



Embracing the Earth, Reflecting the Science

April 9, 2024 BY Abby Luby



Abby Luby

A myriad of art forms inspired by a fast-changing climate is becoming a major part of our cultural landscape, weaving imaginative expression with scientific reality, producing art that elevates our conscious understanding of what’s happening to the planet. This confluence of phenomenon is especially seen in the current exhibition *Biophilia: In Excelsis* at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music’s Miller Hall in New Haven. The show was curated by climate artist **M. Annenberg** known for hosting talks with distinguished scientists and artists whose focus has long been on the environment and global warming.

The exhibit showcases twenty-two artists, all of whom are prompted by existential and eco-themes driven by nature’s uncertainties and an unstable climate. “Biophilia” means the love of life and “In Excelsis” means in the highest degree. To that end, all the art work here reveals a rich passion for the earth and its many natural and unnatural transformations.

For most of us it’s hard to grasp what scientific data really means, creating a widening disconnect between the facts and knowing the how and why of what’s really happening to our planet. Artists can uniquely digest facts and predictions and offer a direct, palpable aesthetic exacting a more immediate and perhaps emotional response unlike any other form of communication.

At the show’s opening on March 27 Annenberg thanked all the 22 artists who “also share my passion for saving our eco-systems” and spoke to the issue of climate change being underreported by the general media, especially in light of 2023 being the hottest year recorded since global records began in 1850.

Over 60 people attended the opening and heard a lively discourse where Annenberg moderated a panel of artists **Susan Hoffman Fishman**, **Eleanor Goldstein**, **Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky** and known National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) climatologist **Dr. Gavin Schmidt** who is also the NASA Director at the Goddard Institute for Space Studies. Schmidt set the stage with some current data on climate change, framing a springboard for the artists’ comments about their work.



From left: Paul D. Miller aka DJ Spooky, Eleanor Goldstein, Susan Hoffman Fishman, Dr. Gavin Schmidt and M. Annenberg at opening night for *Biophilia: In Excelsis* at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music’s Miller Hall in New Haven.

Annenberg cited harsh facts about creatures that have perished from warming trends resulting in wildfires and heated oceans and asked Schmidt if he sees the current status of climate change as a climate emergency. As a government scientist Schmidt carefully navigated his comments to avoid controversial climate related topics and referred to his expertise on scientific data. He emphasized the challenge of transitioning away from internal combustion fuels that overwhelmingly contribute to greenhouse gases, one of the main causes of global warming.

“We have to transition away from coal and natural gas,” Schmidt told the audience. “Those are absolutely the number one, two and three sources of climate change. We have no chance of ever slowing what we’re doing if we don’t tackle those things as a matter of urgency.”

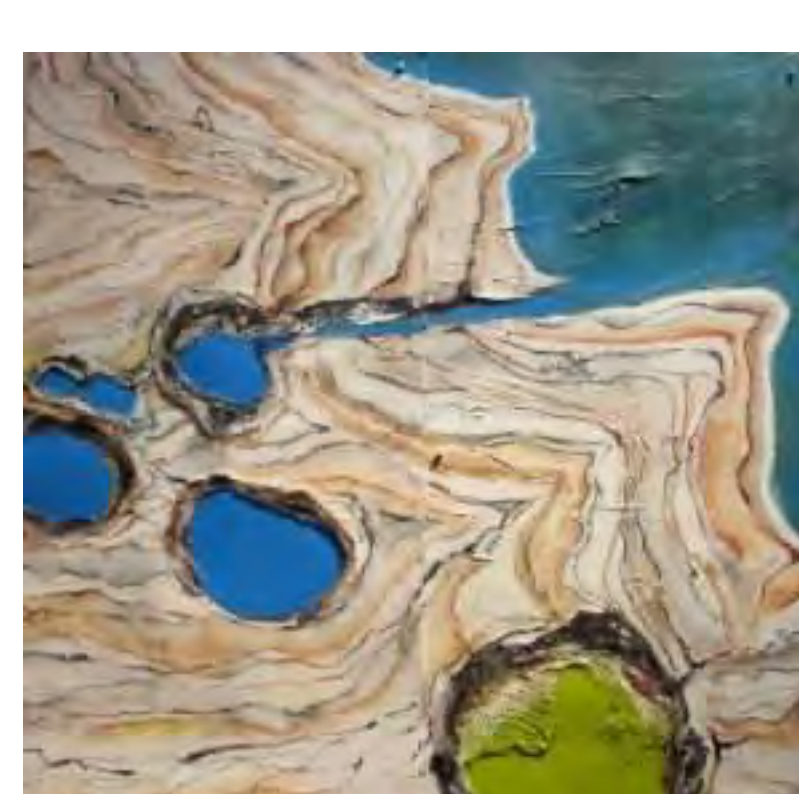


Dr. Gavin Schmidt and M. Annenberg at opening night for *Biophilia: In Excelsis* at the Yale Institute of Sacred Music’s Miller Hall in New Haven.

That NASA has long been observing earth from its numerous orbiting satellites offers vast amounts of information. “The instruments measure everything,” Schmidt explained. “We see the ozone levels, temperatures, winds, dust emitters, carbon. Without those eyes on the earth we would be flying blind and not know what is going on.”

Using satellite images in her work is Susan Hoffman Fishman to show the dramatic shrinking of Dead Sea Sinkholes. “I have focused on the changes to bodies of water impacted by climate change,” Hoffman Fishman said. “There have been dramatic changes to the Dead Sea over the last 70 years where there are now an unbelievable number of holes all over.”

As a result of climate change, Hoffman Fishman said the extraction of minerals and the damming of the Jordan River, which once provided a source of new water to the Dead Sea, over 8,000 sinkholes have developed along the Dead Sea’s shores.



“The Earth Is Breaking Beautifully 1: Dead Sea Sinkholes, 2021” by artist Susan Hoffman Fishman

Hoffman Fishman’s work in the exhibit “The Earth Is Breaking Beautifully 1: Dead Sea Sinkholes, 2021” (Acrylic, oil pigment, mixed media on paper, 30” x 30”) presents a transformed satellite image of sinkhole pools in startling azure and deep olive surrounded by heavy, undulating flows of natural toned thick pigment. Hoffman Fishman’s intent is to emphasize “the contrast between the horrifying destruction around the Dead Sea and the beauty of that destruction.”

Artist Eleanor Goldstein has traveled to the Arctic Circle in Norway three times in the last eight years to experience first-hand the rapidly melting glaciers and the loss of Arctic Sea ice, two-thirds of which has disappeared since 1958 when it was first measured. Because of global warming the Arctic is warming four times faster than the rest of the planet.

Goldstein speaks to her sense of place of the Arctic Circle and her work reflects the profound silence she felt when there.

“There is nothing in this world that we have experienced like the Arctic Circle,” Goldstein said. “If you want true silence, and the only noise is not made by nature beyond you, is to be there. The loudest noise I heard outside or inside of me was my breathing. I could also hear the clothes I wore move against my skin.”

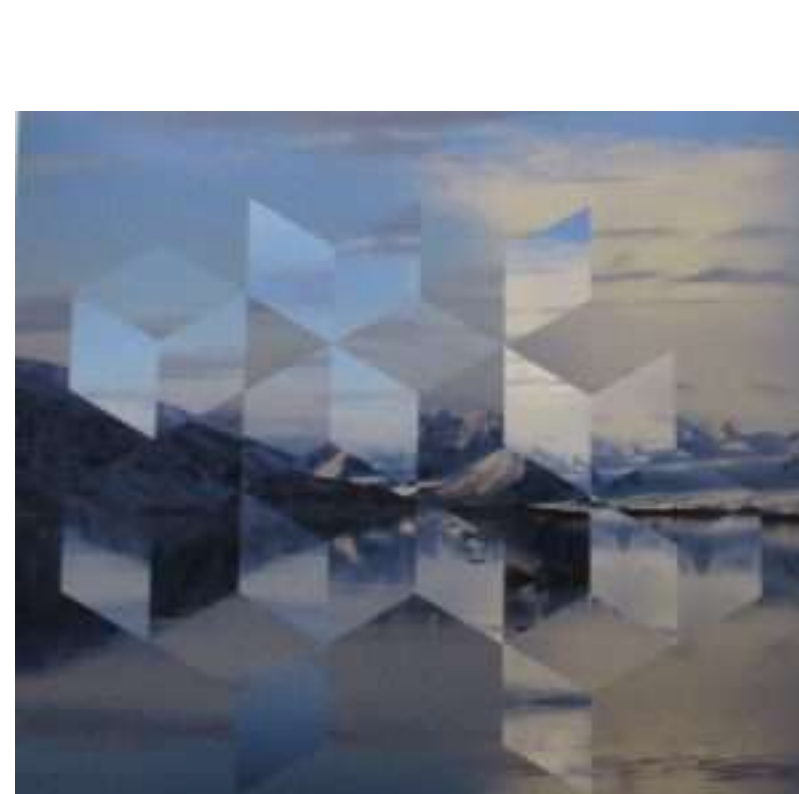
Goldstein’s work in the show “Night Shadows XIII, 2020 (Watercolor collage, 13” x 23”) shows a dramatic windswept seascape of rushing air and water amidst darkened glaciers.



“Night Shadows XIII, 2020 by Eleanor Goldstein

“My art is here simply to honor and to mourn, and to hope, dear God, that we save some of this for who we leave behind in the coming generations.”

The Arctic and Antarctica has also inspired Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky, who spent six weeks in Antarctica in 2011. Miller is a composer, multimedia artist and writer who incorporates cultural and environmental data in his work. “Fractal Apopenhia 2023” (16” x 20”), is Miller’s photo collage in the exhibit which shows an overlay of translucent cubed patterns over a wide shot of the arctic’s partial frozen tundra.



“Fractal Apopenhia 2023” (16” x 20”) by Paul D. Miller, aka DJ Spooky

Miller explained that Apopenhia is a Greek term meaning the tendency to see meaningful connections between unrelated things.

“Here we are in the 21st century and data has become the faux culture to how we think about narrative,” he explained. “As a composer the notion of the earth as a pattern of recognition systems and how humans interact with those patterns inspires my work quite a bit.”

Miller also traveled to the North and South poles in 2007, 2008 and 2014 to record changing climate conditions which resulted in “*The Book of Ice*,” and a 2013 album “*Of Water and Ice*” where the songs were projected through different kinds of ice.

“If you think about ice, it’s a geometric form based on how nature thinks of itself as a tuning system. Ice is one of the most mathematical structures in nature.”

The other artists in the exhibit include M. Annenberg, Krisanne Baker, Lois Bender, Walter Brown, Diane Burko, Janet Culbertson, Cameron Davis, Noreen Dean Dresser, Danielle Eubank, Kathy Levine, Angela Manno, Cristian Pietrapiana, Elisa Pritzker, Lisa Reindorf, Babs Reingold, Ann Shapiro, Steven Siegel, Simone Spicer, Suzanne Theodora White. All these artists deftly illuminate their passion for the earth’s treacherous and dark future of a warming earth.

This exhibition is sponsored by the Institute of Sacred Music’s Religion, Ecology and Expressive Culture Initiative. An essay about the exhibit by **Eleanor Heartney**, a New York based art writer, cultural critic and curator can be seen [here](#).

Biophilia: In Excelsis Biophilia

On view until May 2
Tuesdays, Wednesdays & Thursdays from 12–4 p.m.
The Yale Institute of Sacred Music’s Miller Hall
406 Prospect Street
New Haven, CT

<https://events.newhavenarts.org/events/biophilia-in-excelsis-art-exhibit-5a70e>

<https://ism.yale.edu/event/biophilia-excelsis-art-exhibit>