

Brooklyn Beta

‘American Landscape’ Artists Collect Data, Harvest Local Energy at FiveMyles

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By Nicole Brydson

“Right up until a couple of hours before we opened, we came in and it was like alright, this is the,” artist Dan Carlson said recently before pausing to look around the FiveMyles Gallery in Crown Heights as if someone were listening.

“I don’t know I might get in trouble for saying this – I was concerned that it was looking too much like a cold-ass Chelsea show where there were just smaller frames on the wall in a large space and it looked kind of stark.”

But the show, *American Landscape*, is stark in a different way. In fact, it is a local, accessible reminder that artistic expression might be the last truly free realm to explore the interdisciplinary matters of modern life, environment and politics.

Juxtaposed against the early artists of the Hudson Valley style, whose creative re-creation of the manifest-destiny era American landscape lacked substance if not beauty, these modern artists toil in the devastating industrial quandaries of our society.

The show is open through December 16 and features work by Marin Abell, Josh Bricker, Chad Curtis, Dymph de Wild, Ben Finer, Daniel J. Glendening, Peter Lapsley, Jan Mun, Tom Pnini, Leah Raintree, Rick Reid, Corina Reynolds, Greg Stewart and John Wanzel.

These artists are “united through a heightened sense of awareness to their immediate surroundings seen through the lens of the American landscape; a landscape shaped by unseen socio-political forces, constantly shifting cultural paradigms, and the dizzying flux of construction and destruction.”

Dan, who took me on a tour of the work recently, is an artist and the organizer of the show, but not a curator he says – admitting there might be a slight conflict in showing his own work as a curator. He put together the original environmentally focused concept and assembled participating artists from nearby corridors of the artist collective Wassaic Project.

“I’m not going out and picking which works go into a show,” he said, adding, “Giving the power back to the artist to show what they really want to show, and what fits in, and what gels with everyone else’s work” is most important to him.

“Why does this model still exist?” he continued. “Where it’s like – private gallery space, curator is the middleman and the artist seems to come last, when they’re really driving the boat, you know what I mean? That was really important to me too.”

That sort of intermediation might have banished Dan’s piece *liminal: Powered by Newtown Creek* from the gallery space. This industrial concept was a particularly interesting twist on an environmental catastrophe, but indicated a way in which one might create opportunity out of crisis.

Everything in the show has substance and weight, as this piece does, with the refreshing element of play added to each. In 2010, Dan and his best friend got in a canoe, rowed down the Newtown Creek and collected sludge filled with oil and minerals leftover from the last 100 years of industry, refined it and used it to power a billboard that read “Powered by Newtown Creek.”

Greg Stewart and Dymph de Wild’s contribution is a fully functioning artpocalypse cabin, complete with survival suits, decorated with remnants of discarded mass consumerism, unveiling a little humor in destructive tendencies. According to the statement it was “designed for the chaos spawned from migration and adaptation in the areas between urban and rural environments.”

A recent Parsons MFA graduate, Josh Bricker’s video contributions are a fascinating reorganization of video data points. Entitled *God Bless De-territorialized America (endo-colonization in the age of techno-fetishism)* (2012), this video is crowdsourced from amateur fan footage off YouTube. Josh seamlessly transitions each video of national anthem fireworks, bombers and singers into one seamless stadium experience. Dan tells me, “He takes it to a nicer space where there’s room for critical thinking.”

Josh’s second video is *Time Labor Money*, actually three videos displayed in triptych, pulling together those specific relevant data points from episodes of Discovery Chanel’s *Deadliest Catch* series and put them in a sequence that unveils the way those three things play out in the landscape, with hilarious results.

“There’s definitely a humorous quality,” said Dan, “A lot of it comes down to the absurdity of the modern condition.”

liminal: powered by newton creek (by Dan Carlson) from Panhandler Magazine on Vimeo.

Over a span of 100 years (and including the largest oil spill in American history*), in excess of 30 million gallons of oil has leaked into Newtown Creek, a 3.5 mile long body of water that forms the border between North Brooklyn and Long Island City. The “soft- bottom” that remains to this day is a 5 to 10-foot thick layer of immensely viscous sludge composed of petroleum, raw sewage, heavy metals, and decaying organic matter, which hovers above the “hard-bottom” of Newtown Creek. After the E.P.A. instituted an investigation of the primary parties responsible for the notorious spill and the designation of the creek as a Superfund site, the existing oil marinating in the water is referred to as “free-product.”

For this project, 10 gallons of sludge was harvested from Newtown Creek with a 25-foot long manual bilge pump attached to a canoe. It was then refined using a waste-oil processor equipped with dual-pole polymer filtration beads that absorb any material that is not petroleum-based. The resulting product was poured into a 3 kW diesel generator that provided power for a handmade, back-lit billboard that read “Powered by Newtown Creek” and functioned as a temporary public installation near the East River entrance to the creek in April of 2010. The billboard, generator, and video documentation were shown as artifacts of this engagement at The Kitchen the following June.