“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”

—Aldo Leopold, Sand County Almanac

Miss Anthropocene is the title of the latest album from Claire Boucher, Montreal’s DIY musician and cyberspace pop-songstress better known as Grimes. Boucher’s self-cultivated mystique and angel of the Internet aesthetic continues to define the themes explored in her fifth album—those familiar with her music will recognize the warbling club anthems of a new age diva who is familiar with the power of song and fantasy. In a recent interview with The Wall Street Journal on the subject of the current status of her career, Grimes stated, “I wanted to make climate change fun.” This statement garners further intrigue when considering the artist’s romantic relationship (including a rumored pregnancy, announced in February 2020) to tech mogul and billionaire Elon Musk, whose ambitions include, among other things, terraforming Mars with one million people by 2050. Grimes looks to identify with our current geological epoch, while Musk looks to leave it behind.

The word Anthropocene, credited to Eugene Stoermer, then later formalized by Dutch atmospheric chemist Paul Stutzen, refers to the period of geological time that began when humanity became the dominant impact on the Earth’s geology, ecosystems, and climate. In The World to Come: Art in the Age of the Anthropocene at the DePaul Art Museum, a group exhibition of artists over thirty-five international artists working across several mediums exhibits the response, discussion, and interpretation of this fiercely debated term. Favoring photography and video over sculpture and painting, the show was originally exhibited at the Harn Museum of Art in Gainesville, Florida, from September 2018 through March 2019, including a lengthy roster of noted artists such as Liu Bolin, Kimyo Mishima, Taryn Simon, Andy Yang, Trevor Paglen, Noelce Mason, and Gideon Mendel, among others. Originally curated by Kerry Oliver-Smith, The World to Come highlights an effort to encompass a timely theme that implicates global capitalism, white colonialism, and extraction culture.

The large scale of this group exhibition implies the equally large curatorial task required to address the sheer volume of “physical and social effects” of a planetary condition, alongside the consideration required to present work representative of a history undergoing its own creation. This debate of authorship surrounds the exhibition’s most explicit concerns, explored in seven themes; Deluge, Raw Material, Consumption, Extinction, Symbiosis and Multispecies, Justice, and Imaginary Futures. “The Anthropocene might seem to offer a dystopic future that laments the end of the world, but imperialism and ongoing (settler) colonialisms have been ending worlds for as long as they have been in existence,” writes Kathryn Yusoff in her seminal text on the subject, A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None? How these concepts present themselves in context reflects the polemics involved with such a proposition, namely, that the grammar of this current environmental condition must not humanize change, but rather signal a crisis that we must take responsibility for.

Documentary photography takes precedence in the exhibition as the dominant medium—through the lens of Yusoff, images like Gideon Mendel’s Adlene Pierre, Savanne Desolée, Gonaïves, Haiti,
September 2008 (2008) achieve a complicated duality of meaning. Taken from Mendel’s Drowning World series, we see a Haitian woman, framed in the center of the photograph, standing in a doorway, staring into the camera, with flood waters reaching up past her waist. Mendel’s activist intentions show clearly the devastation on the subject’s home that stem from natural disaster, but by including this particular woman, in this particular country, Mendel invokes the requisite history of black culture and aesthetics often overlooked in the discourse of the Anthropocene.

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The exhibition does well to make this statement clear: humanity and earth are inextricably intertwined. Yet in addition to this perspective, other works reach further into the recesses of the current political stratosphere. For example, under the exhibition’s subheading, Imaginary Futures, artist Noelle Mason address technology and surveillance in relation to the Anthropocene. The exhibition’s title The World to Come invokes irony when considering the cross-stitched pieces from Mason’s series X-Ray Vision vs. Invisibility (2011–12), where digital images sourced from the US-Mexico border are remade by hand into material objects. The work tells the story of an all too brutal present, as well as an abstract invocation of past histories of human trafficking. Mason’s narratives of the undocumented immigrant do less to acknowledge the individual, in place speaking to the geo-political systems that are in place to govern border maintenance and surveillance—inescapeable elements of the Anthropocene.

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