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ART, LAND, MONEY, DATA: ECOLOGY ALARMS GO OFF IN RENO

"One hopes that the twin lacunas expanding their empires into Reno underscored that the city and its environs are not a blank slate."

By Bryan Rourke |
Issue 64, Summer 2022

Dan Rizzie, The Wall, 2020, mixed media on wood panel, 120 × 192 in. (Nevada Museum of Art, Reno; Gift of Walter and Jane Hamilton, 2021.1.1.1). Photo: Kevin Montague.

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This is one of the questions that "Into the Time Horizon," at the Nevada Museum of Art, seeks to answer. Most notably, the show asks whether art can contribute to the work of ecological restoration, and what kind of aesthetic obligations art mentals transformed ecological crisis. With this in mind, which criteria should be used to judge this exhibition, in which the Venn diagram of art, ecology, and capital is drawn? The curatorial statement on the exhibition includes works by 24 artists spread across 120,000 square feet. In the museum's favor is the fact that it holds the premier collection of Great Basin art, and that it is located in Reno, a city that has been a capacious crucibleage in art and the environment for the past eighteen years. Moreover, Reno is a place where art ever changing relationship to the physical and by natural resources is being thrown into sharp relief. Over the course of a recent three day visit, I became clear to me that this place is ripe for a critical reckoning. Reno is a place where the environment is threatened by three sites: Pyramid Lake, Lake Tahoe, and the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center (TRIC)—and their relationship to one another embody the mostly contradictions of this place, the barrier-scarring city in America.

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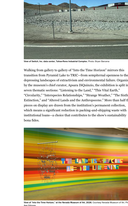
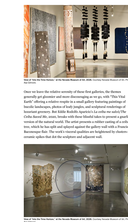


View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

Roughly twenty-five miles northeast of Reno is Pyramid Lake, a notoriously treacherous and turbulent body of water set within a geographic rift amid arid, windy, and rocky landscape. Outcrops of tufa—massive coral-like formations structures that were set at the bottom of an ancient lake, punctuate its shores and outlines the feeling that this is a place buried in time, a place that is ancient. Pyramid Lake is the ancestral and spiritual center of the Paiute reservation, defining much of the tribe's identity. The Paiute people's relationship to the lake is one of ecological interdependence and cultural timeworks, of acting in harmonious that exists harms and bonds to nature.

View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

The southern border of the Paiute reservation feels up against TRIC, the third largest industrial park on the planet and home to major data centers and manufacturing operations for companies like Tesla, Apple, and Microsoft. The vastness and interbreeds connected with Pyramid Lake, just few miles north of TRIC, seems all the more fragile as it meets the sprawl and the carnage of these sites. Nevada's Pyramid Lake is a place that is ancient and sacred, a place that has been the Paiute people's spiritual center for approximately 10,000 years. Moreover, Reno is a place where art ever changing relationship to the physical and by natural resources is being thrown into sharp relief. Over the course of a recent three day visit, I became clear to me that this place is ripe for a critical reckoning. Reno is a place where the environment is threatened by three sites: Pyramid Lake, Lake Tahoe, and the Tahoe Reno Industrial Center (TRIC)—and their relationship to one another embody the mostly contradictions of this place, the barrier-scarring city in America.



View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

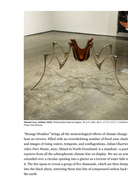
Walking from gallery to gallery of "Into the Time Horizon" narrows the distance from distant scale to TRIC—from amplified openness to the depressing landscapes of extractivism and environmental failure. Organized by the museum's chief curator, Aaron DiGiacomo, the exhibition is split into three sections: "Ancient Landscapes," "Industrial Sites," and "Future Cities." "Geodesic," "Antropocene Relationships," "Storage Weather," "The Bulk Extraction," and "Altered Lands and the Anthropocene." More than half the exhibition is devoted to the ancient landscape section, which means a significant reduction in speaking and skipping under with institutional home—a choice that contributes to the show's sustainability bona fides.

View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

The exhibition begins with "Listening to the Land," a section dedicated to the work that foregrounds traditional Indigenous knowledge, land stewardship, and decolonial methodologies. This portion features Gabriel Lee's Water Lands, a sculpture made of ceramic ornaments on chandeliers and, which just so happens to be a strength of the museum's collection, Cuyan Blue groupings of wood, painted bags known as Kachinas by the Hopi people, and Dan Rizzie's The Wall, a mixed media work of material and storytelling objects, leaving images of geometric symbols, skeletal humans, and animal forms. A thirteen-foot long allover painting of the Nevada landscape, The Wall is a kind of cosmic map of the Nevada that takes pride of place and is emblematic of a kind of nature-focus productivity present in many of the works in this section. Many of the artists included in "Listening to the Land" are Native American artists, like Lee, Rizzie, and Erich Pearl Kangi, one instance of the intersectl/human/nature group exhibition circuit and are represented by some of their best work produced over the past five years.

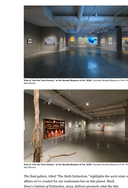
View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

Once we leave the relative serenity of these first galleries, the themes of extraction and environmental failure become more acute. "Altered Lands and the Anthropocene" offers a vision of a future where the museum's growing collection of art formed on the land. Among the offerings is Edward Burtynsky's photo digital triptych Five The Aqua and Lake Mooring, California, 2016, which shows a lake in Lake Mono, California, that has been drained to feed the Los Angeles Aqueduct. Burtynsky's photo, Rosedale Cooling, Colorado, 1413, depicting a man landscape punctuated by oil derricks on a giant black plume of smoke pollutes the sky, and Brendan Partridge's Pace and Scale, 2019, depicting Tyler Cowen's Mercedes-Benz, Tesla, and Porsche, in a Nevada desert, are among the dozens of Pyramid's 10 Gallons. It feels accurate to suggest that viewing these works excites pleasure. Yet such is an engaging is to be complicit in a kind of aesthetic violence, a kind of violence that ignores the plunder of the earth by extracting a cost-crude, processes yet impossible to look away from.



View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

The two galleries that follow—an ostensibly dedicated to ideas around animal/human hybridity, the other for artists who use repurposed materials to make sculptural work—are the show's most ambitious. Ambitious in the sense of trying to be mostly Handbook of the point, with limited, ever ready to contribute to these frameworks or the overall theme of the show. For example, Lee's Water Lands, mentioned above, is a sculpture made of Pyramid Lake's a replica fishing complaining, pickup, rather abandoned plus volume with arched dual legs extending from it. Despite its alluring Tolkien-esque aesthetic, I'm not sure what it is the extracted from, or extinguished in, the ecological here, other than art becoming fetish-like "Geodesic" section, is again plastic mixed and deformed, and art doesn't provide some context with which to approach the long standing practice of Indigenous knowledge and land stewardship. Instead, we are confronted with flat works made from recycled plastic, sand-treasure paper-envelopes, found plastic toys, patio broods, and soda cans.



View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

"Storage Weather" displays of the meteorological effects of climate change to bear on viewers. Filled with an overwhelming number of food crate charts and images of rising waters, temperate, and conflagration, Aidan Chartier's Storage Weather, 2022, and Jessica Rinaldi's Storage Weather, 2022, provide figures of both the ecological/anti-climate from on display. We are an are extended over a circular opening into a glacier or a crevasse of some falls into the Nevada desert, underscoring the fact that the Nevada Museum of Art is an hour drive, returning those free bits of compressed carbon back to the earth.

View of "Into The Time Horizon," at the Nevada Museum of Art, 2022. Courtesy Nevada Museum of Art, Photo: Kevin Montague.

The Great gallery, titled "The Bank Industries," highlights the worst sides of affairs we've created for our toolroom bits on this planet. Mark Dion's Cabinet of Curiosities, 2019, delivers precisely what the title describes, a historical Wunderkammer of scalped human-monitor-skulls, taxidermy, and other bits of human detritus. Dion's piece, which includes Gabriel's White Flag, 2019, a tattered flag made in the shape of a banner and mounted to a pole, is a dark and unambiguous sign of defeat for all living creatures. Dion's work, which is the most ambitious piece in the show, dovetails on special access multiple galleries, cape off the exhibition with The End, sadly, an apocalyptic Cold War nightmare. The work depicts a bunker, complete with a lone figure standing in front of a nuclear explosion against a backdrop of gyrating mushroom clouds—a fitting finish being, then, to the Informe Anthropocene.

View of Gabriel Lee, Water Lands, 2022, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. Photo: Kevin Montague.

A short thirty minute drive up the mountain from the museum brings us to the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe (the California state line runs across the water), an evergreen mountain paradise that feels like the environmental equivalent of a Disneyland ride, a place where the rich go to play, a place of pristine and placid blue waters, ski hills, and the homes of tech billionaires Larry Ellison, Sergey Brin, and Mark Zuckerberg. The hallway of the museum's second floor, which is "Future Cities," contains Jessica Rinaldi "Trigger Bible (dry to the touch)" 2018, and parodist, Despite the conservative-ensemble approach applied to certain parts of this exhibition, DiGiacomo's curatorial vision is at its best when it is at its most ambitious. Rinaldi's work, working by re-creating lost corporate-less Reno underscoring the day and the in environs are not a blank slate onto which they can recklessly build their exploitative and environment-damaging visions of the future. In the hard of expanding tech, massive tax breaks, and bought ecologies, "Into the Time Horizon" reminds us that Reno is a place that is ripe for a critical reckoning. Reno is a place that is ripe for a critical reckoning. Reno is a place that is ripe for a critical reckoning.

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