

Displacement

June 27-December 8, 2024

MassArt Art Museum

Displacement explores how humans have altered the sea, land, and air, and reflects upon how these environments are responding. Using textiles, sculptures, films, and scents, the artists in this exhibition encourage us to closely observe our world and think about how we can restore balance to nature and our communities.

Around 10,000 BCE, Earth's climate stabilized, remaining nearly unchanged for thousands of years. Atmospheric temperatures changed very little; oceans stayed at the same level; ice sheets held steady; and plants and animals settled into local ecosystems. Given these predictable conditions, our ancestors settled down, developed agriculture, and created civilization.

The Industrial Revolution marked a big shift as machines started replacing human labor to make things like clothes, building materials, and food. In the nineteenth century, we learned to harness the dense energy

contained within the coal, oil, and methane (natural gas) that had been buried underground for millions of years. Pulling these substances from the earth and burning them gave us unimaginable new powers. Some societies felt they had conquered nature; they believed the climate would remain stable forever.

Today, however, atmospheric temperatures are increasing; oceans are rising; glaciers are melting; and the weather is becoming warmer and wilder. After centuries of exploitation and displacement, nature is pushing back, forcing us to rethink how and where we live.

The artists in *Displacement* draw our attention to the causes and implications of climate change. By looking at past and present relationships between humans and the physical world, the artists highlight issues including migration, adaptation, and extinction. Their art gives us different ways to understand human impact on the environment and think about changing our path.

This exhibition was curated by Lisa Tung, Artistic and Executive Director, with Ana Gasparian, Curatorial Fellow. We gratefully acknowledge the **MAAM Programs! Fund** for continued support, and **Probable Futures** whose approachable distillation of climate science provided the bedrock for *Displacement*.

MAYA WATANABE

Zhùr, 2024

Single channel video installation

18 minutes

Courtesy of the artist, Tegenboschvanvreden, and 80m2

Livia Benavides

Maya Watanabe's *Zhùr* explores mortality and permanence. The video features a recently discovered wolf puppy that was frozen intact for 57,000 years. For millennia, the Arctic was so cold that many plants and animals that died there froze before they rotted. These remains were then buried by snowfall, ice, and minerals, creating what we called "permafrost," so named because it was believed that this sediment would remain frozen forever. Instead, warmer Arctic temperatures are now thawing the permafrost, uncovering preserved beings and causing them to decompose. Carbon that had been stored for centuries is now escaping into our atmosphere. The prehistoric creature at the center of Watanabe's work is a testament to a lost era, symbolizing the layered intersections of time—from its ancient existence to its contemporary rediscovery. *Zhùr*

serves as a stark reminder of both past life and the looming threats of climate change-induced extinction.



NYUGEN E. SMITH

Bundle House Borderlines No. 3 (Isle de Tribamartica),
2017

Pen and ink, watercolor, thread, colored pencil, acrylic, graphite, gesso, metallic marker, colored pencil, tea, Trinidadian and Zambian soil on paper.

60" x 48"

Courtesy of the artist

Nyugen Smith makes alternate worlds that are inspired by the creativity and resilience of the Black diaspora. His *Bundle House* series comes from ten years of exploring themes of uncertainty and forced migration. With roots in Trinidad and Haiti, Smith focuses on the Caribbean. He sees it as "ground zero" for climate disasters and recognizes the area's fragility. In his sculptures and works on paper, Smith uses materials like rubber, plastic, and wood, which remind him of makeshift shelters. He is especially interested in collage because the technique echoes how Africa and other regions were cut up and rearranged under colonial rule. For *Tribamartica*, Smith combined the shorelines of Trinidad, Cuba, Martinique,

Haiti, and Jamaica to show that the idea of the Caribbean as a single entity is a falsehood.



NYUGEN E. SMITH

Bundle House: Lukasa Study Five, 2022

Acrylic, gesso, canvas watercolor, fabric, oil pastel, graphite, colored pencil, canvas, diaspora soil, and collage on paper

32" x 22"

Courtesy of the artist



NYUGEN E. SMITH

Bundle House: Rise Up and Walk I, 2022

Found wood, fabric, canvas, fur, metal, wire, bells, acrylic, rubber, shoes, nails, ceramic, leather, plastic, oil pastel, oil stick, graphite, net, cork, sequins and beads

80" x 30" x 30"

Courtesy of the artist



NYUGEN E. SMITH

Bundle House (FS Mini No. 6): For the Record, 2021

Fabric, wood, nails, cork, glass vials, metal, faux fur, fur, rope, sequins, beads, rubber, acrylic, nails, plastic, collage, and foam board

40" x 23" x 23"

Courtesy of the artist



NYUGEN E. SMITH

Bundle House (FS Mini No. 11): Oh, Sing Me A Shanty, 2023

Wood, branches, fabric, acrylic, watercolor, beads, sequins, rubber, plastic, wire, foam, oil pastel, bolts, twine, rope, and Sweden 42 yacht sail fragment

47" x 28" x 21"

Courtesy of the artist



ELLIE SCHMIDT

SANDCASTLES, 2020

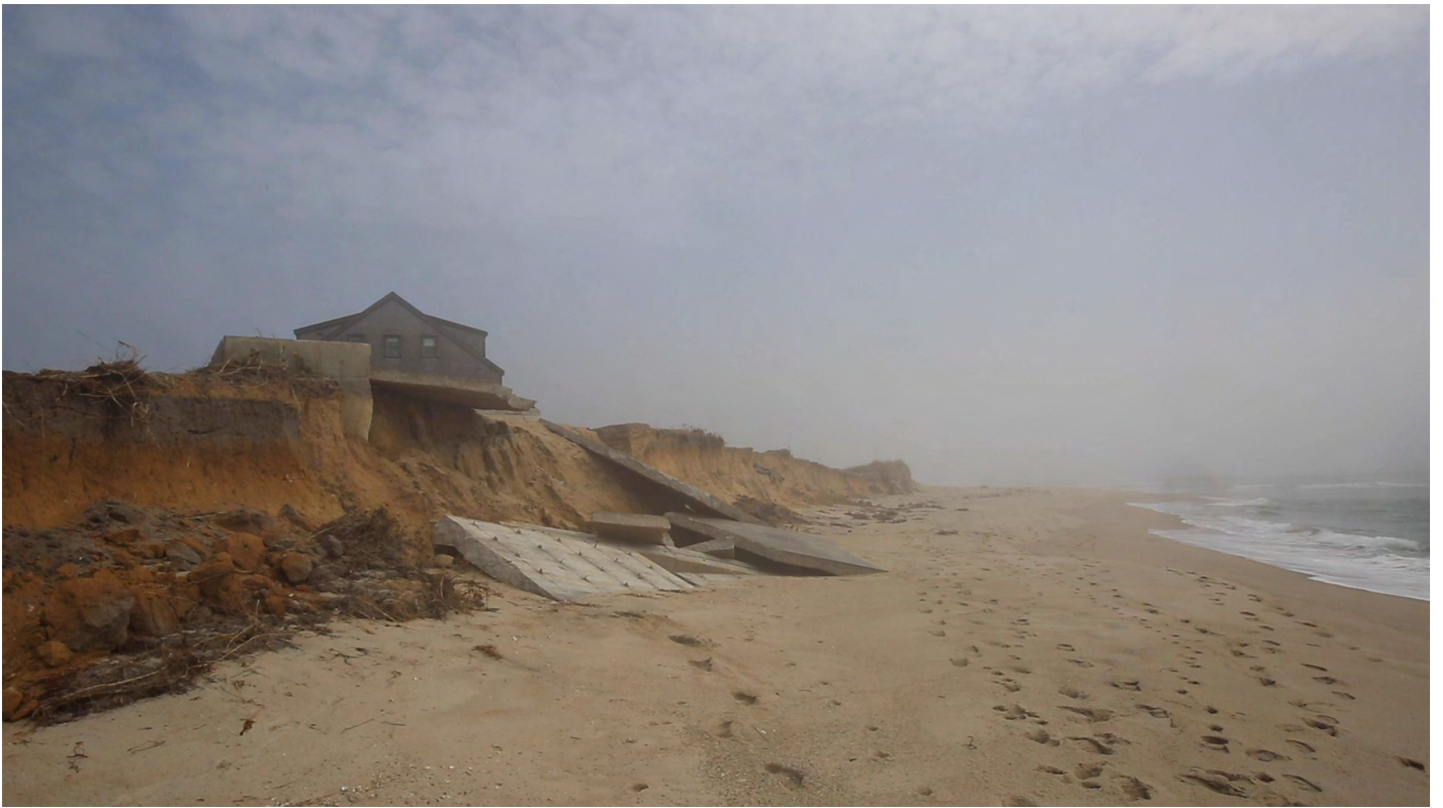
Video, sound

15:05 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

As glaciers warm and melt, their ice turns into water and runs into the sea. Fueled by this influx of fresh water, oceans are rising and promise to continue to do so.

SANDCASTLES by **Ellie Schmidt** is a short, poignant film exploring the escalating issue of erosion on Nantucket in Massachusetts. Shot during summer, the film captures the beauty that made the island an idyllic retreat and the urgent threats that its landscapes and residents now face. The stunning visual narratives reveal how steadfastly people assumed the shoreline would never change. Through her lens, Schmidt questions the future of this community as local residents try to keep the sea from reclaiming the land.



SANDRA M. SAWATZKY

The Black Gold Tapestry, 2008-2017

Silk and wool threads on flax linen cloth

219' 9 ⁵/₈"

Courtesy of the artist

Sewing, writing, and filmmaking are integral to **Sandra Sawatzky's** life. Inspired by the *Bayeux Tapestry*,* the artist challenged herself to stitch a modern epic.

Sawatzky's *Black Gold Tapestry* narrates the history of humanity's relationship with oil. To accurately tell this story of power, progress, and destruction, the artist undertook extensive research in a variety of subjects. Included were the geological and biological forces that created oil; the tools and processes (including child labor) used to extract it; and the engines and rockets that burn it. To bring the tale of oil and humanity to life, she also studied—and embroidered—5,000 years of hairstyles, architecture, flora, and fauna. Having taken over nine years to complete, the end result is staggering: a rich visual narrative of progress unfolding over 200 feet of linen and wool.

*The *Bayeux Tapestry* is an embroidered cloth depicting the conquest of England by the Duke of Normandy in 1066 CE. It spans almost 230 feet, consists of nine panels, and is housed today in the Bayeux Museum in Bayeux, France. Sawatzky's *Black Gold Tapestry* is roughly the same length and is made up of eight panels.



KATIE PATERSON

To Burn, Forest, Fire, 2021

Originally commissioned by IHME Helsinki

Bespoke incense

2 ¾"

Courtesy of the artist

Katie Paterson's *To Burn, Forest, Fire* harnesses the power of scent to bridge millions of years and transports us through time. The work serves as a reminder of humanity's ability to either destroy or nurture other forms of life. Two incense sticks stand on a shelf. One evokes the smells of the earth's earliest forest, while the other imagines the aroma of the last forest. The diagrams help viewers understand what the smells are composed of. As our planet warms and local climates change, flora and fauna are forced to adapt, migrate, or die. *To Burn, Forest, Fire* conveys us on an olfactory journey through the earth's arboreal history. The artist asks us to consider the magnificent diversity held within the forest and the increasing levels of extinction caused by humanity. She urges us to both protect our planet's

remaining forests and assist in the formation of new ones.

To Burn, Forest, Fire will be ignited every other Thursday through August and every Thursday starting September 12.



LOT-EK

S14 (from *SPILL*, 1 to 29), 2023

Shipping container cutout, 2x4 wood support

18" x 159" x 31"

Courtesy of the artists and Hosfelt Gallery

LOT-EK, founded in 1993 by Ada Tolla and Giuseppe Lignano, is an architectural design studio. The studio uses innovative approaches to green construction and adaptive reuse. On view here are LOT-EK's ingenious seating and lounging areas. These benches are fabricated from repurposed shipping containers that are no longer in use. In 1956, the first container ship transported 58 containers, whereas as of 2017, a single ship holds 21,413 containers. Today, 80% of all goods are transported from one part of the world to another on cargo ships. As we consume more products, the number of containers we need also increases. It is estimated that 170 million containers exist worldwide. LOT-TEK reclaims these vessels of global trade and puts them into new contexts—as artworks, home decor, and prefab building blocks. By doing so, they invite us to consider our role in the immensity and invisibility of consumer culture.



LOT-EK

S5 (from *SPILL*, 1 to 29), 2023

Shipping container cutout, 2x4 wood support

18" x 67" x 73 ½"

Courtesy of the artists and Hosfelt Gallery



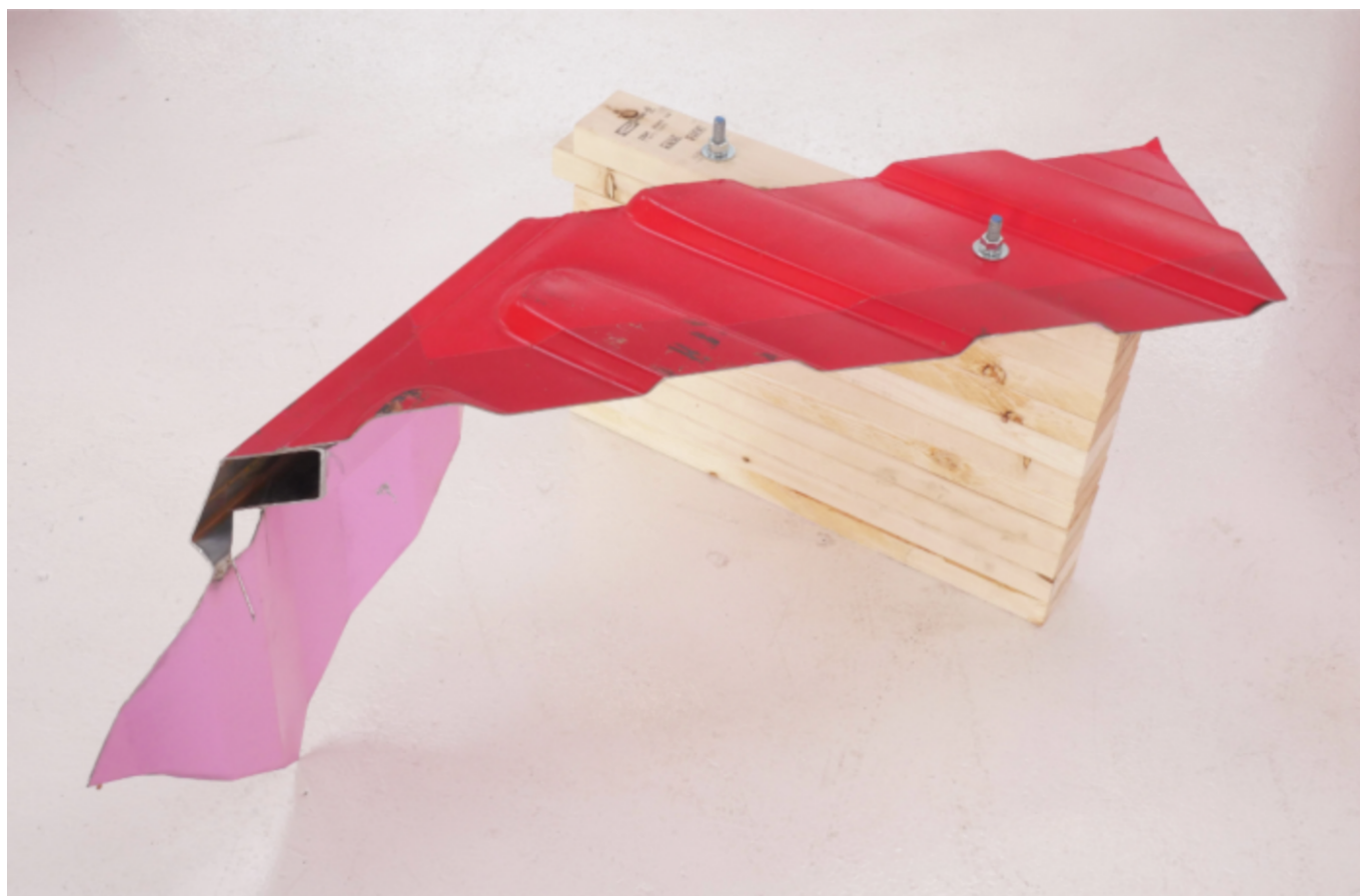
LOT-EK

S4 (from *SPILL*, 1 to 29), 2023

Shipping container cutout, 2x4 wood support

18" x 46" x 29.5"

Courtesy of the artists and Hosfelt Gallery



IMANI JACQUELINE BROWN

What remains at the ends of the earth?, 2022

Video installation with soundscape by Andrea Catherine Steves and the artist

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Imani Jacqueline Brown's installation *What remains at the ends of the earth?* looks at the history of land occupied by Black Louisianans. The artist shows how oil plants, pipelines, and wells often sit where plantations and memorials to the ancestors of enslaved peoples are located. This link ties the petrochemical industry to the plantation economy. By connecting past injustices to today's environmental problems, Brown's work calls for restoring landscapes and providing economic reparations. *What remains at the ends of the earth?* highlights both exploitation and resistance in Louisiana. The state's extensive oil and gas networks harm fragile ecosystems. Magnolia and willow trees, planted by enslaved people, represent memory as well as ecological recovery.



AKEA BRIONNE

Begin Again: Land of Enchantment, 2024

Jacquard, poly-fil, thread, glitter, rhinestones, sand
60" x 96"

Courtesy of the artist and Library Street Collective

Akea Brionne explores how colonial systems affect cultural storytelling. She starts by photographing images, then digitally manipulates the photographs to create images on a woven surface. She decorates the fabric with sequins and beads and adds padding to give her figures depth. The work is infused with memories, assimilation, and stories of the African diaspora. Brionne, reflecting on her family's move from Belize to New Orleans, sees water as a powerful force. Rainfall and droughts, made more severe by the warming atmosphere, further strain families and communities.



JUSTIN BRICE

WE ARE THE ASTEROID II, 2018

Solar-powered LED highway message boards

Dimensions variable

Courtesy of the artist

Justin Brice aims to help people in industrial societies reconnect with the natural world. His large *WE ARE THE ASTEROID* signs are part of the *Displacement* exhibition at MassArt Art Museum (MAAM). Normally, solar-powered LED signs like these are seen on highways, giving instructions or warnings, such as DETOUR or CAUTION during road work. But here Brice has reprogrammed these signs to alert us about today's climate crisis. Passersby will see messages like WARNING: HIGH CO₂; THERE IS NO AHEAD; and GOODBYE ARCTIC ICE. These astute phrases remind people of our omnipresent and ever-expanding human footprint.

Visitors to MAAM will get a lapel pin that reads WE ARE THE ASTEROID. This miniature sign serves as a conversation starter and as a reminder of the power we have to transform our planet, for better or worse.

This artwork is included in *Displacement*, an exhibition on view at the MassArt Art Museum through December 8, 2024.

