

Relief in the Anthropocene

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American sculptor Blane De St. Croix creates sculptures and installations that respond to the big questions of our time: climate change, disaster, and political turmoil. He often works on location, choosing sites that reflect how these issues play out in our environment. In this exhibition, you will see the artist's journey through challenges that face different "natural" environments—from glaciers to bayous, and from forests to deserts to salt flats—with all its beauty and power, as well as its fragility and mutability.

The word "landscape" originates in the history of painting, and the term itself contains one of the roots of De St. Croix's working process: land exists independent of humanity, but a landscape refers to how we as humans frame it, how it appears to our eyes. De St. Croix often describes his artworks as "hybrid landscapes," by which he means: they are not exact replicas of the land he studies; his sculptures, installations and collages are a combination of observation and narrative, expressing the questions that one confronts in that specific location.

Inspired by his physical experience of the location, the artist's sculptures evoke questions or narratives that he discovers on site. The works in *Horizon* represent the span of his work across the globe, with a focus on his works made in response to the UAE. In particular, he celebrates the less-familiar views of our UAE environment, such as the natural and human-made salt lakes, and the diversity of rock and desert vistas. This exhibition grows directly out of the artist's thinking on climate change, and in dialogue with the questions at stake in the 28th "Conference of Parties" (COP28) to be held in the UAE this year.

Installing Superbags of gravel to save the Utqiagvik community from increasing climate-created Arctic storms, Alaska, US.
Photo: Paul De Luna



During the last year, the artist has been in residence at NYU Abu Dhabi. Over the course of five visits, he crisscrossed the Emirates, studying the diverse physical landscapes of the UAE. On his first trip in April of last year, he connected with NYUAD's scientists, historians, and artists, as well as some of the UAE's leaders in climate policy. Some of these conversations developed into collaborations on artworks presented here, others are represented in the video interviews featured in the last section of this exhibition.

While in residence in the UAE, De St. Croix received news that the US National Science Foundation (NSF) would fund a project on which he is one of four Principal Investigators ("co-PIs"). Together with two climate scientists and a curator, he is studying and making work about the impact of climate change on Yukon Arctic Indigenous communities. It is rare, indeed, for an artist to be a co-PI on a grant from the NSF. Rare, but not a surprise: responding to the Arctic, and co-producing knowledge about it, makes up De St. Croix's most extensive body of work to date. That work includes a major new series of installations that premiered in a solo exhibition at The Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) in 2021.

The landscape of the UAE stands in stark contrast to that of the Arctic, yet the artist sees connections, parallels, and exchange between the two ecologies and climates. While in residence here, the artist also plunged into another aspect of climate change: the efforts of the UAE and other governments alongside NGOs to develop renewable energy and address climate change. IRENA (The International Renewable Energy Agency) formed in the UAE in 2009 and is headquartered here. During his second visit to the UAE, he attended the 2023 IRENA Assembly, as an artist observer. He was joined by Joanna Settle, who is a theater artist and

Artist's documentation of
the salt lakes of Abu Dhabi.

faculty at NYU Abu Dhabi (Associate Dean, Faculty Affairs and Outreach; Arts Professor of Theater, Arts and Humanities Division). They were beginning their work on one of the installations in this exhibition. The climate was on everyone's mind: this was also to be the year the UAE hosts COP28.

As I write this text, a train track is taking shape, running in and out of the art gallery's walls, and circling past our front windows. On that track will run two trains, visible through the gallery windows to people passing outside. Working on the train track shares much with the kind of work we normally do to prepare a newly commissioned artwork, with one key difference: a sense of play.

39 cars in total, the trains are made up of miniature sculptures of different environments around the world, with a focus on those he found in the UAE. These include sand dunes, but also salt lakes and rocky mountains. The train leads audiences into an exhibition of sculptures that deal with nature framed by climate change.

Why use toy trains in an art installation about climate change? What role does art have, for that matter, beyond representing the crisis? Play and art both seem to pale in the face of the serious business of what we see in climate news today.

To begin the exhibition with a toy train offers the visitor permission for a moment of play, even if just in that first encounter of beholding the train. In many ways this entry point is the opposite of what many visitors might expect from an art museum, and certainly of a serious topic such

Moving Landscape II, 2020
Wood, plywood, foam, plastic,
paint, branches, dirt, other natural
and recycled materials, model trains.
6 meter train track with 16 train cars





1. Donald Woods Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 1991), 13.

as climate change. And yet, according to D. W. Winnicott (a founder of child development theory), play and art may be just the missing pieces to enable us to confront reality:

It is assumed here that the task of reality-acceptance is never completed, that no human being is free from the strain of relating inner and outer reality, and that relief from this strain is provided by an intermediate area of experience, which is not challenged (arts, religion, etc.). This intermediate area is in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is 'lost' in play.¹

Relief from the strain of accepting reality is necessary, according to Winnicott, in order to mature into adulthood. In the context of eco-anxiety (referring to a chronic fear of environmental doom), one can imagine that relief from strain will be needed, indeed, as we work toward accepting the reality of the choices at stake when it comes to global warming.

Winnicott's intermediate area of relief includes both art and play as crucial elements in the process of maturation. De St. Croix's trains offer both: toy trains that are also art. For him, the miniature trains allow room for humor, and for nostalgia as they relate to childhood toys. The artist sets the stage to allow relief, even as he queues up the subject of climate change.

Viewers soon see that their train cars carry all manner of landscapes, sculpted in miniature by the artist. These sculptures rehearse many scenarios of climate-change-induced disaster. The artist here leverages the relief of play and art, while rehearsing the harrowing reality of ecological disasters. In this way, the project perhaps makes it possible to absorb the specter of climate change differently than we might when reading the news.

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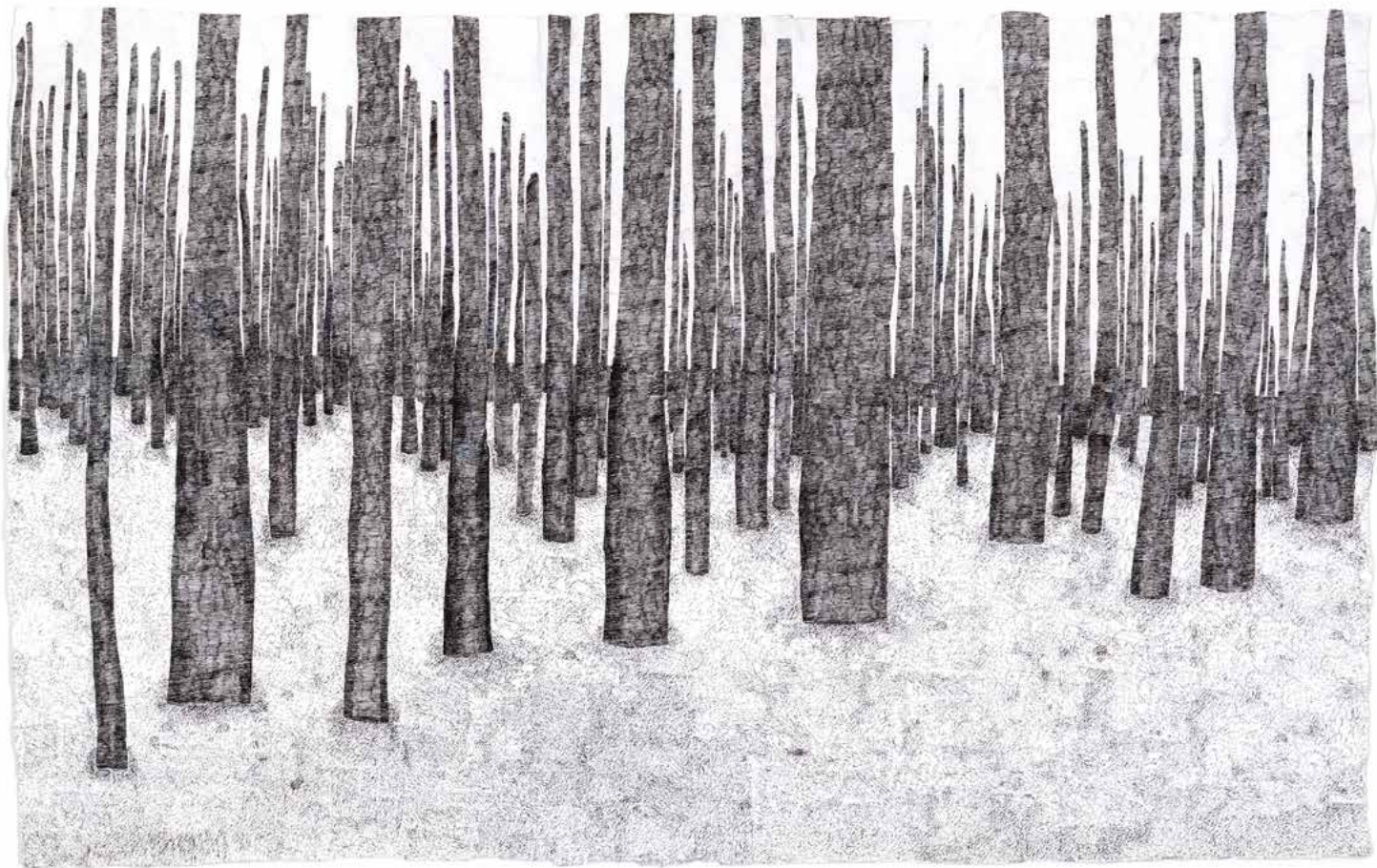
The trains themselves do double work: they point to the beginning of the problem, and offer a proposal for its solution. Trains inaugurated the industrial revolution—at least symbolically—which, in turn, is seen as the beginning of the Anthropocene (the era in which the impact of human activities triggers distinct geologic change). Trains also allowed human populations unprecedented access to unfamiliar landscapes. Trains, historically, were coal-driven, a massive source of carbon emissions that cause global warming. And yet, today's trains emit as much as 80 percent less carbon than planes and cars.² With recent innovations in fueling trains, trains hold more hope than almost any other fuel-powered mode of transportation, especially for cargo so often trucked across continents. The train then signals another kind of relief: what if we moved the world with trains instead?

Winnicott's intermediate area between internal and external realities, the area of art and play (and thus relief and eventual reality acceptance), is where much of the sculpture of De St. Croix thrives. Sometimes overtly playful, and humorous, as with the use of trains, and other times more subtly so, throughout this exhibition the art offers the viewer small bursts of discovery and wonder.

As the visitor's journey into the gallery progresses, away from the train, the artist's collages, paintings, and sculptures shift the scale and perspective of the land. These range from aerial views of entire regions, spanning a full gallery wall, to lava beds laid at the viewer's feet, to a small-scale Mount Everest and Himalayan range extending above the viewer's head; the exhibition's landscapes range across the continents. The artist has zigzagged the planet, creating sculptures in response to different regions, often in wild or challenging environments. In all of these works, the

2. Hannah Ritchie, "Which form of transport has the smallest carbon footprint?" OurWorldInData.org, 20, August 30, 2023, <https://ourworldindata.org/travel-carbon-footprint>.

Louisiana Bayou Cypress, 2018
Collage with ink on paper and digital archival
prints mounted on canvas, 91 x 183 cm



sculpture derives from his experience of travel to these places, where he went not only to look, but to engage the communities who live there, as well as those invested in working there—scientists, activists, corporations, and governments. From all of these conversations he develops an account of each location that captures multiple perspectives.

On the train, and in the course of the exhibition in the following rooms, the visitor will encounter a Louisiana Bayou, burnt forests in Haiti, the deserts and salt flats of the UAE, the Gobi Desert, the Arctic's Svalbard Archipelago, the lava beds of Kilauea (a volcano in Hawaii that has become unusually active this year), and the melting glaciers of the Himalayas.

There are four new works in this exhibition, which are commissioned by The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery. Three respond directly to the UAE's environment: the train, the "infinite landscapes," and *Salt Lake Excerpt, UAE*. A fourth is *High Peaks: Himachal (Snow Mountain)*, a monumental piece that is his first-ever presentation of his Himalayas project.

Early in the exhibition, the visitor will encounter a series that the artist refers to as "infinite landscapes." He adopted this technique to help capture the distinct feeling one might have in the deserts of the UAE, as if they are indeed infinite. As I write this, the works are still being constructed. We know that they will appear as windows in a long dark room—one can imagine them having the effect of train windows, as we pass landscapes that extend endlessly out. Each one depicts an ecosystem from the UAE, (desert, salt flats, etc.), and is based on the artist's close observations here. They are "infinite" due to a trick of one- and two-way mirrors that allow them to reflect endlessly in a double mirror effect. These landscapes point to infinite space, while

Over Ice, Svalbard, 2020
Cast white cotton paper, 381 x 411 x 15 cm





also serving as a frozen moment of time captured during our world's present climate.

De St. Croix also maintains a practice of sculpting on site, or, as he sometimes calls it, "en plein air" (a term that French Impressionists coined to describe painting outdoors, rather than in the studio). With these works, he uses the material in the actual land around him as part of the sculpture itself. He came up with a working method that allows him to sculpt on site as well as serving as a metaphor for how we carry the landscape with and within us. The artist sculpts on site using the top panel of the crate as his working surface. When he is finished, he flips this panel and closes the crate, which enables him to ship his work from the site where it was made, unharmed. In turn, when exhibited, the crate of the work serves as its pedestal.

In the case of this Gobi Desert work, that region's soil has blown into north-central China, as climate change drives desertification of surrounding lands. After making this work on-site, he shipped it in this crate to China, where it was exhibited, in a rehearsal of the actual movement of the Gobi's soil along the prevailing Mongolian winds.

The other two *plein air* sculptures on view are from his Arctic series, in the Svalbard archipelago, which is among the northernmost areas in the world to host human population. This work captures the horizon view that the whaling town of Smeerenburg would have had of today's melting glaciers, if the town had survived.

Artist working on site, on *En Plein Air: Nomadic Landscape, Gobi Desert*, 2012.

The Arctic region first appears in the artist's work in 2013, when he joined an expedition as part of the inaugural Arctic Circle, comprising a group

of artists, writers, scientists, and educators who sailed from Svalbard, Norway, in an ice-breaking vessel, to ten degrees from the North Pole. That eventually led, in 2019, to his filming and sculpting expedition to the High Arctic, in Utqiagvik, Alaska, the most northern point in the United States—which, in turn, led to his current NSF-funded project. In the exhibition at NYU Abu Dhabi, a series of works capture these different trips, with painting, collage, and a massive cast-paper piece that envisions the Svalbard archipelago from a birds-eye view.

In addition to sculpting *en plein air*, De St. Croix has pioneered an unconventional technique of casting paper pulp to make large sculptural works that span floors and walls. He uses this technique for *Over Ice*, which is part of his Svalbard Arctic series, as well as for an extensive series that grew out of his work on the lava beds of Hawaiian shield volcano of Kilauea. Using cotton pulp colored with carbon black pigment, he worked with master paper-maker Lisa Switalski to drape saturated cotton pulp over armatures, and allowed it to collapse and dry in a manner that produces a texture emulating that of the lava beds. Together, the two cast-paper pieces mirror each other in content and form, and echo the lines of the glacier collages. With black vs. white, lava vs. glacier, the formal qualities of Earth's most extreme temperatures come into focus.

In the artist's rendition of the Himalayas, they rise above eye-level, and appear to be collapsing and melting down the pedestal sides. The installation includes Mount Everest and the other 5 highest peaks in the Himalayas. He made this choice in response to newly announced scientific research that confirms that they are melting far faster than previously predicted, on track to lose 80% of glaciers by 2100.³ This, in turn, "will directly impact billions of people in Asia... (and) the melting

3. Delger Erdenesanaa, "Himalayan Glacier Loss Speeding Up, New Report Finds," *The New York Times*, June 19, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/19/climate/himalayas-melting-water-source.html?searchResultPosition=1>.

Lava Bed (from the *Kilauea* series), 2015
Cotton pulp in black made with carbon,
black pigment, and metal dust,
15 x 290 x 290 cm



of such a vast reserve of fresh water could impact countries as far away as the United States, even the whole of humanity.”⁴ The delight of these mountain sculptures reverberates against their depiction as melting, and the collapse of their surrounding human and natural ecosystems.

At the center of this exhibition is a sprawling new installation, titled *Salt Lake Excerpt, UAE*. De St. Croix is known for his room-enveloping installations, and here he collaborates for the first time with theater artist and NYUAD faculty Joanna Settle. This project began with their visit to a series of salt lakes and salt flats (more often referred to by their Arabic name, *sabkha*) found in the UAE. Abu Dhabi’s coastal *sabkha* is under consideration by UNESCO as a world heritage site. This work contains elements of both the *sabkha* and salt lakes.

The vista of this art installation recalls the salty UAE lands, while taking on an eerie life of its own, perhaps also evoking an Arctic landscape as much as a salt lake or salt flat. The crystals are flakes of plastic, PET from 50,000 plastic bottles in their recycling process. De St. Croix has long used PET in his sculptures, inviting viewers to experience a shift in perception from “nature” (ice or salt crystals) to “human-made” (plastic). Each medium plays a critical role in ecological changes.

For De St. Croix, the salt vistas fascinated him because, “conceptually, they combine land and water centered around salt... these salt flats are also visually similar to the Arctic, they are spectacular. They look icy, frosted, snowlike, and share the elements of water. There is also a sense of an endless landscape, very flat, going on and on.”⁵ He points out that salt is a critical factor in climate change: the planet’s oceans are getting hotter

4. Arshad R. Zargar, “Himalayan glaciers are melting faster than ever, and scientists say it’s ‘going to affect us’ all,” *CBS News*, June 22, 2023, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/himalaya-glaciers-melting-faster-study-warns-will-affect-us-all/>.
5. All quotes regarding new work are transcribed from voicenote recorded interviews with Blane De St. Croix and Joanna Settle, August 21, 2023.

work in progress: *High Peaks: Himachal (Snow Mountain)*, 2023
Acrylic paint, vinyl paste, wood and foam armature, recycled polyester battens, dimensions variable. Commissioned by The NYU Abu Dhabi Art Gallery.



and saltier than ever before, and as water salinity increases, so do surface temperatures of the planet.

Along with the salt, plastic is an important medium for this work. Settle notes that, at this point, “though man-made, we have to consider plastic a natural material that can be harvested, and worked with: it is in our bodies, it’s in our food, it’s in our water, everything. So, it didn’t begin from nature but it is now part of our environment.”

In this human-made landscape, De St. Croix and Settle 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.



In the final room of the exhibition is a series of video interviews that the artist has conducted with scientists and others about their work on the climate. Some of these are NYUAD faculty and community—and many whom he interviewed are also not here on video, but contributed to his research. He finds working with scientists to be profoundly inspiring, and admits: “I made a lot of assumptions about scientists. But they’re philosophers, too. They’re living on the edge.”⁶

Throughout the artist’s work runs a thread of our interconnection—the land around us, the ways we choose to live, and how we learn about each other. Moving away from the silos of STEM and the arts, literature, music, theater, philosophy, and history, he instead works to make visible the power of knowledge across the disciplines. He seeks out collaborators who participate in processes of “knowledge co-production,” a term

6. Martha Schwendener, “Interview with Blane De St. Croix at his Studio,” in *Blane De St. Croix, How to Move a Landscape*, ed. Denise Markonish (North Adams, Massachusetts: MASS MoCA, 2021), 32.

7. Ibid.

for an emerging transdisciplinary method that brings together experts and lay stakeholders of all backgrounds to solve complex challenges. De St. Croix notes:

I recently read that if the Vikings had contacted the Inuit communities they probably would've survived longer. This made me understand that we need to be more collaborative and learn how to survive together ... And if I can make some of this visible, to help foster these conversations, then I have done my job.⁷

This exhibition represents a growing community of cross-disciplinary researchers, makers, thinkers, scientists, and change agents who embody that kind of collaborative mission. Art brings the power of relief and space for new knowledge to the table, where new ways of confronting, understanding, and discovering might lead to new paths across the horizon now coming into view.