

"Feeling the Heat" - Art and Climate Change

Apocalypse No!

Feeling the Heat at the 60 Wall Street Gallery

If one were to search for images of melting icebergs and oil-drenched beaches in "Feeling the Heat," one would search in vain. While the exhibition at Deutsche Bank's 60 Wall Street Gallery in New York investigates one of the world's most urgent problems, climate change, curator Liz Christensen distances herself from apocalyptic image of horror. Instead, she banks on art that's made well—and not just meant well.

Prepared scientific specimens, or merely bizarre sculptures? In the work of [Brandon Ballengée](#), one can never be sure. His photo works depict skeletons of frogs—with one astonishing flaw: the frogs have six hind legs. No, Ballengée's photos do not feature mutations created on the computer, but real specimens of the Pacific Tree Frog captured in California. Due to their sensitive skin, these animals react particularly strongly to environmental pollution and climate change, sometimes even with physical deformities. The frog as a Litmus test testifying to the condition of its—and our—living environment?

For more than a decade, Ballengée has not merely been studying the Pacific Tree Frog, but the overall decrease in the amphibian population worldwide. The New York-based artist operates in the interstice between art and science—as do many of the 16 artists in *Feeling the Heat*, the current show at the 60 Wall Street Gallery of Deutsche Bank New York. The exhibition addresses one of the most urgent problems of our time—global climate change and its effects. Curator [Liz Christensen](#) is not, however, concerned with painting as dark an image as possible of the situation; she avoids approaches that are all too didactic. Instead, the works are based, as she formulates it, on "an overarching belief in the power of the creative process to help open our eyes to what is happening." And this is precisely what [Chris Jordan's](#) works do.

His series *Running by Numbers: An American Self-Portrait (2006-08)* investigates the remains of the consumerist society. On each of his large-scale photographs, he converts statistics into unbelievable images depicting, for instance, the 160,000 soft drink cans emptied every thirty seconds in the US, or, as in one of the works shown in *Feeling the Heat*, the vast spread of the two million plastic bottles manufactured there every five minutes. From a distance, *Plastic Bottles (2007)* resembles a pointillist painting; the motif can only be discerned up close. Jordan's works are assembled together on the computer from thousands of photographs; they are not merely concerned with casting a critical eye on large-scale waste and environmental pollution, but also explore questions of perception, the view from near and afar, singular and plural.

It is one of the exhibition's great strengths that the art is consistently good. All too often, the artistic investigation of themes such as global warming or environmental damage leads to an invocation of a pristine,

unspoiled nature or to images of landscapes devastated by industrial exploitation. Exhibitions such as *Feeling the Heat* and *Greenwashing* at the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo in Turin, however—with artists such as Tue Greefort, Cornelia Parker, and Simon Starling focusing on the theme's social aspects—show the variety of alternative artistic strategies employed in addressing this complex theme at a far remove from idyllic or apocalyptic images.

Another artist exploring climate change is Olafur Eliasson. His 42-part *Glacier Series* (1999), shown in the exhibition *True North* at the Deutsche Guggenheim, depicts melting glaciers in the form of a serial grid. Eliasson's BMW art car *Your mobile expectations* (2008), a frozen racing car that runs on hydrogen, formulates questions on the connection between global warming, carbon dioxide emissions, and individual mobility. On the other hand, in his Internet platform *Free Soil*, the Danish artist Nis Rømer connects artists, researchers, and environmental activists. A close collaboration among artists and scientists also characterizes the exhibition *Weather Report*, which art critic Lucy Lippard organized in 2007 at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art and which inspired Liz Christensen to put on *Feeling the Heat*. With institutions such as the National Center for Atmospheric Research, the university city of Boulder is one of the centers of climate research worldwide. The exhibition's goal was to sensitize public awareness of the subject and to develop visions of a sustainable handling of natural resources.

The exhibition at the 60 Wall Street Gallery pursues a similar agenda, inviting visitors to become actively engaged in the works. Isabella Gonzales' installation *2 Cents' Worth* (2007) includes postcards that viewers can send to their congressional representatives to demand that they commit themselves to environmental protection. On the other hand, the *Seed Bombs* that Kathryn Miller has been making since 1992 from earth, gelatine, and plant seeds serve entirely peaceful purposes. As an urban guerilla, anyone can make plants grow on empty lots and create small ecosystems.

Other artists implement agit-prop to provide visitors with food for thought. "Change works through individual efforts that very naturally become a collective chorus", as Kim Abeles explains. The Los Angeles-based artist presents her *Presidential Commemorative Smog Plates* (1992)—porcelain plates bearing the portraits of American presidents. What from a distance resembles a patriotic gallery of ancestors turns out to be a scathing criticism of the insufficient environmental policies of various administrations. Presidential portraits ranging from William McKinley (1897-1901) to George H. W. Bush (1989-1993) consist of smog that has settled on the white porcelain surface. Abeles adhered a special foil to the plates, from which she cut the stenciled faces of the presidents. She then left the plates of those least concerned with the theme of environmental pollution for a longer period of time on the roof of her house in Los Angeles. While Woodrow Wilson's (1913-1921) plate only spent four days in the air of the city counting the most cars worldwide, Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) was subjected to the legendary Los Angeles smog for a total of forty days. The reason for this is printed on the plate in golden letters: in 1980, during the primaries, Reagan declared that "approximately 80% of our air pollution stems from hydrocarbons released by vegetation, so let's not go overboard in setting and enforcing tough emission standards from man-made sources."

On the other hand, Joel Sternfeld's approach is subtler. For his series *When it Changed*, he created portraits of the participants of the 2005 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in the Canadian city of Montreal. The delegates' fears are reflected in their faces—but also the hope for change, which the work's title also alludes to. Since the conference, awareness of the effects of global warming has increased worldwide, while more and more countries are undertaking measures to confront this planetary challenge. Yet when one views the works of Isabella Gonzales and Kathryn Miller or regards Patricia Johanson's drawings depicting "sustainable" gardens in harmony with the nature surrounding them and hence using less resources, *Feeling the Heat* conveys more than anything else the realization that it is not the responsibility of politicians to undertake measures against climate change. Each and every one of us can do something—and art is a good medium for conveying this message. Because, as Liz Christensen explains, "It is one of the great powers of art that it can sometimes sneak up quietly and then hit you on the head."

Feeling the Heat

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60 Wall Street Gallery

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