

The World to Come

ART IN THE AGE OF THE ANTHROPOCENE // DEPAUL ART MUSEUM

By Ryan Filchak



“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.”¹

—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.”² 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,³ 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, includ-

ing a lengthy roster of noted artists such as Liu Bolin, Kimiyo Mishima, Taryn Simon, Andy Yang, Dana Levy, Trevor Paglen, Noelle 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*.⁴ 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.

—“If the Anthropocene is viewed as a resurrection of the impulse to reestablish humanism in all its exclusionary terms of universality, then any critical theory that does not work with and alongside black and indigenous studies will fail to deliver any epochal shift at all,” says Yusoff.⁵

—Other works of photography on display include Richard Mosse's *Stalemate* (2011) and Taryn Simon's *White Tiger (Kenny)*, *Selective Inbreeding*, *Turpentine Creek Wildlife Refuge and Foundation*, *Eureka Springs, Arkansas* (2007) provide further striking images for the exhibition, in part due to the use of a similar photographic style to Mendel. In each piece, nature takes dynamic precedence over the subject of humanity, portrayed as the aggressor towards machinery and as a caged animal, respectively. The absence of a human figure in each image does not dismiss a human involvement or complicity. In the instance of Chinese artist Liu Bolin's self-portraits, the artist literally hides his own figure amongst natural resources and cityscapes in order to claim social and political statements. *Hiding in the City, No. 95, Coal Pile* (2010) uses Bolin's act of identity forming to reinforce the unavoidable connection between body and earth, and the choices made both by him and for him in connection to fossil fuel extraction and use.

“The exhibition does well to make this statement clear: humanity and earth are inextricably intertwined.”

—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—intrinsic elements of the Anthropocene.

—In our current moment of historic and radical definition, *The World to Come* works to highlight artists like Andrew Yang, whose video work *Interviews with the Milky Way* (2016) explores the Anthropocene on an all-encompassing astrological scale. The two-channel video plays audio interviews conducted by



Yang atop moving images of space; one interview is with his mother Ellen S. Yang, a child psychologist, and the other with his friend Jeff Oishi, a professor of astrophysics. In the work, the artist asks questions to people in his life, leveling topics such as breastfeeding with the celestial phenomenon of the Big Bang. This exhibition, ambitious in scale and scope, looks to achieve a similar understanding —by pulling material from both the largest and smallest moments of human history, only then can a clearer definition of the current geological era take shape.

The World to Come: Art in The Age of the Anthropocene at the DePaul Art Museum runs through August 16, 2020.

- 1 Leopold, Aldo Carl. *A Sand County Almanac*. New York: O.U.P., 1966.
- 2 Bradley, Ryan. “The Life and Death of Grimes.” *The Wall Street Journal*, March 20, 2019.
- 3 Steffen, Will; Grinevald, Jacques; Crutzen, Paul; McNeill, John (2011). “The Anthropocene: conceptual and historical perspectives,” *Royal Society*.
- 4 Yusoff, Kathryn. *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.
- 5 Ibid.

IMAGES:

Liu Bolin, *Hiding in the City, No. 95, CoalPile*, 2010. Chromogenic print. © Liu Bolin. Loan courtesy of Eli

Klein. Image courtesy of Eli Klein and the artist.

Gideon Mendel, *Adlene Pierre, Savanne Desolée, Gonaïves, Haiti, September 2008*, from the series *Drowning World*, 2008. Chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist and Axis Gallery, New York and New Jersey.

Richard Mosse, *Stalemate*, 2011. Digital chromogenic print. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Futuristic render of a collection of Starships on the surface of Mars. Elon Musk and SpaceX.