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History Lessons

Greenhouse Britain and the Force Majeure

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison
Dec 10 - Feb 27
Kala Art Institute Gallery
by Lea Feinstein

Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison are not afraid to think big. At the new Kala Art Institute Gallery, they focus their collective designer's lens on the earth itself, and specifically on the problems arising from irreversible global warming, which they title the "Force Majeure." Since 1974, the two artists and activists have researched, interpreted, and visualized the coming cataclysm. Working as the Harrison Studio, they have collaborated in Europe, the United States, and Asia with citizens, architects, planners, scientists, and governments to seek fresh perspectives on intractable environmental issues, and have proposed creative solutions, many of which have been adopted by the real world. "Greenhouse Britain" was exhibited from 2006 to 2008 in the United Kingdom, and in 2009 at the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York.

What distinguishes the Harrisons' work from other eco-artists is the rigor with which they approach their fact-gathering, the dispassionate tone used to report their findings, and the creation of dialogue between parties with opposing interests. They position themselves as speakers for the land itself and work to promote the idea of living gracefully and empathically within the natural environment—be it a crab lagoon, the San Francisco Bay, the Thames Estuary, or the headwaters of an entire continent's rivers. Their approach is not scientific, cartographic, or one of urban planning, but a combination of all three, framed as art.



The Book of the Seven Lagoons from *Book of the Lagoons*, 1984; limited edition handmade book. Courtesy of the Artists and Kala Art Institute Gallery, Berkeley.

Their lifelong mission has been to create works of art that are also works of science. In Sri Lanka and in California, they studied lagoon ecology and the marine life that thrived there. *The Book of Seven Lagoons* (1984) is a giant workbook recording their investigations. It is a template for later, more ambitious projects, and includes laminated maps, drawings, photos, graphs, and musings, which give an in-depth view of the artists' working process as a couple.

The gallery, filled with wall-sized maps and videos, evokes a geography classroom with a mission. Interspersed throughout the visual displays are scroll-like texts reporting each project's findings. They are linedated as poems, Zen-like in their complex simplicity. Two voices speak in these texts, entwined, but not obliterating one another. The effect of this "conversation" is an underlying message: differences can be reconciled, consensus is more important than unanimity, and genuine collaboration is possible. The Harrisons themselves, in their artistic process, model an approach to solving the problems of the world. The rich archive on their [website](#) chronicles their attempts.



"Greenhouse Britain;" installation view. Courtesy of Kala Art Institute Gallery, Berkeley.



Tibet is the High Ground, Part III, 2009; projection map; 84 x 84 in. Courtesy of the Artists and Kala Art Institute Gallery, Berkeley.

In *Tibet is the High Ground: Part III* (2009), a giant map of the Tibetan plateau lays out the courses of seven of the world's great rivers. A selected portion of the accompanying lengthy text, transcribed from the gallery wall, informs us:

The research of Chinese glaciologists/ and glaciologists from India/ appears to be right/ 80% of the glaciers in Tibet/ and surrounding areas/ can disappear in the next 25 years/ Measurements of glaciers large and small/ show the melting of the Tibetan plateau/ to be about seven percent a year/ triggering drought, flood, desertification/ and sandstorms/ Irrigation and hydroelectric power will suffer/ More mountain lakes will burst their dams/ The list is long and getting longer.../ It is not clear that/ the countries.../ can put aside differences of culture,/ race and religion.../ to create a counterforce at / virtually continental scale.../ Long term survival requires a phase shift/ where cultural belief and legal structures flip/ from valuing extraction to valuing nurture....

The Harrisons propose a new form of non-national governance assigned to consider ecological alternatives. This positive thinking, with the ability to conceptualize a “phase shift” of such magnitude, is at the heart of the Harrisons’ practice.

“Greenhouse Britain” addresses equivalent plights in the British Isles. *The Ocean is a Great Draftsman* (2009) pictures Britain reduced to an archipelago in six successive phases as the ocean rises 100 meters. A project to divert the Avon River from flooding the town of Bristol is proposed. In Britain, the Harrison Studio collaborated with the architecture firm ATOPIA to design settlements for populations displaced by coastal flooding. These self-sustaining visionary settlements were conceived as “vertical villages”. The tall sail-like forms are beautiful, but the dwellings themselves don’t seem too different from utopian housing designed in the United States in the mid-20th century.

Today, many other artists and scientists are at work on related issues. [Edward Tufte](#) has analyzed how we construct meaning from maps, diagrams, and new media. [Michael Singer](#) has worked with cities in the United States and Europe to re-vision waste treatment plants as architectural gems. [Amy Franceschini](#) has resurrected urban Victory Gardens and engaged in public eco-activities. Scientists like [Janine Benyus](#) study biomimicry, and describe the “grace” with which plants and animals are adapted to their surroundings.

The Harrisons have been drawing attention to the issues of global climate change for 40 years. Now that the undeniable reality of global warming is upon us, their work seems prescient. Framing their investigations as art has given the Harrisons a platform from which to maneuver: to ask impartial questions, to consider opposing positions, to propose the unthinkable. The ability to tolerate ambiguity—the “not-knowing” that is part of every artist’s daily practice—together with the willing acceptance of the unexpected and a gift for metaphor have served the Harrisons well. Now, for grace.

“Greenhouse Britain and the Force Majeure” is on view at [Kala Art Institute Gallery](#) in Berkeley through February 27, 2010.