

Water as a Climate-Change Gut Punch in a City Defined by an Ocean

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Photo



Holoscenes, a performance and installation piece by artist Lars Jan, at Miami Dade College, in Miami.
Credit Jason Henry for The New York Times

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MIAMI — The ordinary man settled into his ordinary ritual.

He lay down at the bottom of the empty, cubelike aquarium with his fluffed-up pillow, crawled under his sheet and shut his eyes. But he was roused abruptly by a stream of water, and in less than a minute he was a man whose day had turned topsy-turvy: He floated and twisted, rose and sank, fought and surrendered. Then, just as suddenly, the water level dropped, only to rise and fall again for the next 45 minutes while spectators sat mesmerized.

As [scientists and politicians in Paris](#) wrestle with the complexities of battling [climate change](#), here in Miami, an artist,

Lars Jan, is inviting people to view it in a way, he said, that makes people “feel climate change in their guts, rather than just understand it.”

When Mr. Jan brought his installation, “[Holoscenes](#),” to Miami Dade College this week to coincide with the annual [Art Basel](#) extravaganza, he knew Miami was the ideal city to spotlight the increasingly delicate dance of climate change, water and everyday life. The ocean, after all, made the city famous.

Photo



“I know how exposed Miami is, and Florida,” said Lars Jan, 37, in Miami, who developed the concept for his installation after seeing the damage wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy. Credit Jason Henry for The New York Times

But today Miami and particularly ritzy Miami Beach across the causeway are more vulnerable to sea level rise than almost any other place in the country, and now the bill has come due. Roads must be raised, water pumps updated, homes built high off the ground, sewage plants safeguarded, and estuaries and the Everglades protected from encroaching saltwater. And no one knows if that will ever be enough.

“I know how exposed Miami is, and Florida,” said Mr. Jan, 37, who developed the concept for his installation after seeing the damage wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy, and stumbling across a particularly vivid photograph of a major flood in Pakistan. “It was classically beautiful, but it depicted a horrific situation. It opened a door that I walked through, and I kept walking.”

Mr. Jan, who lives in Los Angeles and is half-Afghan, half-Polish, immersed himself in research about floods and climate change. In time, his visualization of rising seas in mundane situations led him to the human aquarium, where the idea plays out in eight separate scenes. All of them depict everyday life jumbled by the rise and fall of water and arrived via video submissions from the public.

Inside the aquarium rising from the middle of a well-trafficked plaza, there is a man tuning a guitar. A woman putting on and taking off an abaya, the overgarment worn by Muslim women. A couple engaged in a duet. There is hose guy — a man in sneakers and jeans who begins to coil and uncoil a garden hose (a frustrating task even on land). The aquarium fills and empties unpredictably, over and over. The hose wafts from his clutch, and as it does he tumbles into fits of pique, resignation, futility and determination. Later, a fruit seller in eye-popping Indian finery sits down in the empty tank with her basket of orange persimmons. As the water rises, the persimmons float away. Sometimes frantically, sometimes placidly, she gathers them once again.

The project, Mr. Jan said, is as much about the ability to adapt as the ability to fight back. And while it was serendipitous that world leaders gathered in Paris this week to discuss climate change, Mr. Jan said he was hoping to reach people in a way that eschewed statistics and scientific treatises.

“The conversation needs to happen on the street,” he said.

Photo



A couple engaged in a duet as an aquarium fills and empties unpredictably, over and over, to symbolize the uncontrollable nature of climate change. Credit Jason Henry for The New York Times

Pulling off the project took imagination as well: calibrating the hydraulic rise and fall of water; allaying the fears of sponsors who worried about performers drowning (they can breathe at the surface); training performers to hold their breath for extended periods (sometimes more than three minutes); designing costumes that are water-proof yet billowy (the bedtime sheet is actually a shower curtain).

“What’s amazing is that in all of these situations you feel yourself adapt,” said Geoff Sobelle, 40, the choreographer and performer who coils the hose, describing life in the tank. “There is a sense of surrendering.”

For Jannet Dannon-Mairena, watching “Holoscenes” while sitting on a white folding chair near her three home-schooled children, an element of fear courses through the water scenes. A Miami resident, she joked that she was already building her boat in her backyard, just in case. But Ms. Dannon-Mairena, 45, said the scenes also depict a loss of control, which is really where the fear is rooted.

“They are struggling to do all the things they used to but, with all the changes, now they can’t,” she said. “The water coming up and down, it’s like the points in your life when you think, now I have it under control, and you don’t.”

Roseanne Friedlander, 62, a retired airline employee, could not resist making a political quip as she sat and watched the hypnotic performance. “It’s ironic that with all the water rising around Florida, our governor doesn’t want us to mention climate change,” she said.

Ms. Friedlander was referring to reports this year from former state environmental protection employees who said that Gov. Rick Scott’s administration had unofficially banned the term “climate change.” Mr. Scott has said no such policy exists.

Yet, there is no question the topic remains as contentious as ever. Climate change, and its proposed solutions, is equally unpopular among Republican presidential candidates, who express skepticism about the science around it and a reluctance to act in ways they say could hurt the country’s economy.

Watching the man in the tank struggle with the hose, Ms. Friedlander concluded that he was not adapting very well. “You can’t fight water,” she said.

Correction: December 4, 2015

An earlier version of this article misstated Lars Jan’s ethnic background. He is half Afghan and half Polish, not half Pakistani and half Polish.