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Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison at Kala Art Institute Gallery, Berkeley



Green House Britain and The Force Majeure
Courtesy Kala Art Institute Gallery

Global warming and its predictable dire consequences— melting glaciers, rising waters, receding coastlines, and the concomitant reduction of some of the Earth’s most critical land masses, which would cause great shifts and migrations of populations—only seem like recent topics of concern, due mostly to politicians and governments who have been so slow in heeding the warnings and taking substantive ameliorative or remedial actions. Witness the recent Copenhagen Climate Conference (6-18 December 2009) and its lack of meaningful results or binding agreements.

That global warming is a topic of only recent concern, however, is clearly and historically not true. We have been heating up the planet for a very long time. Many scientists and environmentalists have been working diligently for decades to warn and alert us to the dire consequences of global warming, and also to propose and promote alternative viable ecological and environmentally friendly solutions. Two such dedicated visionary experts are Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, who, through various ingenious and creative projects, have been telling the story of global warming and its effects for nearly forty years. A wonderful exhibition of their creative projects and proposals is now on view at Kala Art Institute’s new gallery in Berkeley. This is an exhibition that everyone should see, and that no one should miss, not only for its topical subject matter of concern to all of us, but because of the beauty and genius of the Harrisons’ imaginative presentations of their ideas and thoughts.

The multi-media presentations of *Green House Britain* by the Harrisons in this fascinating exhibition include the following:

On the Island of Britain: The Rising Waters—A bright and colorful large-scale illuminated model of the Island of Britain, resting on the floor, measuring 7 ½ x 13 feet, on which six overhead projectors show the rising waters,

storm surges, and the changes to the coastline caused by global warming.

On the Upward Movement of People: A New Pennine Village—Made in collaboration with the Land Planning Group at Sheffield University, this is a design proposal for a 9,000-person village where the land around it is ecosystemically reconfigured to absorb the local carbon footprint of the village through the use of forest and meadow.

In Defense of the City of Bristol—A three-minute video that proposes a defense and salvation for Bristol, England, by the unusual use of the Avon River and the Avon Gorge.

The Lea Valley: On the Upward Movement of Planning—A collaborative work with APG Architects that takes issue with the existing development of the Thames estuary, which the model shows as submerged in water, and casts a new design for the 1,000-square mile Lea Valley watershed to include habitation and sustenance for a million people in environmentally and ecologically sound high-rise structures, with solar power, stilts, and hanging gardens.

On Eco-civility: The Vertical Promenade—A proposal for a concept of civility built into a vertical village.

Other works on view, dating from 1974 to 2009, give an extensive history of the Harrison's engagement with the topic of global warming:

San Diego is the Center of the World (1974)—Documentation of a work in the Powers Gallery of Contemporary Art Collection in Australia, which includes images from a book by Jerome Rothenberg, published in 1977 by The New Wilderness Press. This is the first work by the Harrisons on global warming.

The Book of the Seven Lagoons (1984)—A limited edition of a large, elaborate and beautiful handmade book, with colorful hand-drawn fanciful images and photographs, recounting various "lagoon" projects, including the following: a crab and mussel hatchery; a retelling of the history of the Salton Sink/Sea with cartographic maps of the Central Valley of California, including the 1905 planned rerouting of the Colorado River waters for irrigating the Imperial Valley, which resulted in the diverted waters breaking their channel and spilling into the Salton Sink, creating a new inland Salton Sea and a new changing habitat with largely disastrous consequences; and apocalyptic images at the end of the book predicting the effects of global warming we are witnessing today.

The Garden of Hot Winds and Warm Rains (1994-1995)—A 24 foot x 36 inch drawing, commissioned by the Kunst und Ausstellungshalle, Bonn, Germany, for the design of two small ecosystems in middle Europe based on a predicted temperature rise of 3 degrees Centigrade.

The Mountain in the Greenhouse (1999)—A 4-minute video on the upward movement of species as the glaciers melt and the high ground warms, with imminent extinctions.

Peninsula Europe: The Force Majeure (2007-2008)—Two large beautiful images, 80 x 92 inches, that graphically depict the migrations of people, animals and plants that would be caused by a drought affecting a third of the European Peninsula as glaciers melt, with a counter-proposal.

The Ocean is a Great Draftsman (2009)—A series of images of the Island of Britain, rust colored on a vibrant blue background, that show the Island progressively becoming many islands as the ocean rises by stages, 5, 10, 25, 50, 70 and 100 meters, respectively.

The 10th Meditation on the Sacramento River, the Delta and the Bays at San Francisco (2009)—A drawing with accompanying text and map, 80 x 42 inches, illustrating how a 3-foot rise in the water level would reshape the bays of San Francisco, reaching inland to Sacramento, requiring a new form of governance.

Tibet is the High Ground, Part II: The Force Majeure (2009)—A 7 x 7 foot azimuthally equidistant projection map of the Tibetan plateau with color and text showing that the seven rivers flowing from the plateau and nourishing 1.2 billion people in ten countries are endangered by the rapid melting of glaciers in the plateau.

To give you a taste of the rich beauty, thoughtfulness and complexity of these multi-media works, here is part of the text from “Let me tell you a dream,” accompanying an image of the Ring of Fire in the *Book of the Seven Lagoons*:

*I awoke knowing that
the business of the universe
is conducted
in an odd kind of dialog*

*For instance
I see the Ring of Fire
as a discourse between fire and rock
taking place mainly at water’s edge*

And this telling conclusion about the Lagoon projects, with its fatalistic “nature will out” tone:

*The lagoon developed a life of
its own
about which we know
nothing at all*

Many California artists have, of course, created works that depict the devastating effects of global warming, most notably in the San Francisco Bay Area, the painter Anthony Holdsworth, whose *Global Warming Triptych, New Montgomery and Market*, shows in three stages the changes effected by the rising of the waters in San Francisco as a result of global warming. No one, however, has been so long engaged with this topic as the Harrisons, particularly with their proposed counter-measures and corrective visionary projects, including watershed and forest restoration, and agricultural and urban renewal.

Planned Events for Harrisons Exhibition at the Kala Art Institute Gallery:

30 January 2010: Artists’ Conversation with the Harrisons, with an introduction by critic and art historian Peter Selz.

20 February 2010: Panel Discussion, “Transformative Processes in Environmental Art,” with the Harrisons, Robert Dawson, Greg Niemeyer, John Roloff, and respondent Sam Bower, moderated by Susannah Hays.