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Diane Burko in Chile: The Environmental Way of an Artist

Alida Mayne-Nicholls¹

While visiting Chile last year, Diane Burko met with the Environmental Humanities Research Network at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (RIHA in Spanish). While gathering with professors and students, Burko told about her journey from artist to activist. This brief essay highlights some moments of that meeting, in which she talked about how she is facing the fact that “the Earth is still heating up”, adding, “I’m still worried”.

Speaking in front of an audience in Santiago, Chile (October 11th, 2019), Diane Burko recalled an anecdote that had only happened a couple of weeks before. She had a presentation in Philadelphia at an event about sustainability (in which they were talking about public transportation and electric trolleys), and the moderator said to her: “I know who you are!” The woman had attended Tufts University (Massachusetts), the same space in which Burko had had an exhibit. The moderator, then a student, had seen her exhibit and decided to go into environmental science because of it. It was the perfect example to illustrate how the work of an artist can positively affect others. Very humbly, Diane Burko said to her Chilean audience: “I can only do what I can do; as an artist this is my way, and talking is my way [too]”.

¹ The author is a journalist, she holds a Bachelor degree in Aesthetics, a Master’s degree in Literature, and a PhD in Literature. Her interests are in the fields of poetry and women’s and children’s representation; also, she develops her investigations under the scope of feminist and childhood studies.

Diane Burko is not only an artist; she practices activism on climate change through her art. Although her field as a painter had always been landscape painting, her career did not begin as an activist. She used to paint very big canvases that recreated large visual geological monuments, like the Volcano Series (1998-2001). Several paintings that represented volcanoes from Hawaii, Costa Rica, Russia, Alaska and Italy emerged from that project. Being a landscape artist in the United States means being a part of a long tradition of visual artists, who—as Diane said—“have always been interested in preserving our planet and in the environment”. In 2006, Diane had her “eureka moment”, as she calls it. She had an exhibition at the James A. Michener Art Museum called *Flow*, and one of the paintings displayed was “Grand Jorasses at Marguerite”, an acrylic on a large canvas (64”x108”), in which one of the snowy peaks of the Grand Jorasses in the Italian Alps appears. Burko had painted it in 1976, so she wondered if—thirty years later—there was still any snow on it. That epiphany changed her way of approaching art, and not conform to just painting beautiful landscapes, but to really get involved in the changing climate and its consequences.

Interestingly, 2006 was the same year in which Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* premiered, and when Elizabeth Kolbert published *Field Notes from a Catastrophe*, a recollection of a three-part series that she wrote for *The New Yorker* on the environment and what to do to save the planet.

Since then, Diane Burko has found different ways to comply with the idea of saving the planet. As she told her audience, when she was thinking about how to make new art about climate change, she learned about repeat photography, which, as the name implies, involves taking the same photograph (same subject and location), but at different times, in order to observe how particular landscapes are changing with the years and the heating up of the planet.

To work with repeat photography, she went back to the books she had consulted thirty years prior. She also made paintings using recessional maps and satellite images, which geologists use to indicate changes over time. These approaches had something in common: the source material was from others (people, journals, agencies), and she sensed that it was not enough: “The planet keeps heating up, and I myself wanted to be a bare witness, I needed to see the way I used as an artist”. So, towards 2013 she decided to go to the actual places again to create her art.

SCIENCE MEETS ART

In the field of Environmental Humanities, one of the concerns is how to do transdisciplinary work since the assumption is that it leads to concrete effects in society. Diane Burko has managed to do this by working alongside scientists in many of her projects and by using science in her approach to art; such as when she worked with repeat photography, recessional maps and satellite images. “I do love media and I love technology”, she says, although she considers herself a painter at heart, and a painter must do what a painter must do: paint! But some of these paintings redefine what we might think about art. Like her lenticular art, which are circular animated paintings, made from baby oil, soap and pigments, and a compressor which creates an animation. These impressive pieces can be seen in Diane’s website: <https://www.dianeburko.com/>.

From Diane we learned many interesting facts about the natural world: nature resides in the smallest fragments and even in scales that we are totally unaware of, as revealed by observing microscopic life in the coral reefs, or learning that the Florida Keys are actually ancient fossilized coral reefs! After all, artists, like scientists observe the world closely and wonder...



Burko, Diane. “Coral Fan 5”. 2019, Mixed Media. *Diane Burko*. dianeburko.com

The encounter between science and art is also in the background of Burko's most recent work, which she will present at an exhibition in Washington DC in 2021: *World Map Series*: a 56 feet long series of paintings, in which she represents —through mixed media on canvas— glaciers and reefs, in order to address climate change as a global problem.

The common ground for the art and science collaboration is clearly the environment. Diane Burko has dedicated her artistic life to nature; first as a landscape artist, then as an environmentally aware one. It was possible to observe this in the event held at Campus Oriente (Universidad Católica), in which she demonstrated that people are part of the environment, intertwining her paintings and her career with her interest in making people aware of the climate crisis scenario in which we are all immersed..

Diane Burko's conversation with the Environmental Humanities Research Network of Universidad Católica was an opportunity to see how art can (and does) contribute to raising awareness regarding the threats and consequences of our changing climate. She illustrated this precisely when describing the spiral that can take a person from being a passive subject, simply catching information and perhaps feeling empathy for the situation (so the emotional element is also present), to an active/activist participation by taking action and, hopefully, influencing public policies... Or even touching other people (students, general audiences) who may shift from being observers to actors.