

Nataraj, Nirmala. “Greenhouse Britian’ and ‘The Force Majeure.’”
San Francisco Chronicle, October 10, 2009.



Kala Art Institute [View Larger Image](#)

Some conservationists may take issue with the term "environmental art," considering the legions of artists whose practices are out of sync with the natural environment (for example, sculptor Christo, whose wrapping of an Australian coastline led to penguins and seals becoming trapped under the fabric). That's where British artistic duo Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison, pioneers of the eco-art movement, break from convention. The Harrisons' multidisciplinary approach to creating work is less interested in the gallery world than in social change.

Pieces from the Harrisons' "Greenhouse Britain" and "The Force Majeure" shows give both environmentalists and art buffs a taste of their approach - using art as a tool for change. By engaging in dialogue with ecologists, architects, biologists and other artists, the Harrisons offer potential solutions to issues that we've been grappling with for decades.

Their past work includes the lyrical 360-foot-tall mural "Lagoon Cycle" (1974-1984), which engaged personal anecdotes and experimental science to ask provocative questions about the possibility of survivalism. Considering the importance of location in the Harrisons' work, "Casting a Green Net" (1998) is an example of a work that proposed a conceptual design for sustainability in the Trans Pennine region of north England.

Lauren Davies, Kala Art Institute's director of exhibitions and public programs, says, "The exhibition presents a fascinating approach to proposed redesigned living scenarios. (They) have been collaborating on this work since the 1970s ... which has become more common in the art world in the last 10 or 20 years. But they're a collaborating pair that shares their work with entities outside of the art world, and their proposed plans have even been accepted as governmental policy, which is truly revolutionary."

"Greenhouse Britain" - imagined through a variety of media, including models, videos and soundtracks - is a five-part piece that revolves around the concept of new forms of settlement as a creative response to the destruction of the globe. It includes mapping and animation of a proposed village where the land is designed to absorb the local carbon footprint, and a town based on principles of ecosystemic thinking.

"The Force Majeure" offers another overview of works invested in global warming, including "Tibet Is the High Ground: Part II," a projection map of the Tibetan plateau that essentially predicts the calamitous results of rising water levels in this region.

The show will be accompanied by an artists' talk and a larger panel discussion (see Kala's Web site). The public discourse element of the work offers creative discussion about plausible solutions. The Harrisons, based in Santa Cruz, say their work begins "when we perceive an anomaly in the environment that is the result of opposing beliefs or contradictory metaphors. Moments when reality no longer appears seamless and the cost of belief has become outrageous offer the opportunity to create new spaces."

Reception 6 p.m. today. Through Feb. 27. Noon-5 p.m. Tues.-Fri., noon-4:30 p.m. Sat. Kala Art Gallery, 2990 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley. (510) 841-7000. www.kala.org.

- Nirmala Nataraj, 96hours@sfchronicle.com