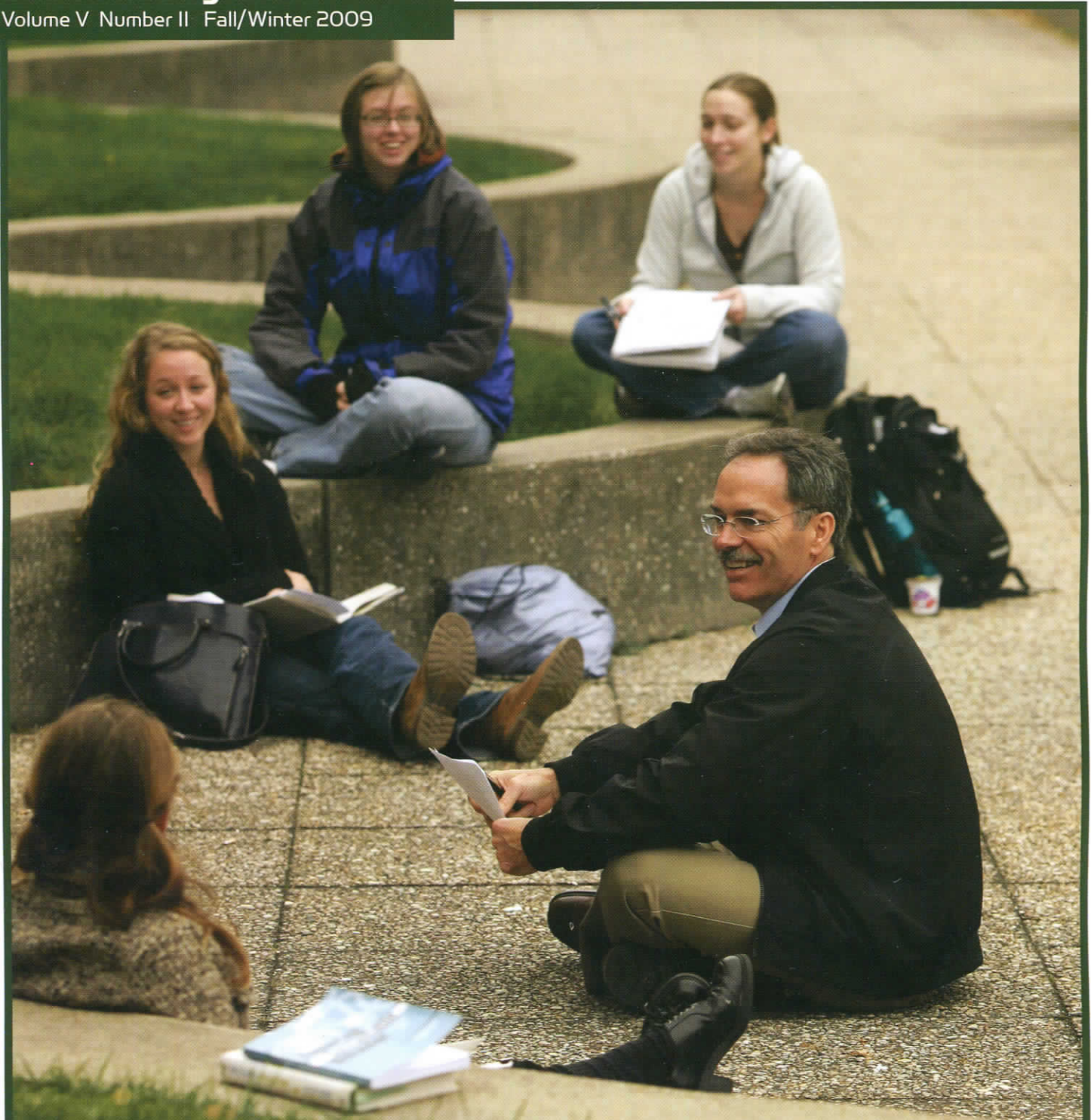


TEACHING & LEARNING

Sustainability Issue

Volume V Number II Fall/Winter 2009

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Freeing the Canary

An IU course and museum exhibit empower students to help alter the course of climate change

By Erika Knudson

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Susannah Saylor / The Canary Project

"The Sublime impresses the mind at once with one great idea; it is a single blow."

—Sir Joshua Reynolds, *Seven Discourses on Art*

"The passion caused by the great and Sublime in Nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."

—Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*

Photo: (above) The Canary Project co-founder Susannah Saylor • Glacial, Icecap and Permafrost Melting XXXII: Portal Point, Charlotte's Bay, Antarctica, 2008 (right) Glacial, Icecap and Permafrost Melting LIV: La Libertad Region, Peru, 2008 • The Canary Project co-founder Edward Morris.

In one room, a block of ice melts slowly. It seems as if time is passing inexorably as the clear, frozen mass drips and evaporates. In an adjacent room, old lantern slides of sled dogs, ice floes, and deep snow-covered mountaintops are illuminated in a vitrine as if they are the memory of the ice as it expires its last cool breath.

This might be an image from a dream, but it is the expression of both imagination and impending nightmare, manifested in an IU School of Fine Arts (SoFA) Gallery exhibit this fall semester. The exhibit, funded in part by a Lilly Foundation New Frontiers grant from the IU Office of the Vice President for Research and the Office of the IU Bloomington Provost, is the work of The Canary Project, an organization that uses art and events to "build understanding of human-induced climate change and energize commitment to solutions."

In its incarnation at IU, The Canary Project couples the exhibit with Engagement/Art/Activism: Response and Intervention on Climate Change, a course taught through the Henry Radford Hope School of Fine Arts by guest instructors Edward Morris and Susannah Saylor, Canary's co-founders.

Saylor and Morris, who are husband and wife as well as equal collaborators in the art exhibits they produce together, began the Canary organization in 2006 as a project to photograph landscapes around the world that have been affected by global warming. At a time when global warming was a contested idea, those photographs were produced to document the real effects of climate change. Our disappearing glaciers and forests, the images said, are like the proverbial canary in the mine, whose demise

warns of the presence of poisoned gas; their death is a harbinger that we must turn back.

Since 2006, Saylor and Morris have expanded their mission, working with more than 20 other artists to create work under The Canary Project aegis. They've also deepened their outreach activities. The course at IU is the first of its kind for the organization, a hands-on, multidisciplinary learning experience for both undergraduate and graduate students.

The SoFA Canary Project exhibit engages students and the community in understanding climate change, extending the reach of the course beyond the classroom and engaging viewers in intellectual dialogue with objects from the university's collections. It consists of five rooms: in one, the melting ice, which at the closing day of the exhibit had evaporated to a



Susannah Saylor / The Canary Project



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thin puddle on the black plastic liner in the main room of the gallery.

Saylor describes the exhibit as complex, including many levels at which interaction and thoughtful engagement is possible. “Each room is quite different. One room is dedicated to the concept of risk—it is an installation of a game of poker. We’re using this idea of gambling as a metaphor for people to consider issues of certainty and decision making, and try to think about your decisions and the future outcomes.”

Featured as well are the large-scale photographs from the original Canary Landscape of Climate Change project, juxtaposed with artifacts from the Mathers Museum of World Cultures, Lilly Library, IU Herbarium, and Department of Biology collections. There is also a room of activist art generated in ongoing collaborations with other artists, as well as several video works. A room on the opposite side of the gallery contains an installation called “Moment,” in which a strobe illuminates an all-black space every few seconds, invoking a sense of acceleration in climate systems.

Exhibiting the photographs in one room along with objects from the university’s collections,

says Morris, “indicates the breadth of geologic and human time” represented by the photographs. The landscapes shot by Saylor capture a region that extends from the imagination to the ozone layer of the Earth’s atmosphere. The landscape of climate change is one that encompasses disappearing glaciers in Austria and a shrinking cloud forest in Costa Rica.

In sublime landscape paintings of the early nineteenth century, like Turner’s *Snowstorm: Hannibal and His Army Crossing the Alps*, nature overwhelms man. Great trees loom over tiny people and buildings; mountain passes shrouded in snow or mist dwarf human figures and animals traversing them.

In the monumental Canary Project photographs, man has overwhelmed nature. The ice has melted from the mountains. Then the sublime comes full circle when we as viewers understand, with a frisson of horror, that humanity’s degradation of the land and water is the catalyst for nature overwhelming us again, through catastrophic storms, loss of species, depletion of natural resources on which we depend.

“I am interested in what of the sublime can be reclaimed in our time, and see a connection to

the sublime as helpful in piercing our false sense of insulation from natural forces,” says Saylor in her artist’s statement.

Standing in front of a sublime landscape, much like contemplating the catastrophic effects of global warming, can be overwhelming. In the main room of the SoFA exhibit, a monumental photograph of melting ice caps is beautiful, yet it freezes you in your tracks. The IU course and exhibit are, paradoxically, a powerful expression of The Canary Project’s mission to give humanity some agency and investment in changing the course of climate change.

The Response and Intervention on Climate Change course incorporates guest speakers from IU as well as outside artists to explain the science of climate change and the history of art and activism with respect to this set of issues. It emphasizes engagement and thorough understanding of one’s subject before creating a work of art, and aims to deepen students’ ability to develop ideas.

In a recent class, two guest speakers addressed the issue of climate change from different perspectives: Professor of Geography Sara Pryor spoke about the issue from the viewpoint of science,



Photos: Morris, Saylor, and students at the Canary Project exhibit at IU's SoFA gallery • Adaptation and Mitigation XI: Palm Springs, California, 2007.

with a particular focus on the promise of wind energy. Professor David Haberman, from the Department of Religious Studies, addressed the concept of the self and each individual's connection with the earth.

"Let's say there was a big birthday party, and all species were invited. How much of the cake are you going to eat?" Haberman asked rhetorically. "We are radically interconnected with all life. So we are all in this together. To lose the pika is to lose a vital part of ourselves."

Both during and after the guest presentations, students were thoroughly engaged, debating the role of women in addressing climate change, sizing up arguments, giving examples from their reading. "If you have a politics of empathy, you'll produce an art of empathy," said Morris, referencing that week's reading for class.

"But art can evoke a range of emotions, from fear to action," argued one student, seated on

top of a table in the back of the room.

"Empathy is really a bridge to a different perspective, though," said another student. "Being able to transform your identification in a way."

Guest speakers juxtaposed with student and instructor dialogue, all this intercut with slides of art examples ranging from Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades to Joseph Beuys' art installations; the class is an interwoven warp and woof of art in environmental context.


"My hope is that students take away a sense of art working outside of the studio-based practice; that they see art as working out in the world, involving more people than an individual vision of beauty," says Saylor. "I want them to think about art as more of a participatory, research-based practice. The artist's job is to look at an issue from so many points of view and present back to the world a picture. They have to gain confidence that their work serves a purpose in the world."

Students enrolled in the course are from many different disciplines, including informatics, business, and theater, as well as fine arts. They will work intensively on art projects through the semester; if their projects are suited to a gallery

space and are artistically strong, SoFA will exhibit the students' work in another exhibit in the spring semester.

Bringing The Canary Project to the SoFA gallery and to the Fine Arts curriculum, says SoFA Gallery Director Betsy Stirratt, was possible because the gallery exists in an educational environment. "It is always our job to push the envelope and show things that are different or that people might not always think of as art. This is the kind of project that creates relevance and helps people see that art is integral to understanding their other interests."

For Morris, art is a powerful way to turn attention and action to the potentially devastating effects of climate change. "If I didn't believe that, I would be in despair," he says. "The main thing I want students to understand is that they can galvanize others, that they can reach out and their art practice can be constructive in the world." ■

 **On the Web:** Read full interviews with Canary Project co-founders Saylor and Morris at www.indiana.edu/~tandlpub/. See more photos and learn about other Canary Project efforts at www.canary-project.org