

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

When The Message Is the Art

In Pelham, an Exhibition
Successfully Makes Its Point
About a World in Crisis



A recurrent problem with a lot of contemporary art made as a response to the environmental crisis is that it tends to lack aesthetic feeling. In its place is an earnest didacticism, which is liable to become wearisome.

**ART
REVIEW**
**BENJAMIN
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So it came as a considerable relief that "And for All This, Nature Is Never Spent," at the Pelham Art Center, manages, for the most part, to sidestep this problem.

The exhibition — organized by Jo Anna Isaak, a guest curator, in collaboration with a group of Fordham University students — has an explicitly political motive: to broaden public awareness of environmental degradation. Still, it achieves that end with a selection of about 30 thoughtful, good-looking works by 10 artists from the New York region. This show has brains and beauty.

The art is often engrossing, beginning with Jesse Potts's "Narcissus: Narcissus" (2008-9), a homemade miniature plexiglass greenhouse in which the artist is growing narcissus for the duration of the show. Part science project, part oddball installation art, it dramatizes the ingredients for life on earth: light, heat and water.

Optimistically, a handful of artists celebrate nature's power of renewal — hence the exhibition title, which is taken from the writings of the 19th-century English poet and priest Gerard Manley Hopkins. Stephanie Lempert's atmospheric photographs of what at first look like pristine, beautiful landscapes are in fact depictions of reclaimed landfills around New York and Boston. The im-

OF THIS EARTH "And for All This, Nature Is Never Spent," an exhibition at the Pelham Art Center meant to focus public awareness on environmental degradation, includes, clockwise from top left, photographs by Susan Unterberg, "Untitled" (Pisces No. 25), and Subhankar Banerjee, "Snow Geese II," and Jesse Potts's mixed-media installation "Narcissus: Narcissus."

ages are overlaid with text telling the story of the transformation of these once-degraded places into the healthy, living natural environments they are today.

Ms. Lempert is one of the better-known artists in the exhibition, along with Alan Sonfist, an environmental artist whose work consists of a range of activities, including collecting sticks and rocks in nature, often in remote sites, which he sometimes arranges and photographs or takes back and exhibits in the gallery. He is famous for "Time Landscape," a permanent installation of native trees at La Guardia Place and West Houston Street in Manhattan.

Showing here is "Element Selections" (1974/2009), a mixed-media installation created in 1974 but being exhibited here for the first time. For the work, the artist extracted fragments from a landscape and then arranged them casually, almost naturally on a sheet of white canvas according to their original location. Photographs show how and where the objects were found.

For Mr. Sonfist, it is the pattern of activity that counts, much more than the result. This idea has its origins in conceptual art, and for some gallerygoers it may take a little getting used to, for

there is really nothing much to look at beyond the natural patterns formed by the fallen elements he collects.

At the other extreme are Mark Jones's photographs of decaying industrial structures and their impact on nature. To hammer the point home, the artist uses saturated colors to paint areas of the photographs where toxic



waste or other dangerous residues in the landscape can be seen, as in "Environmental Aesthetics No. 3" (1990), showing toxic water from the vats at an abandoned paper mill in Pennsylvania.

Similarly, there is little subtlety to Christy Rupp's series "Extinct Birds Previously Consumed by Humans," life-size sculptures of the skeletons of the

Highlighting industrial decay, and nature's power of renewal.

dodo, the great auk and other extinct birds, created primarily from chicken bones. To me these sculptures border on the obvious, aggressively banging away at a simple but tragic truth.

But these are the exception in an otherwise stimulating exhibition. Subhankar Banerjee's large-scale panoramic color photographs of Arctic wilderness in Siberia, Alaska and Canada, often showing the migratory patterns of animals and birds, are easy to like. Some are even mesmerizing, like "Caribou Migration I" (2002), shot from the air, showing antlike trails of caribous moving across the ice.

It is possible to dismiss Mr. Banerjee's images as pretty pictures of wilderness. But they have probably done more than any other work in this show to broaden an awareness of environmental degradation, having been used by environmental groups to argue against the opening up of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil drilling. In 2008, some of his photographs were shown at the United Nations headquarters in New York.

Mr. Banerjee's photographs can perhaps also be seen as an extension of the tradition of romantic landscape, which has played a central role in the history of American art — think of Thomas Cole, Frederic Edwin Church and Albrecht Bierstadt, or photographers like Carleton E. Watkins and Ansel Adams. It is an optimistic vision, even a spiritual one, in which humanity is dwarfed by the majesty of nature.

"And for All This, Nature Is Never Spent," Pelham Art Center, 155 Fifth Avenue, Pelham, through April 25. Information: (914) 738-2525 or pelhamartcenter.org.