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***Strange Weather* Forecast: Inside Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History's New Exhibit**

Angel Chan

Rachel Nelson and Jennifer Gonzalez's exhibition *Strange Weather*, open to the public between April 14 and August 14, 2022, at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, is one that lingers in the mind of its visitors. It had a quality that exemplifies a kind of beauty in melancholy, especially poignant in a time of urgency in topics about climate. *Strange Weather* does not tell its visitors what to do but guides them through conversations they might not have had, challenging ideas like that of the "static native" or the United States' refusal to acknowledge its history of slavery.

Strange Weather provides a survey of the relationship between history, bodies, and the environment through artworks that span five decades, from 1970 to 2020. The artists use a range of mediums, from painting to installation, to draw attention to the impact of trauma on humans and the land through the long history of industrialization, forced migration, and global capitalism. Artists like James Lavadour and Leonardo Drew become nature in their work, while other artists reinsert marginalized bodies and voices into the conversation about histories and current topics concerning life and land. Although there can be moments of sorrow as the exhibition grapples with topics that seem bleak, it is powerful and necessary, because it shows us how we got here and where we go next.



Figure 1, *Installation View, Strange Weather, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA 2022. Image courtesy of Culture Saving LLC.*

Upon entering the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History’s Solari Gallery, visitors are drawn in by a massive sculpture that peeps from behind the introduction wall (fig. 1). Drew’s *Number 215B* is like an explosion of colorful shards of wood; its pieces seem to gather on top of one another in the center and expand, taking up an entire gallery wall. Completely unable to contain themselves, fragments spill onto the floor. The sheer size and details of each individual piece make the sculpture captivating enough to draw viewers in from the hall into the gallery. The label notes that the materials in this sculpture are new, and Drew sees himself as “becoming the weather” as he ages the wood through burning, oxidation, and other “natural” processes. *Number 215B* is a destructively beautiful piece that creates the sensation of motion as the shards travel inward; the piece becomes more thought-provoking as one considers the origins of these shards. Drew’s artistic process makes the artificial natural, and the natural artificial. It is the questioning of the shard’s origins that forces visitors to consider the fragility of our built environments.

The exhibition space is a single room with two walls built in the middle; even though Drew’s piece piques the visitors’ interest from behind one of the walls, the starting point of the exhibition is the introduction wall, which leads the viewer to the right to Terry Winter’s two pieces, *Novalis (Sojka 48)* (1998) and *Crimson Lake* (2013). As the viewers move to the right, they encounter artists like



Figure 2 Installation view, Strange Weather, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA 2022. Featured from left to right is Leonardo Drew's Number 215B (2020), Alison Saar's Grow'd (2019), and Nicola López's Half-Life no. 13 (2009). Image courtesy of Culture Saving LLC.

Carlos Amorales, Joe Fedderson, Kiki Smith, and Nicola López; the work chosen for this side of the exhibition alludes to technological developments for exploration and their effects on the land. Amorales's allusion to the Mercator map and Smith's use of the periphery camera refer to mapping as a historical phenomenon. López's dystopian landscape and Fedderson's reminder of land as a site of the memorial examine the history of exploration through its effects.

These pieces lead viewers to Alison Saar's sculpture, *Grow'd* (2019), which monumentalizes the United States' history with regard to cotton, slavery, and identity (fig. 2). This adult version of the young, enslaved girl from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Topsy, is cast in bronze and life-size. Her braids are lifted, and branches of cotton grow out of her hair to form a halo. This is a powerful image as she sits upright on her cotton bale throne with her crown of cotton holding a branch as a scepter in one hand and a scythe in the other. Interestingly, in addition to the museum light that shines from the ceiling, the sculpture is placed under a small corner skylight; the sculpture's reference to the relationship between enslaved bodies and the cultivation of cotton and this kind of double lighting could be a way to illuminate a part of history that the United States likes to keep in the dark.



Figure 3 Installation View, Strange Weather, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA 2022. Featured in this picture is James Lavadour's paintings, Deep Moon (2005), in the center, and Untitled (2001), right. Image courtesy of Culture Saving LLC.

On the wall adjacent to Saar's piece are two works by Lavadour, who is a renowned American painter and printmaker from the Walla Walla tribe of the Northwest Plateau. Lavadour's landscapes are not like the more traditional western landscape paintings to which most United States viewers are accustomed. In the American context, landscapes usually present land as invitational and it is depicted naturalistically. In other contexts, Lavadour has described how he started experimenting with paint and developing his style of large panel sets of landscape painting. To him, painting does not merely demonstrate what is seen in the natural world but is a medium that allows people to see into worlds that are not visible.¹ The vibrant colors and dynamic motions on the panels surrounding the stillness in the central panel of *Deep Moon* (2005) evoke a side of nature that cannot be seen on the surface level: the side of nature as an active force, one that is both turbulent and smooth, rather than a static entity (fig. 3). Lavadour sees his materials the same way he sees himself: as an event of nature.² The pigments that created his paints are products of natural events, like erosion, mineral deposits, and so forth, and the events that take place in nature also take place on his canvas.³ It is powerful visually to encounter the connection between the material, the artist, and an alignment of certain events in



Figure 4 Installation View, *Strange Weather*, Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History, Santa Cruz, CA 2022. Featured in this image from left to right is Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds's *Not Your Coyote Stories* (2015) and Kehinde Wiley's *Marechal Floriano Peixoto II* (2009). Image courtesy of Culture Saving LLC.

nature that fell into place to create the nine-panel works on display. *Deep Moon* (2005) and *Untitled* (2001) showcase how Lavadour draws attention to the infinite number of ways the earth can move. Each panel could stand on its own as a unique glimpse into the environment, but when assembled together, they demonstrate the possibilities that the rest of the natural world, humans, and paint can offer.

The works of Lavadour and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds face Drew's massive sculpture. One of the exhibit's ultimate themes, the personification of nature, emerges as the viewer experiences these three pieces in conjunction with one another. Nature is not a passive subject in their works but a contributor. Drew "became weather" when creating *Number 215B*, and Lavadour and his paints are events of nature that work together on the canvas. Rachel Nelson and Jennifer Gonzalez, in discussions of their curatorial work, note that Edgar Heap of Birds considers printmaking a mysterious process that is chemical and ethereal, and that can create something beautiful if you stay out of its way.⁴ For him, it is not about controlling the medium but working with it and

letting it lead him. Language is also an important medium in Edgar Heap of Birds' art because of how accessible it is; its accessibility is what makes it harder to deflect.⁵ Language can be and has been a tool of oppression, but in his work, language now becomes a form of protest. His print series, *Not Your Coyote Stories* (2016), resemble protest signs and are especially memorable because they literally speak to viewers (fig. 4). The museum label puts it perfectly, saying "language becomes landscape." Each print, which has its own phrase, becomes a conversation through art. There is a relationship between nature and artists that is apparent in the creative processes of these artists.

Although small, *Strange Weather* is a powerful exhibition that acknowledges hard truths through art and brings difficult conversations that are usually placed on the back burner to the front. It is an exhibition that examines the histories of bodies and the environment and forces viewers to consider how technological advancements, like automobiles, industrial farming, and mapmaking, have shaped our current social and political environment. Visitors cannot help but feel a twinge of responsibility for their contributions to this predicament, but the exhibition does not paint nature as a docile entity. In many artworks within this exhibition, nature is referenced as a powerful force that is both creation and destruction. With this perspective, visitors wonder what happens next. Weather, in terms of climate change, is a complicated and harrowing topic, but this exhibition provides visitors with a survey of artists who actively take part in these needed conversations.

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Notes

¹ Rebecca J. Dobkins and James Lavadour, *James Lavadour: The Properties of Paint*, Hallie Ford Museum of Art, 2008, p. 5, http://oregonvisualarts.org/wp-content/uploads/Lavadour-brochure-pages_notExcerpted.pdf.

² Museum label.

³ Kate Morris, *Shifting Grounds: Landscape in Contemporary Native American Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 69.

⁴ Rachel Nelson, Jennifer Gonzalez, and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Bird, “Traction: Art Talk with Edgar Heap of Birds,” Institute of Art and Sciences, May 10, 2022, 50:22 - 51:23. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x_MJ1lR_Eh4&t=2s

⁵ *Ibid.*, 47:00–47:20.