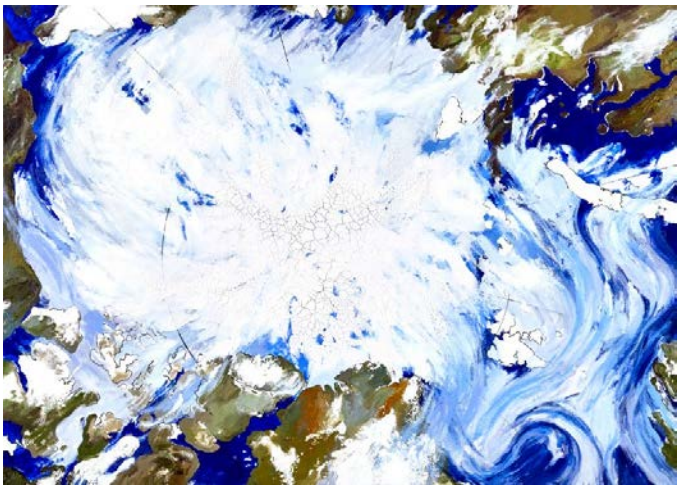
The Washington Post

In the galleries: Science expands nature art, on grand and minuscule scales



Diane Burko. "Arctic Melting, July 2016 (After NASA)," oil on canvas, 2016.

Review by Mark Jenkins, January 18, 2019

Incised into stones or painted on cave walls, images of nature are the oldest known artistic subjects. Forty or so millennia later, flora and fauna remain popular motifs, but a new sort of nature art has arrived, at least in the Washington area. Local exhibition spaces — some, but not all, connected to scientific institutions — are displaying work that depicts worlds too small or too big to be perceived by the unaided human eye.

One explanation is simply that people now can see many things that were previously imperceptible, thanks to devices such as electron microscopes and the Hubble Space Telescope. Advancing scientific knowledge also offers new conceptual subjects, on both cosmic and microscopic scales.

There’s a shift from poetic, humanistic and spiritual themes, which perhaps seem too vague amid the current fashion for “data-driven” thinking. Technology is now widely considered benign and even liberating, which it wasn’t during, say, the Industrial Revolution. Yet much contemporary science-minded art is concerned with such tech-driven threats as species extinction and global climate change.

The latter is the impetus for “Endangered: From Glaciers to Reefs,” Diane Burko’s show at the National Academy of Sciences. The Philadelphia painter-photographer compounds art and science in near-abstractions layered atop oceanographic charts. Burko began by collaborating with glaciologists to depict retreating ice at both poles, a project documented in a 12-minute video that melds footage of ocean waves and flowing paint.

Sometimes textures tell the story: One piece uses white crackle paint to simulate buckling ice, and the pigment is thickly applied in “Reef Grid,” a series that shows how coral reefs, too, are disappearing. Burko’s art can be read as representing general issues of change and fragility, but the maps underneath the paint hitch the pictures to specific places and a particular threat.

Julie Anand and Damon Sauer, "Calibration Mark AM43 with Satellites," 2015.

“Ground Truth: Corona Landmarks,” also at NAS, depicts landscapes in the context of technology. Julie Anand and Damon Sauer set out to photograph the 180 remaining targets that had been placed in a grid in the Arizona desert so that satellite-based cameras could calibrate their scale and focus. The top-secret Corona Project, which ended in 1972 and was declassified in 1995, was a CIA and U.S. Air Force surveillance program of China and the Soviet Union.

Although Corona’s metal birds are extinct, many more remain. The Phoenix-based artists map the paths of the publicly known satellites that were overhead at the moment the photograph was made, and add those orbits to the final picture. (A video reveals how they stitch the various elements together.)

Made of rock and concrete and placed in empty barrels, the Corona targets appear primal. But their purpose was technological, and secret. Anand and Sauer’s pictures remind viewers of how much of their world is covert.

IF YOU GO

Diane Burko: Endangered: From Glaciers to Reefs is on view through January 31. National Academy of Sciences; 2101 Constitution Ave., N.W.

Julie Anand and Damon Sauer: Ground Truth: Corona Landmarks is on view through February 22. National Academy of Sciences; 2101 Constitution Ave., N.W.

Admission: Free. Photo ID required. Open to the public 9-5 weekdays; closed weekends and holidays.