as forcing a similar moment. “That a massive sheet of sea ice might be melted because of decisions about how we make and use stuff is tremendous,” says Joe Smith, a lecturer in geography at the Open University. It is also terrifying. Art is increasingly becoming a way to cope.

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