

Cochrane, Steven, L. "It's the end of the world as we know it... In a group show, 12 new media artists make the most of a CATASTROPHIC SITUATION," *Winnipeg Free Press*, December 3

Winnipeg Free Press

It's the end of the world as we know it... In a group show, 12 new media artists make the most of a CATASTROPHIC SITUATION

By Steven Leyden Cochrane

People have thought the world is ending since the beginning of recorded history, and they weren't exactly wrong. Natural and man-made disasters have shaped nearly every facet of human culture and biology, applying the selective pressures that made us who we are today. Catastrophe is in our DNA; we were born for it.

Which isn't to say things aren't getting out of hand. With rising temperatures and sea levels, the further globalization of conflict, and worldwide networks in place to live-stream each new crisis, the question of catastrophe is no longer if, but when, where, how bad this time, and how can we respond?



Nivel de confianza/Levels of Confidence by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer (right).

Curated by Tom Kohut and Video Pool director Mementie Pandilovski, *The Age of Catastrophe* puts this last question to a group of 12 international artists working in new media. Their responses are critical but never alarmist or defeated, and the diverse, disquieting show at *Actual Contemporary* isn't one to miss.

Unsurprisingly, many of the artists turn a critical eye on technology, noting the ways technology looks back at us. On entering the gallery, Bill Vorn's *Hyster-*

ical Machines, a trio of eight-legged robots hanging from the ceiling, sense our presence and come clattering to life. The thrashing mechanics and blinking lights would be enough to startle most small children or skittish adults, but scarier in the long run is the reminder of more "rational," more co-ordinated, and more dangerous machines being developed elsewhere.

Poetically, David Rokeby reveals digital surveillance to be as omnipresent as the air we breathe. As visitors navigate an empty, black-lit rear gallery, they bump into and brush against an invisible sonic curtain or electric fence, their movements triggering discordant soundscapes of breaking glass and falling rocks.

Equipped with infrared and sonar receptors, Jane Tingley's tangle of wires and branching metal sculptures mimics the human nervous system's form and function, tapping out cryptic messages until we leave. Kelly Jaclynn Andres further explores bio-technical hybrids, using 3D printers and fungal spores to make a sculpture out of actual life processes.

A strong speculative thread runs through other works. In Rick Fisher and Don Rice's *Arcadia: Triptych*, we coast along scenic riverbanks lined with looming cranes and clusters of writhing digital ghosts. Andrew Milne combines laser-cutting, computer graphics and Victorian optical tricks to imagine the Pinawa Dam site repurposed as a "Complex Inertial Field Generator" performing mysterious "psychic computations." Rocket-like plumes of smoke and fire rise out of a desert landscape in Kelly Richardson's video projection, *Orion Tide*, an arresting and ominous exhibition highlight.

Much of the show, which makes excellent use of Actual's corridors and darkened back rooms, incubates a kind of directionless anxiety, but some of its most affecting works directly picture real catastrophe, as in *Mortgaged Lives*, a film by Michelle Teran documenting the material and psychological effect of Spain's ongoing housing crisis (in 2014, nearly 100 families faced eviction every day).

In *Nivel de confianza* ("Level of confidence"), Montreal-based Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer uses facial-recognition software to match viewers with one of the 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College who were abducted and presumed murdered -- by organized crime in collusion with local authorities -- one year ago Sept. 26. The repurposing of military-grade technology for a poignant, necessarily fruitless search for victims is as incisive as it is wrenching, and the piece is one of the best and most important that I've seen at any gallery this year.