

Human/Nature at the Berkeley Art Museum

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The *Human/Nature* exhibition at the [Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive \(BAM/PFA\)](#) is beautiful, both in concept and content. Among other qualities, the show achieves an aura of maturity and real world-relevance that stands in quiet contrast to some of the contemporary art world's less noble celebrations of cultural currency and market value. It was exhilarating to encounter a show that takes artists and their ideas this seriously.

Human/Nature: Artists Respond to a Changing Planet is an ambitious collaborative project of which the exhibition itself is the final stage. Included are new commissioned works by Mark Dion, Ann Hamilton, Iñigo Manglano-Ovalle, Marcos Ramírez ERRE, Rigo 23, Dario Robleto, Diana Thater, and Xu Bing. The project was sponsored by two California contemporary art institutions—BAM/PFA and the [Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego](#)—and the international conservation organization [Rare](#). The overall premise of the project is summarized by the paired questions: Can conservation inspire art? Can art inspire conservation?

To attempt an answer, each of the eight artists was given the opportunity to chose a destination from a global list of UN-recognized [World Heritage Sites](#)—places of high biological diversity which are also at high risk for habitat loss and species extinctions. Artists completed mini-residencies in their chosen locations, with full logistical support and access to local scientists, conservationists and native communities through Rare's network of contacts. The only requirement was that, working on site and after their return home, each complete a single piece or body of work in response to their experience.

Bringing artists to the front lines of the conservation battlefield was risky in several ways. Clearly there are issues of artistic integrity involved, and introductory videos explain how these were addressed. The project was carried out under an explicit agreement between artists and sponsors that the resulting work be entirely free of conditions. The artists were not expected to act or be identified as conservation agents when visiting their chosen sites. They were encouraged not to feel burdened by any preconceived ideas of what was expected of them, beyond completing a residency in a threatened location and reporting back through their work.

Art and environmental causes have been paired in many ways before, but seldom on such a high level and with such an explicit focus on global declines in species and biological diversity. In its early stages the collaboration included two additional institutions, the Houston Museum of Contemporary Art and the New

Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Both eventually had to bow out for financial and other reasons, leaving just the two West Coast art museums and Rare as sponsors. Two artists on the original list of ten (**Olafur Eliasson** and **Gabriel Orozco**) also withdrew, leaving eight who completed the project.

Human/Nature unfolds across three levels of BAM's cascading gallery space. The work on display is highly varied in style and mood, reflecting differing practices and sensibilities and also the unique biological and cultural circumstances that each artist encountered. Many if not all of the pieces were shaped as strongly by encounters with people as with natural environments. The loss of nature is explored in very human terms throughout, often from the perspective of local communities, or in light of broader human values and meanings.

The pairings of artists and locations, and the kinds of work these produced, were often fascinating. **Mark Dion**, it turns out, has a lifelong fascination with Komodo dragons, and visited [Komodo National Park](#) in Indonesia for his residency. Dion has explored themes of natural history museum collection and display extensively in his work, and one might have expected something along those lines emerging from his Komodo experience. What Dion produced instead was a fully functional supply cart for the park's tireless and poorly equipped rangers. The wheeled, decorated cart (replicated for the exhibition) included everything from scientific equipment and a small library of field guides to basic supplies—tools, flashlights, first aid gear, playing cards. Beyond the admirable underlying gesture it's an interesting work. In a sense Dion has reversed the current of some of his previous collections work, bringing the implements of natural history study back out into the field. As museum-goers what we see is a replica of the artist's original, which was left (and is presumably serving its function) on the island of Komodo.

Other pairings were equally intriguing. **Ann Hamilton** visited the [Galápagos Islands](#), and produced a complex installation reflecting her engagement with the islands' legacy of evolutionary studies, with sensory features of the natural environment, and with local school children. **Marcos Ramírez ERRE** went to the [Yunnan Protected Areas](#) of southern China. His installation is a gorgeous 20-foot long, temple-like structure incorporating elements of Tibetan monastery architecture, with four embedded plasma monitors showing long video sequences of daily household and work life shot during his visit. **Xu Bing** traveled to [Mount Kenya National Park](#) in Kenya, where he became deeply involved in an educational process centered on forest protection. In a series of workshops he worked with children and teachers in developing their own art using methods of calligraphy and drawing.

Like other visitors I was immediately drawn to two large, hanging sculptures by **Rigo 23**. The artist visited the highly diverse [Atlantic forest](#) region of

southeastern Brazil, and completed works in collaboration with indigenous villagers using local materials and methods. What appear from a distance to be large but delicate organic forms turn out to be something quite different. Suspended just a few feet off the ground is an enormous nuclear submarine built of tree fibers and bamboo. An opening on one side reveals a festive crew of colorful carved figures in indigenous dress.

High overhead, meanwhile, a cluster bomb is exploding. *Sapukay: Cry for Help* is a large and multifaceted mobile, with dozens of basket-like containers spilling from the bomb's open hatch. Many of the baskets have already unleashed their contents: brightly painted animals and birds. In both pieces the gesture of reverse appropriation of powerful, dominant culture symbols is carried off well, thanks to the seamless blending of concept and craftsmanship. Icons of mass destruction (and mass simplification) are unexpectedly and powerfully suffused with rich diversity, and a sense of enduring beauty. The work also possesses a kind of magisterial presence which counteracts any overly simplistic reading of flower-in-a-gun-barrel symbolism. The political message comes across in a language unencumbered by irony and manifest anger—the register of resistance is more Gandhi-esque.

The most powerful work in the show, however, was that conceptual artist **Dario Robleto**. I spent well over half of my time in the museum studying Robleto's sculptures, and ended up neglecting some of the other artists. If part of the goal of *Human/Nature* was to expand the conceptual repertoire and perhaps even the practice of conservation through encounters with contemporary art, I think Robleto's work makes the greatest contribution. While other artists found unique and inspiring ways to both celebrate and defend nature, Robleto goes the necessary step further in exploring how we might mourn nature's now inevitable decline.

He does so by means that are both dense with information and precisely, poetically to the point. Forgoing the opportunity to travel to some more exotic location, Robleto chose as his destination the [Waterton Glacier International Peace Park](#), on the border between the U.S. and Canada. There he worked with scientists studying the park's melting glaciers, which become a central metaphor in Robleto's work for multiple kinds of loss. In speaking of his conversations with the scientists, Robleto explains that he was seeking not only specialized knowledge but clues to deeper understandings: What does it mean to us that so many things once taken as eternal are now fleeting, almost eternally gone? And how can we possibly respond?

Robleto describes himself as a materialist poet and his work shows why. His six sculptures on display bear titles such as *Time Measures Nothing but This Love*, and *The Ark of Frailty*. Robleto begins his sculptures with words, and then pieces together the physical elements. Each is a kind of display case collection of

decorative domestic materials and wild, sometimes impossible-sounding objects and substances. The various elements are often woven together with audio tape bearing recordings of particular, unusual sounds, or contained in intricate glass vessels. The elegant *The Common Denominator of Existence is Loss*, for example, is composed of rings of “50,000-year-old extinct cave bear paws, human hand bones, stretched and pulled audio tape of the earliest audio recording of time (experimental clock, 1878).”

Or consider the description of *A Homeopathic Treatment for Human Longing*: “Glass vials, vintage glass electrode wands, nineteenth century bloodletting cupping glass, various homemade homeopathic remedies (sound of glaciers melting, voice of oldest to ever live, last heartbeat of loved one, million-year-old blossom, million-year-old raindrop, deceased lovers’ heartbeats, extinct animal sounds, extinct languages), various custom-ordered remedies made by professional homeopath (black amber, willow, tears, mammoth hair, glacial runoff, voice of oldest widow, black swan bone dust, Sylvia Plath’s voice) velvet, silk, leather, ribbon, brass, iron, cork, pine, typeset.”

This kind of work is hard to describe, and may not work for everyone. It probably won’t reward a casual viewing. But perhaps I share a kind of sensibility with this artist—the longer I looked the more I was drawn in, both intellectually and emotionally. I had a sense that here is someone who is bravely asking exactly the right questions.

Human/Nature completed its run at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego earlier this year. Now in the [Bay Area](#) it shows through September 27 at the Berkeley Art Museum. A great collection of supplementary material including video interviews with the eight artists is available at the project website, artistsrespond.org.