

- Institutional Legitimation' in *JAC*, vol. 32, no.1, 2012, pp. 251–278.
- 2 Tabitha Barber, 'Introduction', in Tabitha Barber (ed.), *British Baroque: Power and Illusion*, exh. cat., London, 2020, p. 11.
  - 3 David A.H.B. Taylor, 'The Restoration Court', in Tabitha Barber (ed.), *British Baroque: Power and Illusion*, exh. cat., London, 2020, p. 45.

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**'Climate in Crisis: Environmental Change in the Indigenous Americas', The Brooklyn Museum, New York, 14 February 2020 – 20 June 2021.**

*Edward Christie*

Scientists now widely agree that humanity's impact on the Earth has become so profound that it has driven the planet into a new geological epoch — the Anthropocene. Although the date on which this period of history began continues to be debated, it is clear that the colonisation of the Americas by Europeans in the late fifteenth-century had impacts that were significant on a planetary scale. One estimate maintains that the introduction of diseases and relentless conquests resulted in the deaths of at least 45 million Indigenous people, or 90% of the pre-contact population. This led to the collapse of farmlands across a continent which were replaced by forests, resulting in the removal of around 13 billion tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere, and triggering the coldest

part of the Little Ice Age.<sup>1</sup> Beyond these physical effects, Indigenous belief systems, which maintain that humanity is coexistent with nature, were eclipsed by the European, dualistic conception of the environment as an external resource to be exploited to fuel so-called modern 'progress', which conversely drove climate change.

'Climate in Crisis' takes this history as its starting point to frame more than 60 works by Indigenous artists that span 2,800 years and form part of the Brooklyn Museum's 'Arts of the Americas' collection. The curation illuminates how Indigenous communities of the Americas have been affected by environmental destruction driven by colonialism, and promotes Indigenous perspectives to inform more sustainable relationships with the natural world.

By taking this postcolonial stance, the exhibition associates itself with a wave of art historians who are working to extend the temporal, spatial and socio-political boundaries of ecocritical art history, which generally privileges contemporary art produced in affluent hubs of the art world. A key protagonist of this movement is T. J. Demos, whose recent research has endeavoured to 'decolonise nature' by championing contemporary artists — many of whom are based in the Global South — who imagine new ways of conceiving of ourselves and the environment that challenge the destructiveness of modern ways of being, which continue to be dominant today.<sup>2</sup> Comparably, Sugata Ray's recent writing has explored the impact that eco-catastrophes had on South Asian creative practices during the Little Ice Age, between 1550–1850.<sup>3</sup> These art-historical developments resonate with the environmental movement's increasing commitment to diversity. This

has manifested in events such as the Global Justice Rebellion — a protest which took place in London in October 2019, and which attempted to cultivate a more egalitarian and unified environmentalist network by linking Western climate activists with those in the Global South through exhibitions, talks and forums. Similarly, earlier last year, representatives of Brazilian Indigenous tribes spoke at Extinction Rebellion's protest against the mass burning of the Amazon rainforest. 'Climate in Crisis' is successful in taking these motions further by presenting Indigenous artists' perspectives on climate violence which previously have not received their due attention in museums.

The exhibition is divided according to regional groupings that span North, Central and South America, which the curators admit produces a tension as these cartographical delineations derive from European colonialism. To address this issue, objects are included that exemplify Indigenous approaches to visualising the world. For example, a Mayan *Tetrapod Bowl with Lid* (c. 350–450) depicts the unification of the natural, spiritual and ancestral registers of the universe: the legs of the vessel are formed as nose-down heads of peccaries, representing the Earth; the water bird depicted on the lid symbolises the underworld; and the elaborate design on the creature's beak signifies a portal to the supernatural realm. However, the curators fail to develop this meta-critique into substantial action: rather than attempting to put forward a decolonised structure informed by Indigenous cosmology, the exhibition ultimately relies on geographical conventions drawn from colonial history.

The show begins with a photograph taken by photojournalist Tailyr Irvine as part of her report on the 2016–2017 protests

against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which threatens the pollution of the local water supply and imposes on sites of significant importance to Indigenous communities. The photograph's placement at the start of the exhibition foregrounds its political intentions and alludes to the continued abuse of Indigenous rights. Earlier this year, for example, President Donald Trump drastically reduced the size of the Bears Ears National Monument to allow for corporations to extract fossil fuels and mineral deposits, which entirely disregarded the landscape's significance as the ancestral homeland of several Indigenous tribes.

Later galleries focus on works that exemplify the central role that nature plays in Indigenous belief systems and social practices. For example, a vibrant *Baleen Whale Mask* made in the nineteenth century is displayed, which chieftains of the Kwakwaka'wakw tribe of the Pacific Northwest Coast wore and animated during ceremonies to emphasise their power and celebrate the bountifulness of the sea.

Although I was unable to visit due to restrictions on travel enforced to combat the spread of Covid-19, the information available remotely suggests that the exhibition's critique of the peripheral status that Indigenous artists hold in ecocritical art history remains implicit, and it fails to clearly indicate what a representative and decolonised discourse would resemble; further work is necessary to think this through and bring it to fruition. At stake is the epistemological accuracy of ecocritical art history, which must incorporate diverse perspectives to reflect the global dimensions of the environmental crisis. Furthermore, failing to embrace polyphony risks further enshrining cultural and financial inequality — conditions that fuel colonialism, and which lie behind the imbalanced impact of climate change.

- 1 Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, London, 2018, pp. 147–187.
- 2 T. J. Demos, *Decolonizing Nature: Contemporary Art and the Politics of Ecology*, Berlin, 2016.
- 3 Sugata Ray, *Climate Change and the Art of Devotion: Geoaesthetics in the Land of Krishna, 1550–1850*, Seattle, 2019.

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**Aaron Cezar and Dani Burrows (eds), *Politics of Food*, exh. cat., Delfina Foundation and Sternberg Press, London and Berlin, 2019, 240 pages, paperback, ISBN-13 9783956795169, £20.00.**

*Rosalind Hayes*

Resulting from a curatorial strand pursued by Delfina Foundation since 2013, *Politics of Food* sets a precedent for thinking about ‘the ways in which the arts confront food-related issues’.<sup>1</sup> This book represents a condensed version of the many artist residencies and events held in London during that eponymous programming stream. Artists, anthropologists, farmers and chefs alike present aspects of their work, resulting in a wide-ranging collection of short and occasionally pithy texts. Topics explored include food sovereignty, social inequalities of food and ecological crisis. The dual meaning of ‘cultural’ is the core tension that holds these disparate documents together, in which culinary traditions are mobilised

by arts practitioners to varied ends. For art historians, this beautifully illustrated and avowedly interdisciplinary book is a point of departure for thinking about archives, social engagement and patronage.

The editors, Aaron Cezar and Dani Burrows of Delfina, divided the book into four themed sections: journeys, futures, identity and hospitality. Each section opens with either an academic essay or an ‘in conversation’ transcript, followed by a series of short artist descriptions and reproductions of their work. The breadth of interests and artistic media is wide, which is both a strength and a weakness, for, while there is enough in each entry to introduce readers to key issues – around class or ecology, for example – the texts are often too brief or descriptive to offer conclusions. At some points argumentation, and at others documentation, the divergent approaches between contributors requires readers to constantly shift analytical registers between art objects and scholarly texts.

Key among the artistic strategies represented is the use of historic material to form social platforms for public engagement. This is particularly evident in the first section, which reveals how trade routes, colonialism and migration continue to shape communities through food production. At the nexus of these concerns sit the notions of food sovereignty and heritage, which shape three separate projects through the repatriation of extinct local seed variations to conservationists in Norway, Palestine and Ireland. Each recovers the international journeys taken by native seeds, their repression by monocultural agriculture and eventual introduction to the archive catalogue. Expanding the archive to encompass natural matter, artists and conservationists Amy Franceschini, Vivien Sansour and Christine