

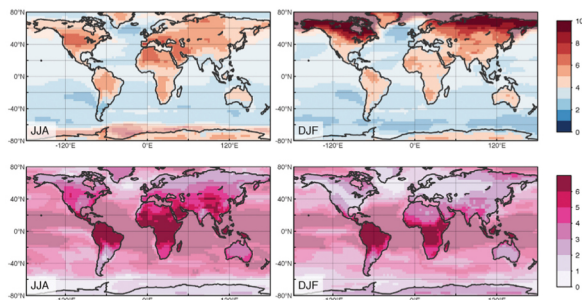
EARTH ELEGY: The Eco-Art of Jeff Schofield

by Matthew Piper

AN EPOCHAL 2012 CLIMATE REPORT produced for the World Bank asserted that our planet is on course to warm by four degrees Celsius by the year 2100, absent a concerted international effort to the contrary. By now, most of us are familiar with the predicted consequences of such an increase: more heat waves and droughts, famines and floods, wildfires and mass die-offs of plant and animal species. After all, we're living through them. Imbalance is the new rule, and catastrophes are commonplace.

A question stalks the moment: what should we do now, when care for the Earth has come to feel like mourning? Jeff Schofield's answer is to make art that meets the mounting climate crisis head-on. Without sentimentality, but with an abundance of sympathy, he gathers material from the environments around him, much of it made

2012-2100: Multimodel mean of monthly warming over the 21st century (2080-2100 relative to present day) for the months of JJA (left) and DJF (right) in units of degrees Celsius (top) and in units of local standard deviation of temperature (bottom). The intensity of the color scale has been reduced over the oceans for distinction.



Four degrees mean global warming by the year 2100 AD
Image by World Bank

available by neglect and collapse, and uses it to create insistent, confrontational forms that present both the fact and feeling of the madness-as-usual world we've made. His clear-eyed, methodically executed artworks evoke profound emotions. They have the capacity to haunt the viewer, who is necessarily implicated, but who can also achieve a productive catharsis through an encounter with this work, which says, "Yes – this is how it is. See it. Feel it. Now what?"

Schofield's 2020 performance video *4 Degrees or More* is directly inspired by the insights of the World Bank report. It dramatizes the awful tension between our understanding that heedless human activity is the cause of the ecological precariousness all around us, and our inability to stop our destructive behavior. In it, the artist methodically places jars filled with either manmade objects (bottle caps, for instance, cheap Christmas ornaments, and hair curlers) or natural ones (mostly parts of plants) on either side of a pivoting, seesaw-like table. He places jar after jar on one side of the table, then the other, repeatedly. The table tips, precariously. Eventually (inevitably) it tips to such a degree that some or all of the jars crash to the floor, where they shatter and spill their contents. Dispassionate, undaunted, Schofield begins again: selecting and placing more jars, until there is another spectacular crash, then another....



Self Portrait
Performance featuring ropes and cables

In *4 Degrees or More*, Schofield presents a tragic vision of humanity as fixed in a track that leads, again and again, to calamity. In three recent sculpture series ("Chairs," "Common Objects," and "Trash to Treasure," all 2022), he elaborates on the theme that we are ensnared by our own destructive habits. Schofield made all the works in the three series out of masses of found objects and consumer waste, which he carefully arranged and bound together in a way that emphasizes the binding process, evoking the sense that the objects are trapped in the composition. He sourced much of what he needed to make *Caution* and *Greenwashing*, from the "Chairs" series, from his own studio, either in the cast-off tools and construction materi-

als that comprise the former, or cleaning products that make up the latter. In both cases, the irony resounds: in our consumerist society, built on an infinitude of single-use plastics, what we use to make ultimately destroys, and what we clean with is destined to pollute.

An early performance piece (*Self Portrait*, 2017) in which Schofield himself is bound with rope, supine, reinforces the understanding that these object series present pictures of *us*, constrained by our unintentionally destructive habits and the larger economic and social systems that prescribe them. Schofield says that his recent *Epidemic* (2022) — a bound mass of medical masks, latex gloves, a blood pressure monitor, and other waste from the medical system, connected to a respirator by a long, limp tube — is his "pandemic piece," but it also transcends those particular circumstances, pointing to larger societal sicknesses of overconsumption and waste.

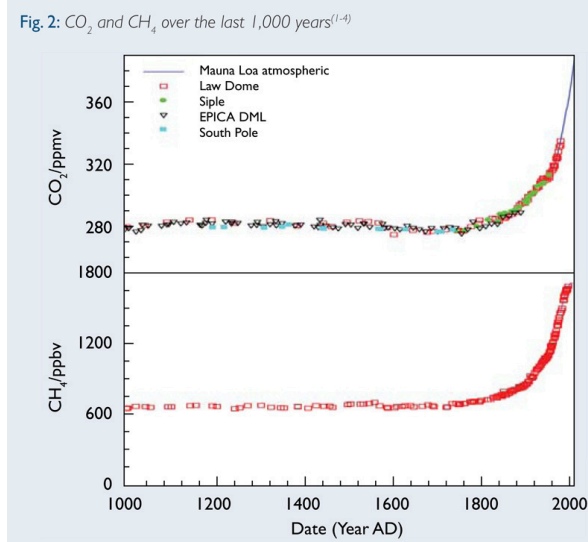
In his presentations, Schofield maintains a stance of scientific distance. This is rhetorically effective (all the better, one might argue, to see ourselves with; all the better to illustrate the depths of our irrational behavior, the catastrophic effects of our ruthless engineering). It is also well-developed. Before pursuing art full-time, he worked in the technically demanding discipline of architecture, with a specialization in eco-conscious buildings. (His crowning achievement is



Capital Gate

Sustainable architecture and urban design
Photo by Gerry O'Leary

Capital Gate, a sustainable 35 story tower in Abu Dhabi.) You get glimpses of this scientific tendency in his multilayered *Core Samples* (2022), titled after the practice of sampling a natural substance like rock, soil, or ice by collecting a cylindrical section of it. (Climate scientists take core samples of ice packs in the Arctic and Antarctic to measure evolving CO₂ content and other indicators of climate change.) Except you can't help but notice that Schofield's person-sized core samples are candy-colored; they too are made from consumer waste, including the artist's soda cans. "When the archaeologists discover our civilization 1,000 years from now by drilling down, what are they going to find?" Schofield asks. "The Coke cans we threw away. The plastic bits. All the other junk."



Carbon Dioxide and Methane levels in polar ice cores Image by British Antarctic Survey

You see traces of Schofield's architect sensibility in *Barn Razing* (2019), an aggressive, wall-mounted sculpture made out of fragments of a collapsed late nineteenth century barn from upstate New York. Pointing at the viewer, intruding into the gallery, the piece feels angry, threatening, a little dangerous. Schofield's point here is to remind us that climate change presents a threat to even the sturdiest structures that make up our architectural heritage. (His professional assessment is that the barn was built to last, and would have stood many more years, but for the increased storm activity in the region over the last two decades.) The zombie-like fragments, reanimated



Barn Razing

Farm structure in rural New York State destroyed by excessive storms and flooding

by the artist to trouble the gallery space, evoke his *Michigan Forest Fire* (2019), for which he suspended slender, charred tree trunks from chains – a ghost grove in a warming world.

All these disparate works are tied together by their quality of bearing witness to the moment and its inescapable precariousness. To our terrible complicity, and the complex, bewildering feelings that accompany it. And perhaps most of all, to what's at stake. Look no farther than Schofield's installation *Cascade* (2021) for a sense of that. To make it, he preserved dozens of weed and wild-flower plants in found jars, each a different species, all gathered from his neighborhood in Pontiac, Michigan. In installation, he suspends the jars from the ceiling at irregular heights to create



Michigan Forest Fire

Remnants of a Wexford County pine forest fire

the titular cascade, illuminating it in such a way that each jar is dramatically doubled by its shadow. The effect is both funereal (more *memento mori*, more dead things arrayed for our somber contemplation) and wondrous (you delight in the diversity, the details, the enormous perfection of each small, once-living thing). *Cascade* is at once a document, an offering, and a *cri de coeur*. Look close, it insists, at all we have to lose.

Detroit, July 2022