

Helen Mayer Harrison & Newton Harrison *Global Warming* *Greenhouse Britain, 2006-2009; Related Works, 1974-2009*

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts January 10 – February 7, 2009 Thomas Micchelli



Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, "The Ocean is a Great Draftsman" (2008). Where the ocean redraws the Isle of Britain reducing mass, increasing edge, making the one island become many islands. Ink on canvas. 29 1/2 x 95 1/4 inches. Courtesy Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York. Photo: Hermann Feldhaus.

While looking at Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison's exhibition *Global Warming* on a dark, dank, altogether nasty Wednesday afternoon, an unrelated opinion piece from that morning's *New York Times* kept drifting into my head. It was by the novelist Douglas Coupland, cautioning that the nation's newfound thriftiness, a virtue compelled by the economic collapse, can lead to unforeseen consequences for a system programmed on rampant consumption with no backup plan. Our dissolute, self-perpetuating cycle of covetousness and greed (I thought of William S. Burroughs's liverless Mugwumps, existing solely on syrup, a life-prolonging narcotic secreting from their genitals) has run its course: we've reached the point where past practices and old solutions no longer apply, where hope is indiscernible from dread. At the end of the article, Coupland writes, "In my mind we were never really in the future until we hit that edge—and now we have—and because of this, everything we sense in 2009 is going to be new, but that's what the future was always supposed to be about."

With their quietly impassioned exhibition, the Harrisons deliver the judgment that the crisis of climate change, like that of the global economy, has already overtaken us. The future we have long been denying is incontestably, fatefully, now. In their view we have already passed the tipping point and nothing less than a radical reversal of

the way we husband the earth's resources can stave off global warming's most catastrophic effects. Through texts, charts, maps, and video projections, they have laid out a number of worst-case scenarios; among the most graphic are "The Ocean is a Great Draftsman" (2008), a series of five images in which Britain is progressively reduced to an archipelago by rising ocean levels, and "Tibet is the High Ground, Part II: The Force Majeur" (2009) a 7 x 7-foot map of a caput mortuum-colored Tibetan plateau, looking like a deep bruise on the earth's crust, that demonstrates the devastating effects of rapid glacial melting on the seven rivers that feed the region and support one-sixth of the human race.

As trenchant and distressing as these visuals are, what is most astonishing about the show is the gradual sense of uplift that you feel as you study the artists' proposals for new physical and social structures aimed at reestablishing détente between the exigencies of civilization and the inexorable forces of nature. Each project is specific to one problem and one location, like rescuing the city of Bristol from flooding or redesigning the Lea Valley watershed. These are not futuristic speculations but collaborations with outside agencies such as the Land Planning Group at Sheffield University and the architecture firms APG and ATOPIA. They may have been dismissed as fantasies just a few years ago, yet today they feel not merely viable, but crucial: hydropower

harnessed from rising water levels; sail-like vertical cities of a million or more, sustained through hydroponic gardens, solar energy and completely recycled waste; highland villages where reforestation sucks twice as much carbon out of the air as the population produces.

Perhaps it was the oasis of warmth and civility that the gallery provided from the unforgiving elements outside, but in the glow of the Harrisons' inspired yet hardnosed optimism—not that everything will be okay, but that we would somehow find a way—it was easy to surrender to the sensation of consolidation and convergence that seems to be enveloping our moment (see, in this issue of the *Rail*, Cora Fisher's profile of the Canary Project, another two-person team taking on the issue of climate change—albeit with a more elliptical approach—who are also convinced that we have passed the point of no return). At a time of epochal perils and opportunities, when the social compact is up for grabs and the audacities of delirious visionaries can seem like our only hope, it is not unreasonable to imagine that experimentation and risk will soon become the order of the day. Douglas Coupland might define this state of intrinsic uncertainty as being "in the future," but once, a long time ago, it was called Modernism. And that's something you can buy stock in. ■■