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Time will tell

Philbrook Downtown exhibit looks backward, forward, and below

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Richard Barlow, "The Sea of Ice, Receding," 2019. Chalk on blackboard paint. Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

With a set of three new installations, Philbrook Downtown continues to strengthen its presence as a space for meditative deep-diving in the Tulsa Arts District. Right off the bustle of Guthrie Green, the space lets a few pieces of boldly-curated art speak for themselves. The voices are weighty ones, beautiful ones, and the austerity of the gallery makes room for the noise to fade out and listening to fade in.

Art as a practice of attention, a conversation rather than an entertainment (elite or otherwise). Time as a medium in which to work, play, consider, and live with more awareness. These ideas are part of the bigger vision of Philbrook under Scott Stulen's direction, and they're present in super-concentrated form at the downtown location.

That's not to say the new works by Richard Barlow, Peggy Weil, and Joel Daniel Phillips don't have a "wow" factor. In fact, they're absolute showstoppers of scale, theme, and virtuosity.

In "The Sea of Ice, Receding," Barlow covers a long horizontal wall with a meticulously detailed chalk drawing of ice floes at the edge of the Arctic's melting pack ice, inspired by photographs he took during a residency in the Arctic Circle. Weil, a last-minute addition to the show, uses music and projection in "88 Cores" to take viewers inside the 110,000-year history—layer by layer—of some of that same ice. And in "It Felt Like the Future Was Now," Phillips, a 29-year-old Tulsa Artist Fellow, renders early-20th-century photographs in pencil drawings that are massive in dimension and overwhelming in sensitivity.

But the real wow isn't the showstopping. It's the time-stopping. Considering historical records and the edges of planetary apocalypse—the past and the future, layered together in a delicately suspended, temporary present moment—the works still viewers into thoughtfulness.

"I have always had an interest in how meaning is produced by images, and how that maps metaphorically onto how meaning is produced in our lives," Barlow said. "When I first considered making drawings on blackboard paint, I didn't think they'd be particularly sophisticated images. I was imagining blackboards as pedagogical tools, a place to make a diagram or sketch to explain something to someone.

"Once I started working on these images, the metaphorical meanings of the fragility of the medium, and its fleeting presence, felt like they clearly mapped onto both the ecological and existential concepts within my work."



Joel Daniel Phillips, "This is the New Appearance of Venice," 2018. Charcoal, graphite, and ink on paper.

For Phillips, who researched Los Angeles Public Library records of early oil industry disasters on the California coast for this body of work, these hyperrealistic drawings are a way of meditating on the emotional impact of particular moments in time, the immensity of which our minds struggle to compute rationally.

"We're saturated in images, drowning in information," he said. "But when we don't truly, from an emotional and sympathetic standpoint, understand the impact of the decisions that we're making, we keep making those decisions in the easiest, cheapest, most capitalistically efficient way."

Phillips' drawings (not black and white, but the whole spectrum of gray) depict the California of dreams—dreams containing hidden nightmares, like the smoky explosion in one image, or in another, distant oil derricks at Huntington Beach, where tar comes up through the sand.

"I'm interested in that ambiguous moment, that knife edge between beauty and terror," he said. "How could something—in this case, the oil boom—have been so celebrated in one moment and become so apocalyptic in another moment? How does that transition happen?"

For both Barlow and Phillips, the sheer physical effort involved in creating these works is a way of pulling these geopolitical realities out of the abstract and into the embodied. To spend 400 hours drawing an explosion with his own hand, as Phillips did, is to bear visceral, sympathetic witness to the truth—something it's all too easy for us to have amnesia about because it's past, it's future, it's far away, it's too massive to register.

As well, Barlow explained, "the idea of the amount of labor inscribed in the work adds more charge to the fact of its eventual erasure." His chalk drawing will be erased at the end of the exhibit.

These scenes are, in Phillips' words, "impossible, Orwellian—and yet, they really happened." Time is easily lost. So is history, and nature, and every complex thing we know and love. The momentary timelessness of art—and the time it takes to make it, and to take it in—is a wellspring of power in a moment when we need it more than ever.

"The Sea of Ice, Receding" / "It Felt Like the Future Was Now" / "88 Cores"

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Philbrook Downtown

116 E. M. B. Brady St

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