

the onstage part, which calls for serious acting, dancing and singing, as well as a heavy dose of syrupy charm.

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PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# The Natural World, in Peril and in Its Full Glory

By ROBERTA SMITH

"Ecotopia," the edifying, entertaining and ecologically aware exhibition that opened last night at the International Center of Photography, means to get your attention. Near the entrance a looming, oozing black form threatens to engulf the show, like some leftover Valdez sludge trucked down from Alaska.

This enormous dollop is the first of several that punctuate the galleries. All are made, appropriately, of a lightweight, petroleum-based insulation material called Tubolit, widely used in the construction industry. An environmentally sound replacement for asbestos, Tubolit is recyclable, but it also offers further proof that the dependence on oil, foreign or otherwise, ranges far beyond gasoline.



Michael Falco for The New York Times

Harri Kallio's carefully reconstructed dodo birds, part of "Ecotopia."

## Ecotopia

International Center of Photography

Erupting from walls and doorways, lining windows and viewing rooms, and providing shelves for video screens and computer monitors, the meandering Tubolit globs manage to evoke not only sludge, but also toxic topiary, exotic rock formations and Flintstone-era habitats. Their symbolic versatility befits an exhibition in which nature is, by turns, magnificent, cute and enduring, while also increasingly dangerous and endangered, thanks to the widening scope of human indifference and exploitation.

"Ecotopia" is the center's second "triennial of photography and video,"

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FROM THE DIRECTOR OF SCARFACE

"Greetings From the Salton Sea," from Kim Stringfellow's Web site, which is viewed via a monitor at the exhibition.

Kim Stringfellow

## PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

# Images of the Natural World, in Peril and in Its Full Glory

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and like the first, it is purposefully germane. Its predecessor, "Strangers," in 2003, explored the confusion of the post-9/11 world as it struggled with religious fundamentalism. Since the losses inflicted by the Indonesian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina, a fear of political chaos has been at least equaled by a fear that the natural world itself is fatally compromised.

As Al Gore notes toward the end of "An Inconvenient Truth," the film in which he charts the grim, imminent future of global warming, terrorism is not the only, nor necessarily the most urgent, problem confronting us today.

"Ecotopia" might be described as "An Inconvenient Truth" in exhibition form. It is a tale of beauty and devastation told by nearly 40 photojournalists and artists. Their viewpoints vary, as do their subjects and forms, but you rarely escape a sense of nature's vast, incalculable richness or of photography's ability to do it justice. There may be no greater meeting of subject and medium.

Near the show's first black bulge, you encounter Robert Adams's almost reticent black-and-white photographs retracing the trail of Lewis and Clark through present-day Oregon and documenting the widespread ruin that foresting companies have visited upon the wilderness. Formally speaking, these images have a blankness, even a meanness, that is commensurate with the reckless disregard that motivated what they portray.

In marked contrast, Mitch Epstein's breathtaking "Biloxi, Mississippi" (2005), a mural-size color image of a tree, is so glorious in scale that it may take you a few seconds to make out that there is a large mattress among its branches, and then a few more to realize that the scene is not a drought- and war-ravaged country, but the Gulf Coast of the United States, post-Katrina.

Nearby, Clifford Ross's "Mountain XIII" provides an antidote: a monumental photograph whose majesty of peak, field, water, sky and reflection is equal to the reverent clarity of a Hudson River School painting.

Catherine Chalmers's deeply Darwinian "Safari," a seven-minute video, offers a ravishing experience of natural color by following the travails of some New York cockroaches, a species no longer found in the wild, after their release into an elaborate rain forest constructed in her studio. Other inhabitants include an African claw frog, for which cockroach spells dinner; red-spotted newts; a gorgeous lizard; a pair of ferociously battling beetles; and a harlequin cockroach, whose black and white stripes are ready for Fashion Week.

The show alternates between tragedy and comedy, and between hard truths and extensively manipulated fictions that assert their own reality.

Noriko Furunishi's lush and edgeless composite landscapes skew space and topography in ways that are all the more disorienting for still

"Ecotopia: The Second I.C.P. Triennial of Photography and Video" runs through Jan. 7 at the International Center of Photography, 1133 Avenue of the Americas, at 43rd Street; (212) 857-0000.



Michael Falco for The New York Times

A view of "Ecotopia" at the International Center of Photography.

making sense. Thomas Ruff's mural-size image of smoke trailing over the marshlands of southern Iraq was taken from the Internet and so deliberately eroded that it resembles a kind of blurred mosaic (and also hints at what it may feel like to be going blind).

Harri Kallio retrieves an extinct species in imposing images of the ill-fated dodo bird, carefully researched and reconstructed by Mr. Kallio and photographed in its natural habitat, the island of Mauritius.

For comedy, there is another working-with-animals effort: the short videos that Sam Easterson makes by attaching tiny cameras to the feathers, fur, shells or horns of free-ranging animals. (Because the attachment is deliberately precarious, there is a high rate of lost cameras.) Cows, chickens, falcons, wolves, tarantulas, pigs and scorpions are among the creatures on whose heads and backs we seem to ride, like Stuart Little. The best is an armadillo, busily foraging for food. In contrast, Alessandra Sanguinetti's rich color photographs bring startling gravity to life and death in the barnyard.

For tragedy, a small gallery offers continuous projections of the often unforgettable images made by several intrepid photojournalists. Their subjects include the black market in endangered species (Patrick

Brown); the Inupiat people of Alaska, among the first victims of global warming (Gilles Mingasson); attempts to exact remediation from ChevronTexaco for waste disposal practices in the Ecuadorean Amazon (Lou Dematteis and Kayana Szymczak); the devastation of Katrina (Vincent Laforet, whose photographs were taken on assignment for

## Reminders that terrorism is not the world's only problem.

The New York Times); and protests against logging in roadless American forests (Christopher LaMarca).

This excellently balanced exhibition has been organized by the photography center's four senior curators: Brian Wallis, Edward Earle, Carol Squiers and Christopher Phillips — an incredibly smart group for whom postmodern theory is often a second language. A little too much of this seeps into the show's captions, which detail meanings, interpretations and intentions that are not always so evident in the work itself, indicating a certain lack of faith in the

### ONLINE: AUDIO SLIDE SHOW

A virtual stroll through "Ecotopia" with the curator Brian Wallis: [nytimes.com/arts](http://nytimes.com/arts)

viewer's intelligence.

Do the black-and-white cutout images of birds sprinkled in among Doug Aitken's "Plateau," an intricate metropolis made entirely of Federal Express boxes, really evoke "Darwinian questions of natural selection, rendering the empty corporate city an artifact of an almost desperate will to build, conquer and survive"?

The caption for Simon Starling's handsome platinum/palladium prints of a frighteningly vast South African quarry informs us that a ton of ore is required to produce "the few precious ounces of platinum needed to make these prints," and states that Mr. Starling's work "encourages us to be skeptical of the popular notion that art emerges from an insular, creative bubble."

On the center's lower level, Kim Stringfellow's Web site, available on a monitor, offers an exploration of the colorful past and precarious present of the man-made playground and disaster that is the Salton Sea in Southern California. Snapshots of the animals that prowl around Mark Dion's house in the Pennsylvania countryside can be perused on the walls of his cozy, and messy, office, an installation titled "Bureau of Remote Wildlife Surveillance."

Diana Thater's "Perfect Devotion Five" centers on a video of three tigers frolicking in a large, sod-covered pen: a startlingly beautiful figure-ground composition that is inefably sad. Marine Hugonnier's video "Last Tour" provides a final testament to nature's power and indifference in black-and-white views of the Matterhorn, shot from a hot-air balloon; these are unfortunately interrupted by portentous sentences that suggest a poor grasp of Barbara Kruger's syntax.

But the white-carpeted room where this work is projected insinuates the sense of untouched nature into the galleries as emphatically as the oozing Tubolit suggests nature's demise.



Mitch Epstein/Black River Productions Limited, Sikkema Jenkins & Company, New York

Mitch Epstein's mural-size "Biloxi, Mississippi," from 2005, showing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.