

ARTS

Three Ways to Explore Environmental Justice Through Art This Week

by **Kayla Benjamin**
December 3, 2022



Visitors to the Kreeger Museum enjoying "Purple," a video installation about climate change by John Akomfrah, on Nov. 30. (Photo by Kayla Benjamin/Washington Informer)

At the Hirshhorn Museum, an ominously beautiful cloud of hundreds of plastic bottles hangs from the ceiling. Further north, at the Kreeger Museum, an aluminum photo collage reflects tiny slivers of the viewers' faces among images of deep-sea corals. These works intend to connect viewers with environmental issues that often feel far-off.

Three different District art museums—the Hirshhorn, the Kreeger and the Freer Gallery of Art—currently have exhibitions or events focused on environmental justice and the climate crisis, bringing environmental issues to life in a way that science and data rarely can.

1. “John Akomfrah: Purple” at the Hirshhorn Museum

The inside of this new exhibit feels a little bit like a cave—massive and dark. The walls, floor, and beanbag seating share a matching shade of deep purple, a color chosen by artist John Akomfrah because it represents mourning in Ghana, his birthplace.

Within that atmosphere, it's easy to get lost in the six huge screens that stretch across the museum's curved wall. On the screens plays [Akomfrah's “Purple,”](#) a film made up of constantly shifting collages that explore climate change's impact on communities, landscapes and biodiversity. The work weaves together archival footage from the BBC with new video Akomfrah shot in locations around the world where global warming is rapidly changing landscapes and ways of life. The accompanying soundtrack shifts from melancholy to ominous and back again with a mix of original music, old recordings, and spoken word.

“Sometimes when you see a video in a museum, you think ‘oh, I don't have time for this’ and you just sort of walk past it,” said Marina Isgro, the exhibit's curator. “But I've heard that people are sitting down and really watching it for long periods of time—people find it absorbing.”

Akomfrah has said his inspiration for “Purple” came, in part, from a childhood spent in the shadow of a coal-fired power station in London. Pollution hung in the air constantly.

The Hirshhorn's exhibit captures some of that sense of a polluted atmosphere: a “toxic cloud” made of hundreds of plastic bottles hangs overhead at the exhibit's entrance.

“I want people to be aware of the ways in which their lives are touched by things unseen and bear witness to these creeping environmental disasters and emergencies,” Akomfrah said in a press release about the new installation, which opened at the Hirshhorn Nov. 23.

The non-narrative film—which includes snippets from the Industrial Age all the way to the modern day—presents a new way to confront the realities of climate change. It offers neither scientific analysis nor policy suggestions.

“One thing I really like about this work is that it’s not preachy, it’s not didactic,” Isgro said. “Sometimes when you talk about climate change, there’s a lot of admonishing people—like for using plastic forks, or straws. And Akomfrah says basically ‘that’s not what I want to do as an artist.’”

“John Akomfrah: Purple” will be on display through January 2024 at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Independence Ave SW & 7th St SW).

2. “Perplexity” at the Kreeger Museum

Photographs of brightly colored, intricately arranged piles of garbage stand out at the Kreeger Museum—the collection in Northwest is known for its 19th and 20th century paintings. But the photos fit perfectly within “Perplexity,” an exhibition of works from seven contemporary artists. Several of the contributors will give artist talks on Saturday, Dec. 10, which is the exhibition’s last day.

Many of the artists’ works highlight the increasing fragility of our natural environment and our own impacts on the Earth.

“I started thinking about my own waste and how much I was using, and then I tried to come up with playful ways of re-looking at them in a new light,” said Sarah Knobel, one of the featured artists. Her colorful images depict one week of her own trash.

The exhibition showcases works by alumni of the D.C.-based **Hamiltonian Artists’ Fellowship Program**, which helps artists build careers while boosting the District’s art scene.

“It can be pretty thrilling to have your work hanging next to these historic works, works you studied in school,” said Hamiltonian Artists’ executive director, Lily Siegel. “By

showing the contemporary artists of D.C., we are greatly raising the diversity on view in the museum and amplifying different voices.”

Among those voices is Helina Metaferia, an artist of Ethiopian descent raised in Silver Spring. One of her pieces, a video performance, tells the story of five generations of women in her family and their contributions to resistance movements.

Nearby, works by Taiwanese-Chinese American artist Joyce Yu-Jean Lee tell a very different story of resistance. Her works examine a coral reef that scientists recently found live in a part of the ocean so dark it seemed impossible for coral to thrive. She sees it as a potentially hopeful sign for nature’s ability to adapt in the face of climate change. The aluminum pieces, printed with photo collages, also contain slivers of mirror reflecting the observer’s own face.

“I want to implicate the viewer in looking at the future of our ocean, because everybody is responsible for stewarding our environment,” Lee said.

“Perplexity” is on view until Dec. 10 at the Kreeger Museum (2401 Foxhall Rd NW).

3. “Yamuna/Anacostia: Rivers and Environmental Justice” event at the Freer Gallery of Art

This Saturday afternoon panel discussion will connect environmental justice struggles from around the globe to the ones faced here in the District. The event will center on ideas found in two of the National Museum of American Art’s current exhibitions: “A Splendid Land: Paintings from Royal Udaipur” and “Unstill Waters: Contemporary Photography from India.” The conversation will explore environmental justice problems and stories shared by India’s Yamuna River and D.C.’s Anacostia River, including communities’ efforts to revive their waterways.

Artist Ravi Agarwal, one of the photographers behind “Unstill Water,” will speak with the Anacostia Museum’s program coordinator, Katrina Lashley, as well as academics in the fields of global studies and environmental science.

“Yamuna/Anacostia: Rivers and Environmental Justice” will be held at 1 p.m. on Dec. 10 at the Freer Gallery of Art (1050 Independence Ave SW). Listeners can also attend virtually by registering [here](#).

