

Environmental art is on the rise – with a little help from Leonardo DiCaprio

Olafur Eliasson, Shepard Fairey and Tomás Saraceno are among a growing group of artists creating works that draw attention to the effects of climate change

Anny Shaw – 26 March 2016



Ice Watch by Olafur Eliasson. Eliasson carved a massive block of ice from Greenland and installed the pieces at the Place du Panthéon in Paris last December for the UN climate summit. Photograph: Martin Argyroglo/Olafur Eliasson

The image looks like a scene from a science fiction movie about an alien landscape on another planet: a 28-by-24-foot LED wall depicting an impressive, circular array of giant mirrors surrounding a tower lit at the top. But this is very much an earthly construct. It's an artwork reflecting the emergence of renewable energy: a digital simulation of a solar power plant producing electricity in the Nevada desert.

The artwork, called [Solar Reserve \(Tonopah, Nevada\) 2014](#), was created by Irish artist John Gerrard and illustrates the changing views of the solar arrays from day to night. The actor Leonardo DiCaprio, who has used his fame to publicize the perils of global warming, bought and donated the work to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Gerrard represents a group of artists joining the the public conversation about climate change by creating works that convey their views of humanity’s impact on the environment. During the United Nations conference on climate change in Paris last December, artists including Olafur Eliasson, Shepard Fairey and Tomás Saraceno displayed works throughout the city as part of an initiative calling for a global commitment to climate action.

Eliasson, in particular, created an impressive piece that illustrated the effects of global warming. He transported a mass block of ice from Greenland to Paris, carving it into pieces and installing them in a circle at the Place du Panthéon. The 80-tonne work, called Ice Watch, slowly melted over time. Such works are meant to be temporary, grand and evocative. The Danish-Icelandic artist has built a career creating site-specific installations, like hanging a huge, artificial sun inside London’s Tate Modern museum in 2003.

“The purpose is to engage a wide audience to offer a new perspective on the world in which we live,” says Tanya Bonakdar, Eliasson’s New York dealer.



Solar Reserve (Tonopah, Nevada) 2014, by John Gerrard, who created the software to simulate and project a real-life solar power plant in Nevada. Leonardo DiCaprio bought and donated it to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Photograph: Iñaki Vinaixa/John Gerrard

Art with a purpose

Creating art with an environmental message isn’t new. In the 1960s and 1970s, a group of mainly American artists began to create art that wasn’t meant for the confines of the gallery space. Robert Smithson’s Spiral Jetty (1970), a 1,500ft-long mud and rock piece in Utah’s Great Salt Lake, and Walter De Maria’s Lightning Field (1977), a grid of 400

stainless steel poles driven into the New Mexico desert, are two of the best known examples. Partly funded by the dealer and philanthropist Virginia Dwan, the works were never intended to be sold to private collectors.

The start of a greater public discussion on climate change in the 2000s served as inspiration for a new range of works, sparked in part by the Academy Award-winning film on global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*.

In 2007, Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, a collector in Turin, Italy, dedicated a whole year of exhibitions, talks and events to climate change. The program culminated with the show *Greenwashing Environment: Perils, Promises and Perplexities*, which featured 25 international artists including Minerva Cuevas, Santiago Sierra, Tue Greenfort and Norma Jeane and works like Greenfort's waste bins, which came with transparent polycarbonate sides, and Jeane's bed of plants installed in industrial pallets using microbiologically treated soil.

"I daresay our 2007 exhibition anticipated climate change as an art world issue," says Sandretto Re Rebaudengo. "But certainly over the past ten years more and more artists have begun to address this problem."



Ice Watch by Olafur Eliasson and Minik Rosing, Place du Panthéon, Paris, 2015. Photograph: Martin Argyroglo/Olafur Eliasson

Can I put that on my wall?

On the whole, the large scale and ephemeral nature of many environmental artworks makes them unsuitable for private collectors' homes. But artists often produce smaller works to complement their statement pieces, and collectors are quickly snapping them up. At a charity auction organized by Christie's Paris on 9 December to coincide with the climate summit, a watercolor painting by Eliasson sold for €23,000 (\$25,700).

As a relatively emerging niche market, however, sales numbers for environmental art are hard to come by. At present, no one specifically tracks these works, which are part of the global art market, worth \$63.8bn last year.

Lisa Schiff, a New York-based art adviser who works with private collectors, says more and more artists are creating digital works that exist as a piece of software, and can be easily shared online. That has raised questions about art as a commodity that can be bought and sold – and kept locked up.

“Collectors still like objects they can hold onto, rather than just a password,” says Schiff, who last year organized an exhibition in Berlin called Open Source: Art at the Eclipse of Capitalism, which addressed a range of themes including environmental and ecological activism. “The question is: how do you monetize these works?”

One answer is to find a collector like DiCaprio, who gave Solar Reserve to the museum as a way to raise public awareness of renewable energy and environmental protection.

DiCaprio’s purchase put the spotlight on environmental artists, including Gerrard, who has attracted more attention from collectors lately. Prices for his works range from around \$25,000 to \$500,000, while commissioned installations run into seven figures, says Martine d’Anglejan-Chatillon, a partner at Thomas Dane gallery in London.

In a bid to appeal to a broader audience, the gallery recently released a new body of work depicting oil slicks, priced at \$25,000 each in a collection of 12. The works sold out “almost immediately”, d’Anglejan-Chatillon says. Prices for Gerrard’s work at auction have also spiked. A digital image of a grain silo in Kansas sold ten times over the estimate at Phillips in New York in September, for \$118,750 – a record for the artist. Gerrard, who creates his works using computer algorithms and considers writing code a creative act, counts a geneticist and a high-frequency trader among his collectors. “My work chimes with the mathematical processes they use in their own jobs,” he says.



Spiral Jetty, by Robert Smithson. Photograph: George Steinmetz

Artists as activists

The idea of melding art with the landscape has made a comeback. The non-profit Dia Art Foundation, which supports ambitious art projects and owns Spiral Jetty and Lightning Field, is working with a new generation of artists revisiting the themes explored by both Smithson and De Maria.

In September, artist duo Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla installed a work by minimalist artist Dan Flavin deep inside a limestone cave in Puerto Rico. Solar panels at the mouth of the cave power Flavin's work, which is made from pink, yellow and red fluorescent lightbulbs and is hermetically sealed in a glass case to protect it from humidity and flying bats. The light emitted by the Flavin sculpture illuminates the surrounding rock with a reddish glow. The installation is on show until 23 September 2017.

Alexis Lowry, a curator at Dia, says artists today have more of an activist bent than the earlier generation, who were more interested about creating art in remote landscapes. "Today's artists are dealing with more expressly sociopolitical concerns," she says. "Environmental sustainability, energy, power and economics."