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## Rice's solar-charged FotoFest installations stir up a storm Three little pods. Powerful ideas.

By Molly Glentzer April 12, 2016



Brainy talks about the Anthropocene and the Betacene and oil and Karl Marx may enthrall participants during the spring "Cultures of Energy" symposium by Rice University's Center for Energy and Environmental Research in the Human Sciences (CENHS) April 21-23.

But folks will also be encouraged to step outside for a few minutes and visit a couple of not-too-fancy art installations.

"Dear Climate" and "Another Storm is Coming" occupy a far corner of the big parking lot near the Shepherd School of Music. The artists have set up shop in a trio of small metal pods that may be the only solar-powered exhibition spaces of this year's FotoFest biennial, which has a climate change theme. Officially, these nondescript structures are "reconfigured solar Mobile Grid juiceBOX containers."

When professor Joseph Campana curated the shows, he thought the university's new Moody Center for the Arts would be finished. It wasn't. The Rice Building Workshop and Metalab's Joe Meppelink (a Rice alum) helped him secure the donated structures and set them up. The center's massive metal frame makes an impressive backdrop, but it's hard to imagine any better setting than the self-contained microgrid.



Funny signs are part of Zurkow's installation. Photo: Molly Glentzer, Houston Chronicle Photo: Molly Glentzer, Houston Chronicle

The weather was appropriately ominous the day I visited.

We started with Judy Natal's "Another Storm is Coming," the result of two years' research in towns from New Orleans to Houston, looking at the effects of Hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Ike.

She's converted one of her pods into a microcinema/chapel with a few bench seats and a bigish screen. During her meditative "Breathed on the Waters," a monk, a priest and a gospel singer offer up chants, prayers and songs — pleas to their various gods to provide safety from hurricanes. Their altar/stage appears to be the remnants of a home's concrete foundation in some not-fully-recovered coastal town.



An elaborately carved offshore worker's helmet from Indonesia is among the objects displayed in Judy Natal's "Another Storm Is Coming." Photo: Molly Glentzer, Houston Chronicle. Photo: Molly Glentzer, Houston Chronicle

Natal interviews storm survivors for her other film, "Storm Redux." We didn't watch it that day. Rain was threatening outside, and there was more to see.

In Natal's library pod, books about hurricanes beckoned, along with a long vitrine of curious objects

collected along Gulf Coast beaches — a barn owl's wing, an intricately carved Indonesian hard hat, Mardi Gras trinkets, crosses commemorating victims of the BP oil spill.

A display of Natal's photographs, printed on metal, form a kind of amphitheater outside. They're all very gray, shot on cloudy days. The muddy installation site became a kind of boardwalk by necessity, and the big black rain boots worn by the installers are still there, perfect props.

A bridge swings in the Costa Rican cloud forest where author Andrew Kragie spent much of his gap year. (Haakon Crohn under Creative Commons license) Gap years: Not just for Malia Obama Republican presidential candidate Ted Cruz, right, exchanges words with Donald Trump supporters during a campaign visit to Marion, Ind., on Monday, May 2, 2016. (Jeff Morehead/Chronicle-Tribune via AP) News poem: An elegy for Ted Gebriella Hailemariam&nbsp;in Carnegie Vanguard Theatre's production of&nbsp; Holy Day. How edgy should high-school theater be? 1943. The Bronx. My father's record store. TORONTO, ON - MAY 24 - Ace, a Black Labrador Retriever and explosives and firearms detection dog, munches on a ball in the photographer's dugout during action between the Toronto Blue Jays and the Seattle Mariners. (Bernard Weil/Toronto Star via Getty Images) Are black dogs unadoptable?

A rangy cluster of signs poked out of a patch of nearby grass, like an Election Day mess. They're part of "Dear Climate," which replicates a FEMA trailer. Artist in residence Marina Zurkow and collaborators Una Chaudhuri, Fritz Ertl and Oliver Kellhammer invite visitors to sit down at a bank of retro, red "hot line" telephones to hear "audio experiences" that invite them to "meet, befriend, and become climate change."

I put a receiver to one ear. A woman's voice cooed, "May all beings be protected from inner and outer harm... have open arms and equanimity... May all roaches, beetles and ants be happy and free...."

I filled out an official-looking form (with a carbon copy to keep) that asked me to list all the living things in my home. I couldn't lie. It goes well beyond beings of the two- and four-legged variety, to the six- and eight-legged kind. Did this make me any less likely to squash them? Maybe, roaches excepted.

Agitprop posters with messages like "Normal Isn't" and "Salute the Super Storms" covered the walls.

"Dear Climate" is seriously funny and crazy. Zurkow "always wants you off balance," Campana said.

He's happy some of the lawn signs have disappeared. That means students are relating, he said.

Big, hard raindrops were falling, and we didn't have umbrellas.

Through April 24, the pods are open 3-6 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays; 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturdays; noon to 5 p.m. Sundays; and also by appointment (cenhs@rice.edu).

Rain or shine, you can hear Zurkow's podcasts, download copies of the posters and write letters to the climate at dearclimate.net. Maybe that'll make you feel better.