

Earth Works: Mapping the Anthropocene

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Anthropocene

‘anTHrəpə,sēn/

noun

the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant global influence on climate and the environment.

Whether or not one accepts the premise that human impact is the primary cause of shifting climate, sea-level rise, and global temperature pattern shift, the visual markers of human activity on the planet are undeniable. Both the ancient Great Wall in China and the newly-constructed Palm Islands in Dubai are visible from orbiting spacecraft. Closer to the planet’s surface, every cross-country airline window seat commands views of agricultural patterning, roadway strands that partition bare land-masses, and the expanding ripples of villages, towns, and cities that seem to bubble up from the earth itself.

New Jersey-born artist Justin Brice Guariglia (American, born 1974) became aware of subtle and some not-so-subtle shifts in land use while living and working as a photographer based in Asia in the 1990s and 2000s. Flying from assignment to assignment, Guariglia became intrigued and troubled by the topographic transformations that he could observe were occurring below. Graphic evidence of new agricultural methods and open-pit mining operations became far too abundant to ignore visually or intellectually. When given the opportunity in 2015 and 2016 to accompany teams of scientists affiliated with NASA on their flights over Greenland to study glacial and sea-ice changes, Guariglia became aware not only of the science of polar melt, but also its implications. He began to correlate the links between what he had seen in Asia with what he was photographing in Greenland. To him, both were emblematic of the slippage of the planet into what has now become widely-accepted as the Anthropocene epoch.

The aerial images Guariglia took of Asia and Greenland became the raw materials for a new body of work for the photographer. In fact it became the opportunity for him to move from making images to making objects. As a commercial and editorial photographer, he was part of an image-driven operation. The image was the culmination of the enterprise. Yet, as he was taking images over Asia on commercial flights and with NASA on a scientific mission his images were simply the beginning of a much longer study of science, environmental philosophy, and materials. Not divorced from the power of the image altogether, he began to use it as an element in a visual exploration that would become something far more complex and sculptural.

Guariglia’s intellectual and philosophical study of the Anthropocene coupled with his intense need to push the boundaries of his own artmaking, resulted in his use of materials rarely associated with photography and his development of a new technology by which to render his images. His work is as much about making objects as it is about making images. His materials and the processes he uses contribute as much to the conceptual strength and cohesiveness of his art as do the abstracted landscapes that are at its core.

We are conditioned to believe in the truthfulness of photography, yet, every photograph is an abstraction. Images are removed from their context—spatial and temporal; they are untethered from the circumstances of their making; and their meanings are subject to the whims of those who view them and those who make them. Guariglia’s aerial views of Chinese agricultural and mining landscapes carry with them an understanding of reality that we as audiences bring to them based on our shared experiences.

The artist blurs our innate understanding of his subject matter, however, through his selection of materials that carry his imagery as well as the manner in which they are presented. Guariglia has adapted an industrial-sized printer to apply polymers instead of inks. This substitution allows him to build up the surface of his images through successive applications. His use of linen that has been coated in gesso—a mineral-based coating—as his substrate ties his works to a painting tradition as well as to the land itself. Additionally, his mining studies feature precious metal-leaf as a means of metaphorically reinvesting the landscape with the minerals it has been plundered to obtain. In a concrete and reciprocal sense, his images and the way in which they are given materiality have begun to mutually reinforce one another. This conceptual reinforcement is taken even further in his Greenland images.

By its very nature, photography presents images of the past, whether an instant, an hour, a day, or a century ago. The occasions or subjects that appear in a photograph are always imaged as they were then, not now. Guariglia exploits this property of photography in his glacier and sea ice studies. Taken at the abutment of sea and ice, his images record the glacier in transition from a solid to liquid. His subjects, the solid, cast-off remnants of a glacier, are more than tens of thousands of years old when photographed. This is the beginning of their final demise. They have since disappeared, transitioning into liquid and dispersing around the planet. His works are a memorial to the disappearance of vast architectonic swaths of planetary matter, and part of the death mask of the glacier itself.

What we commonly refer to as a photograph is surprisingly fragile; highly susceptible to both light and temperature. Our common assumption is that glaciers are forces of nature yet we are learning that they, too, are surprisingly fragile, and just as susceptible to light and temperature. Guariglia's choice of materials on and with which to render his images delicately exploits this commonality and conceptually complicates his work.

Guariglia's use of his materials in the final product—the object that carries the image as well as the image itself—is what truly sets these works apart. Guariglia uses the same printing process (a plastic polymer) as he had with his images taken over Asia. His substrate (the surface upon which the image is printed), however, is different. Instead of the linen-covered, and gesso-coated panels he used previously, he now prints on the surface of a 1-3/4 inch thick slab of dense polystyrene. He has thereby created a photographic object that, unlike its prototype and its subject, is impervious to light and temperature.

In a twist that is as much ironic as it is poetic, his images become objects in which the materials, the process, and the subject reference and reinforce one another to produce artifacts of incredible if not harmful durability, that will endure long after his subjects are gone. His materials, both plastics, will outlast the glaciers and their sea ice progeny whose images they carry (plastic being one of the defining markers of the Anthropocene epoch by which future archaeologists will be able to delineate the strata of our civilization in when they excavate), and, they are products derived from fossil fuels, the burning of which has sped the increase in the glacial melt that the images memorialize.

Precedent, as defined by most dictionaries, is an earlier event or action that is regarded as an example or guide to be considered in subsequent similar circumstances. In legal parlance, it is a principle or guide to a decision that has been arrived at in prior actions that is used as the authority for decisions of similar actions. Civic and social groups set precedents when they consistently behave in a similar fashion when interacting or deciding on a course of action. In the arts, however, a precedent is that vision or voice that has so perfectly captured a time and place that the artist and the subject or style are inextricably linked. It is also one of the things of which subsequent artists try to steer well clear.

For contemporary artists using photography, this is especially dangerous territory as they must constantly navigate the expansive and exponentially expanding visual legacy of people, places and things that are recorded not only by other artists, but by every consumer with a camera or a smart-phone. For artists, the endeavor is to not only address and embrace prior images and artists whose work bears a resemblance to their own, but, then, to extend those precedents.

Guariglia, as is the case with every artist, has had to choreograph his approach to precedent from many directions. Because his work is rooted in photography, however, his precedents are far different than would be facing painters, sculptors, printmakers, or even those active in the performing arts.

When all is said and done, Guariglia's works are predicated on images of the landscape. As such, they confront every photographer who ever pointed his camera out a window, some unknown; some internationally respected. His forbearers include 19th-century artists Carleton Watkins and William Henry Jackson; 20th-century masters Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, and mid-century New Topographic artists Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams, among others. Add to this list the number of imagemakers of the past and those of the present who have claimed an aerial perch as their point of perspective such as Californian David Maisel and Canadian Edward Burtynsky, and finally all those who have delved into the pictorial possibilities of imaging glaciers and icebergs which includes those expeditionary photographers of the nineteenth century and the artists of today such as Lynn Davis, Sebastião Salgado, and Stuart Klipper.

Perhaps the most difficult part of being an artist is to be respectful of all the works by those who have come before, aware of what is happening around one, and, yet, still firmly rooted in the ideas, philosophy, and vision that are truly one's own; in other words, to be truly contemporary. The works that are part of the exhibition *Earth Works: Mapping the Anthropocene* are testament that Guariglia has earned this elusive moniker.