

“Exploring the tenuous relationship between humans and the world”



@photo from [Dillon Marsh portfolio](#)

Dear readers ! In this brand new article, [Profs En Transition](#) invites you to investigate the tight and strong connection between art, particularly photography, and education to ecology.

Along with science, art continuously provides us with a complementary reading lens and a means to understanding the world we live in. South African photographer Dillon Marsh ([see his website here](#) and explore his work) has not only fully grasped this potential, but he also came to devise a creative method combining both art and science. Dillon thus strongly believes in the power of images to convey both rational and emotional messages about the environmental crisis, which might eventually call out for action. Multiple award winning artist who exhibits all over the world, Dillon's last notable participation took place at [The caring gallery in Paris](#) along with other international artists, where emphasis had been put on the cohabitation between the different living species and the observation of life's tremendous complexity.

Profs en Transition is happy to shed some light on an artist's work presented as an advantageous educational perspective. It might be a gateway to be considered by teachers and educators when broaching topics pertaining to ecology, namely embedding not only art as a discipline per se but a more diverse range of other study programmes as well such as literature, mathematics, economy, physics and geography, all molded in an artistic pretense. Each entry point therefore contributes to the transmission of elementary knowledge while enabling a creative multidisciplinary approach where our natural environment resumes its rightful central place.

In any case, Marsh's work is questioning, moving and utterly insightful.

Dear travelers, brace yourself to a journey where you might very well read, watch, enjoy and learn all at the same time ! Go explore your near territory right afterwards and give yourself and the younger ones the opportunity to shape a fresh and new eye on the world ...

Dillon Marsh, thank you for granting Profs en Transition this interview thereby giving the opportunity to publicize through your artwork the absolute significance of art as a powerful ally in the climate crisis mobilization.

First, would you please introduce yourself and your work ...

I am an artist from Cape Town, South Africa, and I use photography to explore the tenuous relationship between humans and the world around us. I also incorporate computer generated imagery (CGI, *[sic]*) into some of my series to reveal underlying features or dynamics that can't be illustrated with photography alone.

As an artist, why is this “tenuous relationship” as you mention worth exploring ? And how does photography play a part in the process in your opinion ?

I have a deep appreciation for nature, and have always felt a strong desire to see the natural world preserved. At the same time, as a member of the human race, I am also a participant in the exploitation of nature. In principle I don't agree to this exploitation, but like most people, I benefit from the results in many ways. This is a personal conflict that also plays out on a global scale, and for this reason I feel compelled to address it in my art.

Global warming is accelerating the glaciers' ice loss with no possible turning back. Humankind's activities are driven to an excessive exploitation of limited resources, namely mining in the present case. “For what it's worth” and “Counting the costs” are among your photography series dedicated to the topics above.

What attracted you in the first place towards those particular themes, and why the use of a combination of art and data representation as part of the process ?

Mining is a big and prominent industry in South Africa, and as a result it has been of interest to me for a long time. I've always tried to find new ways of representing my subject matter, and one day I suddenly thought it would be fascinating to use CGI to visualize how much copper was removed from the first commercial mines in the country. The resulting series grew to include gold, diamond, and platinum group metal mining too.

My next series followed on from that, but instead of representing what was gained from mining, I represented rather the glacial ice we are losing as a result of climate change. In both projects I chose to represent the volumes as spheres, as this is a simple and uniform shape that can be easily understood in a two dimensional image.



Dillon Marsh shapes into geometric figures the global warming consequences and the industry mining's havoc, acknowledging the ecological crisis in the process

On one hand, across the world the mining industry is allegedly assumed by the average population and governments to be essential to both the local and global economy. On the other hand, during operation and long after shutdown, mines exploitation causes significant damage to the environment and raises major concerns such as water contamination, wildlife habitat destruction, health poisoning and human rights abuse. Hypothetical economic spinoff thus comes at a high cost ... the very same cost you question in your photographs.

How's South Africa dealing with all the aftermath of this “burdenous” industry?

There are regulations set in place to ensure the rehabilitation of mined land in South Africa, but these efforts have fallen short time and time again. I am not an expert on rehabilitation requirements, but by simply experiencing long-abandoned mines, it is clear they remain unsightly scars on the landscape, with the striped land often prone to wind and water erosion.

In “counting the costs” series, images of remote hazards such as mountain glaciers ice loss are brought into pictures of people's lively places to offer hints on how it could possibly affect them in the long time (drinkable water shortage for exemple) ; whereas, in the second series “For what it costs”, it is the watcher himself who is invited on the contrary to gaze over some distant places, usually thought of as being too far beyond to be worrisome, thus urging him to reassess his assumptions. In both cases, although the threats have obviously long ceased to be only hanging Damocles'

swords and are in fact already striking, humanity seems either standing still or beating around the bush with an apparent lack of concern. Do you believe human species is forever doomed to failure and blindness ? How do we overcome this “fate” ?

I wouldn't say that we are indifferent towards the threat of climate change and the general exploitation of nature, but I do think we find it hard to consistently show the appropriate concerns for these issues. Our lives are filled with other worries that affect us more personally, and it is understandably difficult to find the time and energy to think about issues affecting the globe as a whole, issues that often don't touch us in clear and immediate ways. I don't think we are doomed to blindness towards issues like climate change, but I do worry that we will probably only collectively see them clearly when it is too late to easily rectify them.

How strongly do you believe that art practitioners in general and photographers in particular, might enhance public awareness towards the environment in the most appropriate way ?



Photography has long been used as a tool to document and represent reality, to relay facts and information. For this reason, photography is a fantastic tool for creating awareness. Of course my photography does not represent reality in a strict sense, because the spheres aren't real and I construct my images with the aid of CGI. I still however make use of photography's reputation for representing truth to add credence to my work.

Regarding your work techniques, should our readers be interested in setting up educational projects in schools using similar proceedings, what would be your “how to - guide” in a nutshell ?

I start by finding public records containing the information I need to establish the mass of the various spheres I create. For the mining industry I get this information directly from the Chamber of Mines, or from old books if there weren't official records. For glacial ice loss figures, I looked at reports compiled by the World Glacier Monitoring Service. Factoring in the density of the material, I then work out the total volume and resulting diameter of the sphere. The next step I take is to visit the places I'm placing the spheres, and to document them photographically. The last step is to use a 3D rendering program to create the spheres and to insert them into the photos using Photoshop. In this last step I make sure the sphere

is the correct size in the scene by using two main factors, the distance between me and the imagined sphere (I sometimes measure this on Google Maps), and my angle of view which is determined by my prime lens.

As seen from a standard point of view, nature photographers are supposed to be rather enjoying their time in the most beautiful places, capturing the most fantastic views before revealing their catch to the most amazed eyes. Of course, this vision is an idealized one but to "lurk" around abandoned quarries or some « shabby » scarred places remains quite an unusual requirement. So what makes these places so talkative and worth visiting to you ? How does the public welcome your audacious artwork ? And how is their feedback triggering new ideas ?

I think it is important as an artist to find a unique interest if you are to stand out from the rest. I tend to shy away from well photographed places for this reason, and I often look for subject matter that exists in the margins of the environments we inhabit. I feel that these places often have a lot they can teach us. I have gotten really positive feedback so far for my work, I think people appreciate the fresh perspective. I am keen to add to my glacial ice series and I hope to produce similar, but evolved versions of this series for other glaciers around the world. I am now seeking funding to produce a European or a US version.

Your photographs make a real great case for nature conservation and your commitment is genuinely obvious. Do you ever experience hard feelings though ? Most nature proponents can easily fall into a sense of sadness, anger, frustration, grief or could even be plagued with mixed emotions aggravated to solastalgia in the face of a man-made mute environmental collapse. Do you acknowledge your feelings as being part of such a state spirit ? How do you cope with those emotional experiences ?

I do feel sadness for the damages I see caused to the natural world, but for the most part my main feeling is that of morbid curiosity. I need to distance myself from thoughts of hopelessness if I am to remain motivated.

Among photographers worth mentioning, some have been committed, although using different approaches, into a quest similar to your own : French Vincent Munier, US James Balog, Kenyan Geogina Goodwin, the Climate heroes photographers group and so goes on a lengthy list. It seems though that, even if all have been sounding the alarm of a ticking bomb for decades, artists campaigners turn to be as inaudible as the unfortunate climate scientists in the recent film "Don't look up".

How could the course of things be reversed in your opinion ? Have you noticed the slightest shift of perspective among your public for instance, especially once your work had brought to light some striking and undeniable testimony ?

I think it starts by somehow dismantling the divisive political climate we find ourselves in. This is no easy feat, but I feel like the solution has to start from a place of compassion rather than conflict.

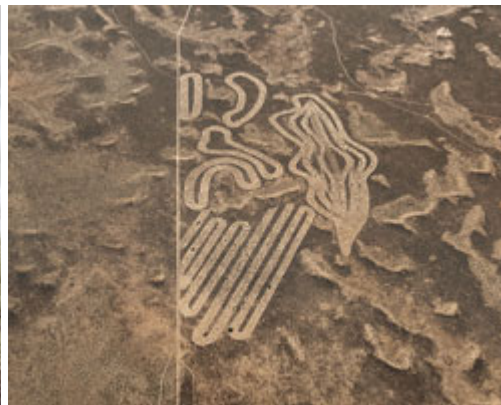
I have noticed a recent increase in the reach of my work so I am hopeful that this will have a positive impact.

Another piece of your work are the beautiful series “Assimilation”, “Contours”, “Hitchhikers” and “Limbo”. Each one tells a seemingly different and yet a very similar story. Is this work series about the resilience nature is gifted with and which still can give hope and help us come to grips with the current situation ?

Yes, you are right, there is a sense of the resilience of nature in most of my work. Nature will ultimately find a way to adapt to the exploitations of humans. It may not be as rich and diverse as a result, but it will survive.



This electric pole had become a giant communal nest home to small birds called social weavers, their construction defies gravity law



These extra-terrestrial like shaped landscapes are nothing but old abandoned grown meadows slowly recovering their vegetation



Plants seeds growing in inhospitable conditions must be gifted with the best fitted shapes enabling them to travel firmly clutched to moving hosts, thus playing hidden hitch hikers towards more welcoming breeding grounds

Your last words for the young generations would be ... ?

Do what you can to help, even if it is little things. The big issues can look overwhelming at times, but little acts are still important.

Thanks again Dillon for sharing your work and thoughts with us ! We look forward to discovering your next projects, especially in Europe.

For further researches :

Dillon Marsh whole artwork is available on his website on : <http://dillonmarsh.com/work.html>

About CGI : <https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-cgi>

Start your own photography project with your students using public provided data such as : <https://www.oecd.org/climate-change/data/>

As a teacher, you might want to register your classes to one of the many photo contests organized by NGOs and other international organizations, or simply start your own local initiative :

[RSPCA photo contest](#)

[Jeunes Reporters pour L'Environnement - GoodPlanet Belgium](#)

[Les concours photo, bourses et prix. \(photophiles.com\)](#)

[Concours photo international de la jeunesse | CCNUCC \(unfccc.int\)](#)

[Le concours photographique « biodiversité » commence aujourd'hui! - Amis de la Terre International \(foei.org\)](#)