

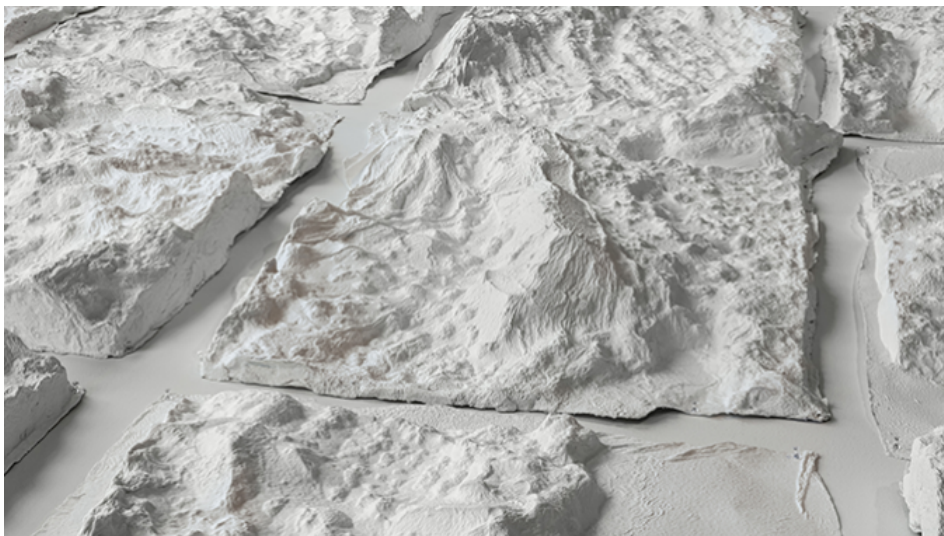


3 JANUARY 2024

SEARCH ...

Endless seas, melting mountains: Blane De St Croix in conversation

🕒 29 November 2023 📁 Art, Exhibitions



Detail from Blane De St Croix's *Over Ice* (2020). A white cotton paper cast of sea ice

The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery opened its new season last September with one of its most pertinent shows: **Horizon by Blane De St Croix**. He's a sculptor who works on the relationship between people and landscape, and in particular the landscape of climate change; what better credentials for an exhibition that brackets Cop28?

Blane De St Croix discussed his practice and the inspiration behind the exhibition.



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maggie: How did *Horizon* come into being?

Blane De St Croix: Mariët Westermann, the NYUAD Vice Chancellor, reached out after seeing *How to Move a Landscape* at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art in 2020-2021. The exhibition explored geopolitical landscape and environmental issues, and those themes must have resonated with her. We set up a call that included Maya Allison, Executive Director of The NYUAD Art Gallery, and they subsequently invited me to undertake a residency and exhibition at NYUAD. This show is the culmination of my time in Abu Dhabi; it was developed in partnership with NYUAD faculty and other climate experts in the UAE community.

What did you learn about the deserts of this region?

My time in the UAE reaffirmed something I've long known, having travelled to other spectacular but ecologically fragile places including the Gobi Desert and the Arctic Circle: our planet is interconnected on so many different levels.

For example, dust from the Sahara is thought to carry micronutrients that help to fertilise Amazon rainforests. Conversely, researchers at NYUAD, along with other global scientists, have identified a mechanism by which warm dust travels from the Sahara Desert to the Arctic Circle; that has been proven to affect rising temperatures and ice melt in Greenland. And as the Arctic permafrost melts and methane gasses are released, it will continue to get hotter in this region.

I also wanted to capture the essence of the deserts here, and this is something I explored in my 'infinity boxes'. These use mirrors between two sandwiched landscapes that go on forever. I thought it was a perfect way to highlight the endless beautiful deserts of the UAE. Our scale is dwarfed in these places – it's like being in the middle of a giant ocean, or the permafrost of the Arctic. It helps you understand the perspective of where you stand and your place on the planet.



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Insecure renting ages you faster than owning a home, unemployment or

Detail from 'High Peaks: Himachal (Snow Mountain)', commissioned The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery in 2023. "This is a whimsical presentation, not a scientific rendering. It allows for a moment of light-heartedness, and then offers a contemplation of the reality of these mountains, their glaciers, and their connection to the world around them ..."

And by using different colours, qualities, sands, and different heights of the dunes, these infinity boxes show how the landscapes are all so different. People often assume, wrongly, that deserts or Arctic permafrost are just empty wastelands that don't change, whereas each one has unique characteristics, with historically rich cultures and human activity. So when you look at these mirrors, you'll see these fragments, iconic markers of each one of these deserts, and then it looks endless, like the sea.

You also likened the UAE's salt flats to the Arctic landscape ...

When I look at different landscapes, I'm also looking at a global connection and I'm trying to have a conversation about the environment through those landscapes. In the case of 'Salt Lake Excerpt', I took inspiration from the UAE's sabkhas (salt flats) which are under consideration by UNESCO as a world heritage site. Salt is also a critical factor in climate change: the planet's oceans are getting hotter and saltier than ever before, and as water salinity increases, so do surface temperatures of the planet. Working with Joanna Settle, who is faculty in NYUAD's theatre department, we developed an installation that recalls the salty UAE lands, while also evoking an endless Arctic landscape.

Along with the salt, plastic is an important medium for this work. The crystals in this installation are flakes of plastic, PET from 50,000 recycled plastic bottles, which is a good thing. But then again plastic is in our bodies, our food, our water, everything, which is crazy. It's a man-made, non-natural substance that is now an intrinsic part of our environment ...

The facts behind 'High Peaks: Himachal (Snow Mountain)' are truly sobering.

I made this installation in response to recent scientific research that confirms that the Himalayas are melting much faster than previously predicted and could lose 80 percent of their glaciers by 2100. This would directly impact billions of people in Asia and have repercussions for the whole of humanity.

I picked six of the highest peaks in the Himalayas and modelled them 12 feet high on pedestals. They look enchanting, almost magical, but they are melting down the sides. And again, it's a dramatic visual play with the audience. They don't have to know immediately what they are. I just want to open the door and maybe initiate a conversation about how we need to move to a shared relationship that goes well beyond the boundaries of our countries. We are all interconnected and share the responsibility to address these vast problems. I picked six of the highest peaks in the Himalayas and modelled them 12 feet high on pedestals. They look enchanting, almost magical, but they are melting down the sides. And again, it's a dramatic visual play with the audience. They don't have to know immediately what they are. I just want to open the door and maybe initiate a conversation about how we need to move to a shared

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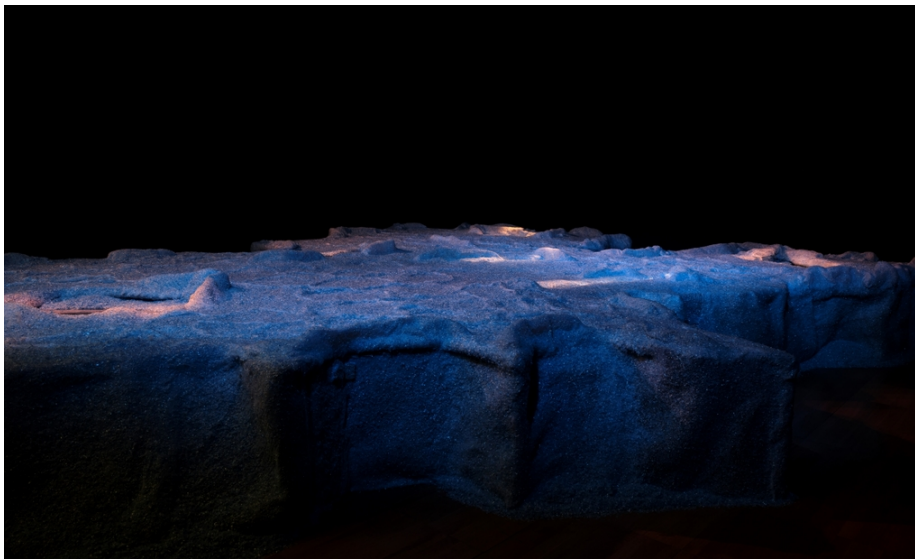
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'Salt Lake, UAE' (2023) Excerpt from a collaboration with theatre director Joanna Settle, commissioned by The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, involving PET, fabric, screens, water, tanks, light, sound, and wave makers. The vista of this art installation takes on an eerie life of its own, perhaps evoking an Arctic landscape as much as a salt lake or salt flat, accompanied by moving theatrical lighting with sound composition. In this human-made landscape, the artists have created a kind of parallel universe in which plastic stands in for the elements, and the recesses of the earth speak back to us ...

relationship that goes well beyond the boundaries of our countries. We are all interconnected and share the responsibility to address these vast problems.

What do you think about maintaining hope in the face of something so terrifying?

Well, firstly, I am terrified, especially after having spoken with so many scientists on this topic. But having said that, there has to be hope. Cop28 is a crucial moment in terms of whether we can get the major countries of the world to agree to the new terms of this agreement, which the UAE is trying to do. It will not stop what we've already started, but it might stabilise the planet to make it more liveable.

And I just want to add, again, that everybody should try to participate in any way they can to move this forward.

How can you use art to inspire positive change?

Art can inspire another perspective. For example, the train set installation in this exhibition is made up of miniature sculptures of different environments found in the UAE, along with other parts of the world. It's a visual narrative that is very playful, and I use this nostalgia to make a connection with something that is familiar and child-like.

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Dr Dan Goyal

@danielgoyal Dec 30

The U.K spent £158b on the health part of Covid - PPE, tests, Test & trace, etc... France spent £30b Germany £60b We had more deaths and our health system is still in a far worse state This was the biggest heist in U.K. history... The perpetrators must be caught and prosecuted



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Ras Al Khaimah Art

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✨ Exciting News! We are thrilled to collaborate with @w3rlds for "Pearls of Motion" AR exhibition at Al Jazeera Al Hamra Heritage Village for #RAKArtFestival2024. Immerse in the fusion of history and art with international artists! 🌍🎨 #W3rldsCollab #AugmentedRealityArt <https://t.co/yUCDmYP73g>

But if you look closely on the back of the train, you'll see landscapes ranging from beautiful to those affected by human activity, from logging to burnt forests, and it just continues on. And this train leads audiences into an exhibition of sculptures that deal with nature framed by climate change.

So again, my work is about a dialogue, inviting the viewer in to have a conversation. I don't want it to be a lecture. I see my shows as a collaboration that hopefully provokes dialogue. In this case, the exhibition features videos of scientists talking about their climate change concerns. It's more of a philosophical approach, rather than them talking about data, and it shows how scientists can think very creatively in ways that are unique and profound.

And I think it's important that we hear them speak in this way because there is a disconnect with the public around climate change. The data is not getting out there as widely as it should, so maybe the arts can connect to the public in a way that a research paper doesn't always land.

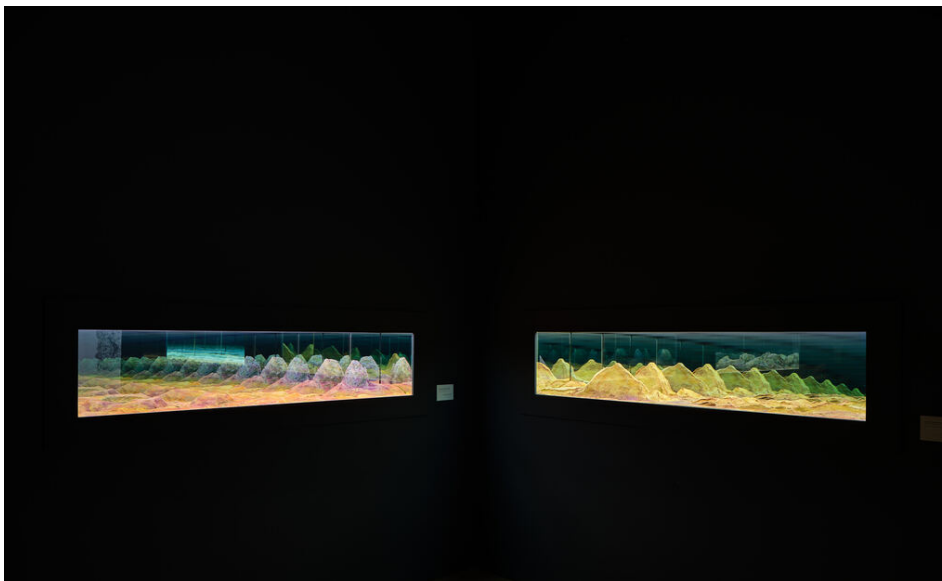
It's an overwhelming problem and I understand why people distance themselves from the facts, but we can't afford to do that. The research shows that we are not isolated, as countries or individuals. And the arts share a big responsibility in this regard. It's not just the scientists who must have this conversation. It should be all parts of the specialities.

Has your research produced anything that might give you grounds for optimism?

Yes, these scientists are amazing people who have some brilliant ideas. For example, I saw how the Marine Biology lab at NYU Abu Dhabi is studying the local coral reef ecology, which exists in extreme temperatures, to understand how these may serve as a model for reefs elsewhere – reefs which are critical to marine health, but which are dying due to warming waters. NYUAD researchers have also reported a method of harvesting water from fog and dew in the atmosphere – and are looking at ways of using solar power to make this happen. These kinds of technologies could profoundly help many people.

Is there a moment from your time in the UAE that captured the beauty of nature?

I saw the sunset and sunrise when we camped out overnight at **Camel Rock**. The land speaks to you through colours, shapes, forms, and shadow lines that are just breathtaking. And it's vast when you're up on the ridge lines looking over the endless landscape.



The "Infinite Landscape" Series (commissioned by The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery, 2023). Four glassed-in landscapes each depicting an ecosystem from the UAE, based on the artist's observations; they are 'infinite' because of the mirrors that allow endless reflection, suggesting the distinct feeling one might have in the deserts of the UAE. "These landscapes expand space in our imagination, while also serving as a frozen moment of time during our world's present climate ..."

I recommend it to anybody for an empowering experience – or a humbling one, depending on how you look at it! You escape the cities, and the sky is just breathtaking. It just opens up and it's full of wonder ... the stars are everywhere.

And once again there is a similarity between the deserts of this region and other so-called 'barren' landscapes on our planet. Most people assume they are devoid of people and life, which is just not true. They all have historically rich cultures that have existed for thousands of years. When you talk to people from the UAE, they all discuss their grandfather or their parents bringing them to the desert as a child and that connection is breathtaking. So these 'endless seas' are teeming with life and affect the planet in a dramatic way. They are key to our whole global presence.

Blane De St. Croix: Horizon is open now at The Art Gallery at NYU Abu Dhabi, through to 14 January. It's open Tuesday to Sunday, midday to 8pm.



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