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ARTIST

Vortex (or My Life as an Unnatural Disaster)

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*In a decaying society, art, if it is truthful, must also reflect decay.
And unless it wants to break faith with its social function,
art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it.*
Ernst Fischer

Disaster

Before the November 2002 elections, in a memorandum, about the “environmental communication battle,” now referred to as the Luntz Memo, Republican strategist Frank Luntz urged party politicians and their aids “that the term ‘climate change’ be used instead of ‘global warming’ because ‘while global warming has catastrophic communications attached to it, climate change sounds a more controllable and less emotional challenge.’”¹

Spin it how you like. Call it global warming or climate change or whatever you want. The facts are frightening. And, they are not easy to comprehend. But the truth is simple. This “global weirdness” is real and we have to do something.²

There is nothing natural about the disaster that our climate is facing unless you really buy into the notion of manifest destiny and that as the chosen ones, it is our divine right to do whatever we what with this world. What’s natural at this point? What’s unnatural?

In a natural disaster a set of natural variables align by chance and circumstances unfold. In an unnatural disaster we are responsible for placing some of that set of variables in alignment, whether it is our intention or not.

I guess that’s not that different from my life, my career as an artist. I live, learn, love. I see, touch, feel, smell, taste. Sometimes I am simply in place. At other times I place myself. I experience the world. I think, relate, contrast, make connections. I create prints, paintings, videos, installations, artwork. I produce. I make.

But what am I leaving behind? What’s in my wake? Is my life an unnatural disaster?

Our Widening Gyre

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

In the first stanza of *The Second Coming*, William Butler Yeats describes the unraveled world as he observed it immediately following World War I. He goes on to muse upon a new notion of the second coming in which the misguided spirit of humankind has created and unleashed a “rough beast” that will take the world into an unfathomable future. Perhaps not differing so much from Dürer’s horsemen and the disaster they herald.

With his gyre, Yeats describes a world in crisis. When we use the word crisis we tend to think of moments of tragedy or complete breakdown, “a time of intense difficulty, trouble, or danger.” But if you look further into the word’s meaning, it is also “a time when a difficult or important decision must be made” or “the turning point in a disease when an important change takes place indicating either recovery or death.”

I see a crisis as a break, a fracture in what has become the norm. It is a moment in which we could see ourselves, perhaps momentarily need to see ourselves, as victims. Or it could be seen as a call to action, a siren awakening us from our sleep, luring us to certain doom unless we fight. In his poem I like to think that Yeats was recognizing the gravity of his world’s crisis and reeling in fear of what could come. With his words he asks What are you going to do?

Global warming rough is our rough beast. Will we march blindly ahead or will we rise and fight?

Mirrors and Hammers

A few years ago Mexican printmaker Ivan Lecaros visited The University of Akron Myers School of Art printshop. At one moment in his talk with our students he proclaimed "Printmaking is a weapon!" We are all well versed in printmaking's relationship to democracy, change, and social justice. But I had always thought of printmaking as a thought process and my voice.

Aphorisms about art are common. Sometimes flip, sometimes inspiring. Recently I came across playwright Bertolt Brecht's assertion that "Art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it." The question is what form does that hammer take and how do you shape reality?

When speaking or writing about my artwork, I often wield blunt, forceful language. When manipulating visual grammar, my content is more often tempered by aesthetics. I am drawn to romantic beauty and clean, economic design. I strive to invite my viewer into a conversation in which s/he reaches the slow realization of the hammer upon consideration of my content relative to his/her own life and relationship with the world. I present my viewer with information that is vital, yet in an unexpected context, hoping to awaken them to face reality. Climate change is a global issue, but it is also a domestic issue. Nothing can be done if we do not all do something together.

Weapons are confrontational and brutal. And the results of their use are messy and complex. But, printmaking with its aesthetics, its process, its history, and its power? This is the kind of weapon I can confidently wield.

Children

At the conclusion of his essay *Techno-Narcicism: A Printmaker's Ordeal*, Shaurya Kumar states "there is a need for artists themselves to be sensitive to changing times, methods and technologies and to create works that are truly children of [their] age."³ We can approach this statement from many directions. Kumar's article addresses the exciting possibility and the complex challenges of incorporating rapidly advancing technology into the continuum of media that we call printmaking. As artists we should also always be asking how our works relate to the world in which we live. How are the works of art that each of us produce children of this age?

Recently one of my Facebook friends posted a link to an article with a title asserting that we are raising a generation of helpless kids. It made me wonder about the artworks that we are producing. What about these products of my reproductive, creative efforts. What are they able to do when they leave my hands? Do they simply exist or will they have an effect?

Home

The future used to seem permanent. When I was growing up in southern Virginia, the nearly 400 year history of the United States was our history. And it seemed like forever to me. Our field trips were to places like Jamestown and the capitol building in Williamsburg to see where Patrick Henry had cried out against the Stamp Act. Now when I look at maps of predicted sea level change as impelled by global warming, neither those places nor my hometown will be there in the not too distant future. The movement of the tidal marshes, the quiet of pine barons, the smell of boxwood hedges, the open expanse of peanut fields always bounded by a horizon line of trees. Gone.

We exist as a part of a world in flux. Change is our most reliable companion. We affect change and we are effected by it. We are in a continuous state of transition. I know this and I understand it. People always say about your youth, "You can't go home." And when I go home now to visit, all of the changes—people and places and things—make that tangibly clear. But, what I can always go home to is the feeling that I get when I walk on the beach, dive into a lake, hike in the woods, or sit by a stream. I can return to the appreciation of nature that was instilled in me when helping my parents in the vegetable garden, digging to find sand fiddlers with my aunts and uncles, camping with the boy scouts, adventuring alone in the woods and on the lake around my house, or "deer hunting" with my grandfather who had stopped carrying a gun decades before because he could no longer handle being responsible for the death of beauty or any part of nature. When I return to that place, my heart is home.

So when global warming began nudging its way into the news more and more frequently, my immediate reaction was to turn and run the other way. I didn't want to believe it. It broke my

heart to think that the world as I have loved it may not be here for future generations. It broke my heart to think that I have played and continue to play a part in the demise of the natural world that we inherited. I know, time moves on and change is our most reliable companion. But this is not a natural change; this is an unnatural change that we are forcing upon the natural world.

I realized that my part in this world can't be just to use and consume, can't be just to produce and waste. I had to face this challenge. My part was to speak and to act, to wield the weapon that I have. It is my responsibility, all of our responsibilities, to care for our world and it's future. Why shouldn't the future for our natural world be permanent?

Ecology

When I am out in the natural world, I am made aware of all of the players in our ecology. The tiny fern-like plants, the squirrel screaming at me, beetles busy at their work. Everything has purpose; everything has meaning. I am a part of that ecology, too.

Ecology is defined as "the branch of biology that deals with the relations of organisms to one another and to their physical surroundings." As an artist and printmaker I am also a part of a different ecology. I am part of a community of individuals invested in the practice of printmaking, a community that speaks through printed matter. There is also the ecology of my personal creative practice—the observations, circumstances, and environment within which I practice my research and create my work.

Different Things

At the MAPC 2010 conference open portfolio in Minneapolis, my table was set up and I was ready to go. Game face on! Soon Karen Kunc walked up to my table. I was speaking to someone else so she looked thoughtfully at my prints. When I had finished my conversation, Karen looked up and with a gentle shake of her head said "Charles, I'm seeing lots of different things again." "I know Karen," I responded laughing nervously. "I just can't help it!"

It had been six years since I had traveled with Karen and an amazing group of printmakers to Egypt. I had wanted to go because I knew that it would be a fantastic adventure with people who shared my passion. But, I also wanted to go because it was 2004 and the world had gone to hell. I wanted to meet people and make personal connections and try to express that we, Americans, weren't our government and our war hungry leaders. I met amazing people, saw unreal things. I learned so much on that trip.

When I returned from Cairo and Luxor, ornamentation and pattern had quickly found a place in my work. Since then, I had been to Scandinavia, Iceland, and Greenland and my work had evolved with the experiences that I had consumed in these places, too. And my concern for the environment had grown. As time had moved, I was seeing lots of different things.

Waiting for Snow

I moved from Laramie, Wyoming to Akron, Ohio in the summer of 2001. I knew what I was leaving and I knew where I was going. But, no one at The University of Akron mentioned that the northeast Ohio region is second only to Seattle in its number of gray days each year. I love the change in seasons; I love warm weather and I love cold weather. But by the time March and even April roll around, gray has a physical weight. The first few years were fun with small children in the snow. Thank goodness we had four wheel drive; it was proving more useful in our Akron driveway than it had in Wyoming. After a few years, though, when late November would stride in, there was a tinge of angst whispering behind the joy of the first snows.

In the late fall of 2008 I had a residency at the Jyväskylä Center for Printmaking in Finland. I had already traveled to Oslo and Tromso, Norway and Tallin, Estonia. I was excited for the dramatically shorter days, especially in Tromso, above the Arctic Circle. The world brightened around 10 and darkened by 3 with a low light in-between. I was hoping for the northern lights, but the weather didn't cooperate. There were some fantastic moments, though it was generally gray, dull, and foggy. The snow came to Jyväskylä towards the end of my stay and as I later continued my travels to Stockholm and back to Oslo. Outside of my everyday environment it was beautiful and exciting. I realized that with the snow, a different kind of light arrived. The the dun-colored pall was blanketed with white and everything around me was illuminated.

While in Jyväskylä, I had begun a series of prints creating patterns of the bare trees spreading their

fingers in the sky and hexagons referring to the crystal structure of ice. Somehow they had become vibrant and garish. With a new perspective gleaned from the world that had opened up around me, I began layering the prints with white ink and flocking them with talc. I pushed my marks back trying to reflect the mystery and magic of the changes in the environment around me.

Soon, I returned to Akron and watched the same cycle play out again as winter arrived in our region. The winters are still gray and feel relentless when March and even April roll around. But, since that trip, I have welcomed the snow and its light. And I am glad that they stay until the sun returns.

Radiative Forcing

At the equinox in the summer of 2009 I traveled to the west coast of Greenland, first to the town of Ilulissat on the Disko Bay at the mouth of the Jakobshavn Icefjord and then further up the coast to Eqi Sermia to hike up onto the Greenland ice sheet. I had been addressing issues related to global warming in my work for a few years, but I was always working from other peoples data, observations, and documentation. I felt if I was going to talk about global warming, specifically as it related to the melting of the polar icecaps, I needed to see these environments for myself.

Each moment in Greenland was an adventure unto itself. When I travel, I'm a bit manic; I worry that I am going to miss something so I just go and go and go. In Greenland this was especially problematic because the sun never sets in the summer. That's how one night I ended up doing a midnight orienteering run with a bunch of crazy Greenlandic and Danish folks. And that's how about an hour later I found myself at the edge of the airport runway slogging through the soggy heath, laughing at myself, and walking my way back to the finish line to let them know that the even crazier American wasn't dead somewhere out there in the rocks. It was a ridiculous night, but if not for my insanity, what I like to call it enthusiasm, I never would have seen the odd warm light and mist hanging over the bay, the icebergs, and the rocky loam the way I did.

The next morning I was on my way to Eqi and the following afternoon I was two miles out onto the Greenland ice sheet with my guide Nikolas and new friend David holding me by my backpack as I leaned over and stared into the mouth of a moulin, a massive, swirling ice melt drainage tube plunging to the base of the ice sheet, lubricating it, and making it move towards its glacier tongues more rapidly. The only thing I could see around me was the brilliance of the snow and ice and the arc of perfect blue overhead. It was magic. Terrifying magic.

I had wanted to know if I could see global warming for myself. Just a few steps onto the ice it was there. Cryoconites, beautiful cylindrical pools of water all over the surface of the ice caused by particulates from the atmosphere (dust and carbon) landing on the ice and drawing warmth because of their dark color. As they grow, they join forming larger pools and streams and lakes and then moulins.

I was awestruck. Evidence of global warming right in front of my non-scientific eyes. But what really took my breath away on this adventure was how beautiful the ice sheet, the rocks, the glaciers, the towns, and the people were. When faced with the amazing beauty, diversity, and vibrance of this world, how could one be anything but humbled, grateful, and inspired?

When I return home, I continued my research wanting to arm myself with more information to balance the enthusiasm of my personal experience. In reading the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Fourth Report I came across a term that grabbed me. In climate science radiative forcing is the measure of an element's potential to effect change.⁴ Carbon has a positive radiative forcing meaning that it is effecting a change, creating a negative impact. We have a positive net radiative forcing. I wondered what my radiative forcing was. Did I have a negative radiative forcing? Could I affect a positive change upon the world even as I am an active contributor to global warming?

Empathy

Recently I was fortunate enough to travel to Sheridan College's Spear-O-Wigwam Mountain campus in the Big Horn Mountains on the edge of the Cloud Peak Wilderness to help inaugurate a residency program where a visiting artist is brought in for four days to work on their own work and then spend three days conducting a workshop with students and faculty. We focused on creating a collaborative book about experience, observation, and sense of place.

I spent my days there in the cabin where Hemingway finished writing A Farewell to Arms in 1928. I

wrote (hoping the karma in the cabin would rub off), I hiked, I looked for birds, I sat and absorbed, I felt and stood enrapt by the natural world around me and reflected upon my place within it.

The last leg of my trip to Sheridan began with a long walk to the end of Concourse A at the Denver International Airport. From there down the stairs into a seatless lobby, around the elevators, down a long corridor to the gates where you await your ride on a turbo prop vomit comet. I walked out across the tarmac, climbed into the plane, and went to take my seat in row two. I was told that there weren't enough people on the plane for people to sit up front. "Sit in the back. Just take any seat you like." When I sat down everyone around me was talking to each other; I felt more like I was on the school bus than United 3045 from Denver to Sheridan.

The next day, I found myself at Don King Days, a community celebration of an individual's fantastic mark on a place. Don King, who had passed away many years ago, had founded King Rope, an iconic American Western company of which most people have never heard. There were polo matches on one field, steer roping and old school bronco riding on the next. There were blacksmithing competitions and the most amazing spreads of barbecue.

I stood at the fence line watching the events with working class cowboys, lawyers, business owners, leather workers, college professors, an old-moneyed gentlemen rancher talking about the problem with the bear in his trout pond, and people who had worked hard to build careers and futures from humble means. I stood doe-eyed watching steers go airborne as they were roped, yanked from their feet, and tied in under 15 seconds.

We talked about the weather. We talked about local land policy. We talked about the improved death rates in bear confrontations with the use of bear spray. We talked about the conflict in the middle east and troubled perceptions of arabic peoples. We talked about how our two party political system no longer works and the fact that we are working with a constitution that was written for an entirely different world. We talked about the lack of understanding of each other's points of view that seems to be as infectious as ebola. We talked about it boiling down to the inability to be empathetic, to try to understand the perspectives and plights of others without the judgement that seems to be a defining characteristic of so many people today.

And then we all turned and ran as a flash of bronco and its thrashing rider suddenly grew larger and larger as they bounded to the fence. They bounced several times and then careened away when they were only an arms length from where we had been standing. We all laughed. Why hadn't I thought about grabbing that the little boy seated at the fence next to me? Where were those super human daddy reflexes I had possessed? Why hadn't I used them? Because in that moment I was that kid, too. That afternoon, I was giddy and alive, I was seeing and listening and tasting and feeling. I was in that moment and consuming everything around me.

We often forget that in our big world, small places are brimming with amazing character, big stories, and opportunities to learn. Sometimes we have to step out of our everyday lives to be reminded of this simple truth. We forget that every moment is filled with possibility. We forget to be empathetic for each other and the value of being empathetic to the world around us.

Solitude

A few years ago I remember Phyllis McGibbon telling me about one of her classes. She was bothered by how relentlessly connected we have become, not only to technology, but also through technology to each other. She was especially bothered when she observed the habits of some of her students. There is so little time anymore to be alone, to be quiet. We don't afford ourselves the opportunity for solitude and reflection. So she decided to make an exercise out of it. She made her students take a walk around the campus lake without smartphones or talking to each other. Some students fell in easily while others were annoyed. That quiet, that space of personal observation and reflection, was where she wanted them to begin their work.

On my recent trip to the Big Horns I found myself literally hiking the Solitude Trail. It was a beautiful afternoon. I was hiking hard and fast. I was alive and invigorated. I wasn't thinking about who was picking up Grace today; worrying about all involved in chairing tenure and promotion at my school; or wondering how on earth we were going to be able to afford to repave our driveway and which would have a lesser environmental impact, asphalt or concrete given that amount of carbon released in the production of concrete. I was thinking oh my God, could this get more perfect; its amazing everything you can hear when you actually listen; why did no one tell me to

buy bear spray before I got here?; and how could I be this hot and this cold at the same time? Is this what it's like to have a heart attack? I kept hiking up and up and up. I kept thinking I would reach a summit that would be a natural point at which I should start heading back to the lodge. But it didn't come. I decided the odd rock up ahead would be my spot. I would stop and rest there for a few minutes before starting my descent.

Something caught my eye in the clearing to my right. I looked over and saw a group of robins. Robins, just like the ones at home gathered in the snowy trees in early Akron spring outside my bedroom window. I had traveled all this way for the same things I have at home? How about a mountain bluebird at least? But there I sat and watched as they flitted around in the sun. I was quiet and took time to experience. Here I saw the robins.

Reality

As one of the characters in Ian McEwan's novel *Sweet Tooth* observes "ultimately reality is social."⁵ We piece it together like a puzzle, constructing our own understandings from the bits we glean from our experiences and the observations of others. The reality, the truth, in my work is constructed from all that I experience—the profound realizations to the goofy laughter—and the conversations in my head trying to understand it all. My reality is the ecology of the creative space in which I allow myself to breath, see, relate, construct, and work.

Over the course of the last five years, I have worked more and more in print based wall drawing and installation to address my concerns for the ecology of the natural world. These investigations have given me the opportunity to create works that challenge the viewer with scale and time. Sometimes the works change over time. At times physical movement is incorporated into the works. I am addressing issues that are overwhelming and complex in so many ways—global effect, personal impact, political dynamics, future outlook. Global warming is a tsunami staring us in the face. This grand scope invites grand scale. With large scale works we are confronted and we can't see their entirety at once. Deep, analytical reflection upon the past is all too rare. We aren't often within place, in the present, enough to really absorb the now. In everyday life we have trouble imagining, we can't see, the future. But when we take the time to step back and really consider, we can begin to grasp and think about the weight of our place in the world at this time and what that might mean for the future. With installation based work time is necessary to experience.

It is my goal with these works, as well as other conventionally scaled prints, to present viewers with issues related to global warming and climate change and invite reflection. I lure my viewers in with color, pattern, movement, and energy and urge them to consider a global crisis in which they are active participants.

Gyre

Yeats had a theory about consciousness and the universe that helped him understand his personal place in the world. Like his widening gyre, it was constructed of two spiraling cones, one set inside the other, but facing opposite directions. As you traveled from the center of one cone, you eventually intersected with the spiral of the other cone and traveled back inward.⁶

I believe that when you open yourself up to the world, the world will close itself back down for you. You gather and consume and fatten yourself with experience. But then as you sit, quiet yourself, and ruminate, things come into focus for you.

For me travel, experience, listening, the environment, sense of place, home, family, ephemerality, time, movement, process, and printmaking are a part of my ecology, the variables in my unnatural disaster. They are the raw materials with which I forge the voice to express my ecological vision and the weapon with which I hope to help shape the future.

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Endnotes

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