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ENTERTAINMENT

4 female artists mount a Chicago exhibit on climate issues: 'Activism work is care work'

By Nell Salzman

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Mixed media artist Jennifer Wen Ma, left, and performance artist Irene Hsiao talk through ideas of Hsiao's upcoming public interaction with Ma's art installation titled "Turn of the Tide," near the entrance of the Sable Hotel at Navy Pier on April 14, 2023. Ma and three other artists showed artworks together in a climate-focused exhibit titled "How On Earth" at the EXPO Chicago art exhibition. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

In advance of Earth Day, Ma was one of four female artists who came together earlier this month to present “How On Earth,” an exhibition put together by the Natural Resources Defense Council and the nonprofit Art at a Time Like This.

Janet Biggs, Helina Metaferia, Lily Kwong and Ma were among hundreds of exhibitors who participated in the 10th anniversary of EXPO Chicago, an international art fair held at Navy Pier’s Festival Hall from April 13-16. Biggs, Metaferia and Ma spoke about their work during a panel discussion on April 14.

“The women involved in this particular exhibit are generals and powerhouses who want to see our planet rescued,” said Barbara Pollack, co-founder and president of ATLT.

The exhibit was curated and executed by an all-female team in part to show how women with children are often disproportionately affected by drought and other natural disasters, said Biggs. Though her background is in painting, sculpture and glass, Biggs gravitates toward film. “It’s so immersive,” she said. “I wanted to explore an idea about autonomy and power structures, and convey the way that I experience the world, which is always moving and absolutely immersive.”

Her film work takes her all over the world, running into active volcanoes in Indonesia and traipsing through rainforests in the Amazon.

Biggs’ contribution to the exhibit was a three-channel video — three screens that were synchronized and worked off each other. Scenes from a Yemeni refugee camp in Djibouti in the Horn of Africa were juxtaposed with images from a Mars simulation.

Biggs said the Mars simulation comes from a group of international scientists and engineers who wear space suits and live as if they were on Mars conducting research, with hope of one day going to an analogue environment to conduct real research. For filming, Biggs also wore a space suit.

Over three years, she went back and forth to the Horn of Africa to film. She would enter a refugee camp with armed guards and stay for monthlong periods. She said it can get over 120 degrees in the camp, with sandstorms.

The movement of refugees across the Horn of Africa and the Mars-simulated astronauts spoke to Biggs. It’s a type of energized stagnancy, she said.



Artist Janet Biggs, right, and her sister, Karen Berman, discuss artworks while standing next to saplings planted atop tree trunks in an installation by artist Lily Kwong, titled "MOTHERFIRE," on display in an exhibit "How On Earth," at the EXPO Chicago art exhibition at Navy Pier. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

"I just felt this crosscurrent of humanity. Both groups were looking for new possibility," she said.

Artist Metaferia also focuses on movement, but across generations instead of deserts.

She is a professor at Brown University and a first generation Ethiopian immigrant. For the exhibition, she mounted two colorful collaged floating headdresses from her solo exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design titled "By Way of Revolution." The portraits are of Metaferia's young, female students of color, and she's carefully covered their hair with hand-scanned archives that relate to their ancestral lineage.

She said her work “deals with intersectionality on many levels.” She hopes it asks viewers to think critically about how each issue — racism, patriarchy and climate change — impacts the next.

Her inspiration for the bold artistic statements started in 2016, after the death of her mother, a women’s rights activist. She said her mother was working on a memoir, and it made Metaferia think about the lack of equitable representation of women in historical archives, particularly of Black women. She set out to change that narrative.

“Activism work is care work,” Metaferia said. “And in my very small part, my very humble platform, I offer a different perspective in how that work comes together.” Metaferia draws on the idea of beauty in struggle.

“I want people to feel — not just my subjects, but anyone looking at the work — a sense of responsibility,” she said. “We can change the narratives.”

A paper wave created by Ma looked like an ominous, sweeping dragon that came up from the wall. Made of delicate black paper decorated in gold, her vision was that the wave would slowly degrade over the course of the fair as a statement of human impact on the natural world.

Ma started painting on thick paper because she loved its tactile quality. And now she creates stunning, fan-like features with it — ripples that twirl out and then condense.

“(Paper) is one of the oldest materials we’ve had. And it’s really widely used in Chinese painting, calligraphy. So coming from that history, I’ve always been really drawn to it,” she said.

EXPO visitors could see Lake Michigan from the paper wave — the turquoise water clashing against the fanning black paper. Dance and poetry performances were held in front of it.



Saplings are planted atop tree trunks in artist Lily Kwong's "MOTHERFIRE" at the EXPO Chicago art exhibition at Navy Pier. (John J. Kim / Chicago Tribune)

Elizabeth Corr, associate director of arts and cultural partnerships at NRDC, said Ma's wave was emblematic of Corr's role with her organization. She partners with artists to break down the legal briefs that often accompany environmental policy discussions.

"Art helps break down that divide. It inspires, excites and mystifies people in a really beautiful way," she said. "Jennifer's piece is made of paper, but it has an ephemerality that really evokes the natural world in this surprising way."

Biggs, Metaferia and Ma, all based in New York, stressed that their pieces were about the viscerality of impending climate change.

Ma said the expansion and contraction in her piece is influenced by traditional Chinese scrolls. She said a Chinese scroll typically isn't displayed the same way as a Western painting. Only when a friend comes over is it unfurled.

"The act of opening and turning is almost like a movement of the landscape. It's an interactive, kind of visual experience," Ma said. "It's amazing how a world that opens to you can just contract and then be tucked away."

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