

A Trip to a Museum for Convincing Americans About Climate Change

An exhibition in Manhattan is the first step in a grand attempt to change the national conversation around global warming.



'Whale Bay, Antarctica No.4,' soft pastel on paper, 2016

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Since January 25, after sunset, the shades on a window-walled gallery in Manhattan's Greenwich Village have rolled up, and the sidewalk outside has been cast in a cool, blue glow. The color comes from a four-and-a-half-hour-long video of ice cores. Inside the gallery, scanned images of samples from the Greenland Ice Sheet are on a continuous loop, representing 110,000 years of accumulation.

Watching the footage gives the impression of descending through the ice core and into the past.

The video, *88 Cores*, is a new work by the Los Angeles artist Peggy Weil. It's accompanied by a selection of Weil's still images of ice-core samples from the National Ice Core Lab in Lakewood, Colorado. Like rings on a tree, the samples have slightly curved bands—the mummification of eons of dust, debris, ash, and moisture. An ambient score by the composer Celia Hollander matches the feeling of the descent in the video with a “downward sloping glissando drone,” as the gallery's wall text describes it.

The exhibition is the inaugural show of the country's first climate museum. Housed at the Parsons School of Design, the museum—for now—only consists of the gallery on the corner of 13th Street and Fifth Avenue. After [garnering](#) a lot of [attention](#) when its founding director Miranda Massie announced the museum's incorporation in 2015, its first public offering has opened with little fanfare. This is in part because Massie is testing the potential audience for the museum, but also because she's experimenting with the delicate balance of its content. When she was introduced to Weil through a friend and saw images of *88 Cores*, she thought it would not only complement the airy confines of the Parsons gallery, but would also, more importantly, affect people emotionally.

“Hockey stick” graphs have their place, but won't move the masses to create a “climate citizenship,” says Massie. “*88 Cores* is a deep dive into one of the aspects of climate change that makes it so hard to grapple with, which is its immense scale. There's something about trying to encompass the long, deep arc of climate's time, of Earth's time, that makes you more aware of the need to act with urgency in this moment.”

Weil, for her part, considers her work as portraiture—“a collective human selfie.” She wants people to see themselves in relationship to our imperiled, vulnerable landscape. The view matches Massie's grand ambitions. While activists, scientists, and divestment movements all have roles to play in scaling back carbon emissions,

Massie says, she wants her museum to help push climate change into Americans' everyday conversations.

Museum visitors reflect on the still images accompanying *88 Cores* (Miranda Massie)

Since Massie founded the museum, she has created a 501(c)(3) and amassed a board and list of advisers. A former civil-rights lawyer, she was driven to start the museum after Hurricane Sandy catalyzed her sense of urgency around climate change. Her goal—years off—is a permanent home for the museum in New York that inspires duplicates. “We want a climate museum in every major city,” she says. But before that can happen, the museum’s “proof of concept” will need to be tested with temporary exhibitions in borrowed and public spaces.

When I met Massie in the Parsons gallery before a celebration for the opening of *88 Cores* in late January, I barely recognized her. In photographs online, her brown hair is styled in a conservative bob, a cut suited to her previous life as civil-rights litigator. But the woman who greeted me had a pearlescent pixie cut—part Daenerys Targaryen, part climate crusader. I realized halfway through our conversation that her crisp, black blazer was actually part cape, with dramatic slits down the arms.

As Massie and I sat on a bench in the gallery, a steady stream of people wandered in to the free exhibition to see Weil’s work. They also explored the hall next to the

gallery, where artifacts and media offer more context on ice-core science and the Arctic. “One of the things we discovered is that both among really climate-literate people and the general public there is so much hunger for this information,” said Massie, who retains a lawyer’s delivery: practiced, attuned to narrative, rapid. “The central audience is people who are concerned, lack confidence about scientific details, and could be more engaged by a social, physical, and emotional experience.”

According to [2016 data](#) released by the Yale Program on Climate-Change Communication, most American adults believe climate change is happening, but many don’t believe it will affect them, and a majority of those surveyed never discuss it. Massie sees a museum—an institution that is trusted and confers legitimacy—as a way to open the floodgates of fear-based denial.

Museums have long served as vehicles for social and political engagement, if not outright change. In a recent example, after President Donald Trump issued an executive order in January 2017 banning citizens from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen from entering the United States, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, swiftly [moved around](#) its permanent collection to highlight works made by artists from the banned countries. Massie says she looks to two museums in Washington, D.C., the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture, as precedents for the Climate Museum—institutions that reference history and suggest the work isn’t over.

But how can a vast and unwieldy subject such as climate change be expressed in architecture and exhibitions? James Stewart Polshek, a New York architect and member of the museum’s board, says it’s still premature to speculate about the details of the full museum’s design or who would design it (the museum’s website features gestural sketches by the Icelandic-Danish installation artist Olafur Eliasson, which gives one a sense of the institution’s ambitions). “Is the museum even an *it*?” Polshek mused, positing that the museum could exist virtually or be

dispersed. “I’ve been an architect for a very long time, and finding ways to bring important ideas to attention is a lot more than bricks and mortar.”

Still, the museum is ever so tentatively beginning to think about what a permanent home could be. Massie has retained the architecture consultant Reed Kroloff to organize a kind of ideas competition in the fall—one that won’t result in a chosen architect or design, but will draw out possible forms for a climate museum from architects on all seven continents. A climate museum in Louisiana may look very different from one in Manhattan, for example. The former may be on stilts.

The Climate Museum isn’t the first or only institution to feature the work of artists who grapple with global warming or humans’ toll on the planet. And it remains to be seen whether or not the museum can propel itself into a purpose-built home and then build an audience passionate enough to take its message back to homes, schools, and communities. Still, Timothy Morton, an ecology philosopher (and [Björk pen pal](#)) who has long believed that apocalyptic hand-wringing won’t get us anywhere, thinks a climate museum is a good idea. “Anything we can do to help people live this stuff, rather than just rubberneck the headlines, would be so great,” he says.

The night that I met Massie at the gallery, the museum had put out cards that asked visitors to reflect on their experience. “Never has this made more sense than now,” wrote someone who identified themselves as a Hurricane Irma survivor. On another wall, Polaroids of people at various museum events included their thoughts on why a climate-change museum was needed. One subject’s response was, “So other museums don’t flood.”

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