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Implied Scale: Confronting the Enormity of Climate Change at Mana Contemporary

MAY 2021

VITTORIA BENZINE



James Prosek, lobby mural. Courtesy of Mana Contemporary.

Mana Contemporary is more than a multifaceted arts organization—it's an experiment. With locations in Jersey City, Chicago, and Miami, the institution offers art handling services, studio spaces, exhibitions and more—six divisions under one umbrella. At the end of May, Mana celebrated their latest public opening, *Implied Scale: Confronting the Enormity of Climate Change*.

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The three month-long group exhibition redefines ‘multimedia’ while exposing new angles to climate change, all through the works of five artists—James Prosek, Catherine Chalmers, Zaria Forman, Ted Kim, and Jeff Frost. The results don’t simply impart the gravity of climate change—they encourage viewers to contend with its literal scale in creative ways.

Implied Scale opens with a mural from James Prosek that questions our need for definitions. Prosek first achieved renown with his 1996 publication, *Trout: an Illustrated History*, a volume of watercolors indexing North American trout. As an artist, he works with everything from mobiles to actual birds, exploring his interest in naturalism and humanity’s compulsion to codify nature.

Prosek’s mural depicts numbered animals in stark silhouette, an instructional guide with the key left out. “It’s part of this critique of naming, ordering nature,” Prosek said. He’d consulted with evolutionary biologists while researching his debut book and found that even experts couldn’t agree how to define a species, much less delineate trout from each other. He’s learned the wild world doesn’t adhere to the arbitrary constraints humans impose in their quest for control.

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Catherine Chalmers, still from We Rule (video). Courtesy of Mana Contemporary.

New York-based Catherine Chalmers honors the great impact every creature has on our ecosystem through her photographs and films of wild ants in the jungles of Costa Rica. *Implied Scale* features works from her *War* and *Leafcutters* series, which depict a war between colonies and ants interacting with hand-cut leaves, respectively.

The illusory nature of pure painting had grown dissatisfying after she earned her MFA and moved to New York City. Armed with a love for ideas and a fascination with the relationship between the human and non-human worlds, Chalmers began noticing the dead houseflies on her windowsill. Her recent work with ants elaborates on a measured, developed practice spent exploring the process of working with untapped insects themselves as the medium.

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Zaria Forman's hyperrealistic pastels scale down glaciers, those mammoth yet remote icons of climate change. "The inspiration for my drawings began in my early childhood, when I traveled with my family throughout several of the world's most remote landscapes" Forman wrote. She encapsulates her emotional experiences with the frozen wonders, drawing out instantaneous interactions in retrospect. Pastels provoke viewers to move closer once they realize her work isn't photography, thus "creating an intimate connection that might not have happened otherwise, had they simply kept their distance," as Forman explained.



Zaria Forman, Charcot Fjord, Greenland, 2018. Soft Pastel on paper, 90 x 60 in. Courtesy of Mana Contemporary.

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Alaskan illustrator Ted Kim conjured his largest work to date for *Implied Scale*, an intricate other dimension. Kim suffered a bad skateboarding accident in the early 2000s. “I started drawing to sideline all the depression,” he recalled. Familiar imagery filled his pages—the mountains and trees of his Alaskan youth, soda cans, car seats from countless Subarus.

He worked ten days straight upon arriving to work on the mural at Mana’s Jersey City location. People intermittently stopped to ask questions—he noticed they frequently asked where the artwork was coming from. Kim explained that his process takes shape through stream of consciousness. This mural began as a sea of trash, an inferred allusion to the individual’s role in humanity’s collective garbage burden. Then, it developed messages of gentle optimism. Kim hadn’t envisioned any characters really, but the scene ultimately unfolded upon a figure surrounded by flowers, staring off into the sunset, a sweet sendoff from the meditation of encountering Kim’s artwork.

Zooming out could expose a sense of futility—the realization that all things end to create new life, that nature is by no means gentle and we are by no means infinite. This is at once the essence of all beauty and the one of the deepest human fears. Jeff Frost elaborates on its tangle with photos and film from his project, *CALIFORNIA ON FIRE*.

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Jeff Frost, still from CALIFORNIA ON FIRE. Courtesy of Mana Contemporary.

Frost has been chasing Californian wildfires since he accidentally stumbled upon his first in Palm Springs during 2012. By his estimate, there's ten people out of the state's 35 million engaged in the practice. "I'm quite rarefied," Frost laughed. "I'm the only artist. The normal state of affairs is that it's photojournalism." *CALIFORNIA ON FIRE* blurs the boundary between hypnotic and horrific. "We see a wildfire and immediately think we're supposed to hate everything about it," Frost said, "but wildfires are natural."

Climate change doesn't cause wildfires, but it does exacerbate natural blazes, elevating them to unnatural levels. Five of California's worst wildfires happened in 2020, doubling the state's all-time record for acreage burned in a single year. Frost sees an ideological solution in the 'overview effect,' cited by astronauts recall overwhelming feelings of unity and protectiveness while gazing at the Earth from afar. "My primary mediums are time and sound," Frost explained. *CALIFORNIA ON FIRE* alters the

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viewer's perception of reality with speed effects and style. "I think, from reading about the overview effect, that it's quite a similar trancelike macro view that widens the mind naturally," he said.

Every artist throughout *Implied Scale* embodies an intellectualism. Their talents lie in perspective, not persuasion. Together, they quilt an earthy, albeit ambivalent insight—that human beings are a part of something much greater than ourselves. Approached from a place of curiosity rather than fear or disgust, each artist points out this truth while equally, sometimes inadvertently, espousing that we live in a magical place worth saving.

In keeping with their commitment to this spirit, Mana Contemporary is offering an ongoing curriculum of virtual panel discussions and community **events** to sustain and deepen the dialogue surrounding *Implied Scale*. Much like Mana transcends its title to come alive like an experiment, *Implied Scale* coalesces into more than an art exhibition—a terrarium of ideas, alive and available for viewers through July 22nd, 2021.

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