

CLAIRE HEALY & SEAN CORDEIRO

ARCHITECTS OF DESTRUCTION

A nondescript whiteboard—normally used for brainstorming in business meetings or in school lectures—is filled entirely with a densely complex, fantastical illustration drawn with black marker. Entitled *Hinkley Point* (2014), this doodle on steroids is the work of Sydney- and Berlin-based artist-duo Claire Healy and Sean Cordeiro. It was also the first piece that visitors encountered upon entering “Architects of Destruction,” the pair’s second exhibition at Gallery Wendi Norris in San Francisco. Featuring several renditions of their whiteboard installations, as well as works made from Lego bricks and cross-stitched cotton, the exhibition presented the duo’s nuanced take on the societal cost of human progress.

In *Hinkley Point*—the title references a natural headland in southern England known for its bird-watching and fossil hunting, and is the site of two nuclear power stations—one side of a skyscraper appears torn off, revealing a chaotic assemblage of industrial mechanisms jam-packed onto multiple floors. Set within a forest, the building is a grotesque encroachment on its surrounding environment—a not-so-subtle portrayal of human development’s abusive effect on nature. The various machinery the tower houses seem ineffectual—especially in the face of a chimeric monster looming in the scene’s foreground—and tell of the human fragility that no amount of technology can protect. With the illustration drawn on a whiteboard, where many an idea is developed and diagrammed, *Hinkley Point* is a poignant commentary on the complicated relationship between civilization and nature.

Though *Hinkley Point* was the first work that greeted viewers, what caught one’s attention was *T+85_red* (2013), a textured, bright-red square panel made from Lego blocks. The wall piece depicts a yellow, billowing cloud—cutting diagonally across the red panel—comprised of orange, purple, blue and green blocks. Aesthetically pleasing, the piece in fact depicts the iconic 1986 image of the space shuttle Challenger’s explosion shortly after liftoff, which resulted in the death of its entire crew. By portraying the historic tragedy in Lego, a building toy that encourages imaginative construction, the artists convey the idea that within each act of creation exists the possibility of destruction, or conversely, that creation, or creative potential for reconstruction, can sprout from destruction.

The reimagining of catastrophic events is also seen in “Tapestry of Disaster” (2013), a series of rectangular, cross-stitched panels hung in a staggered formation, depicting scenes of historic explosions, from the Deepwater Horizon accident to the Iraq War. Reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s “Death and Disaster” paintings (1962–63), which explore media saturation and how it has numbed society’s perception of violence and tragedy,

Healy and Cordeiro’s piece is perhaps even darker: a satirical take on humanity’s aggressive use of fossil fuels, wherein the swift consumption rate is not proportional to the vast length of time required for these resources to be created. Each of the cross-stitched works, which the artists made themselves, involved a tedious process that took months to complete. Yet, as with the consumer of fossil fuels, a casual observer of the tapestries might not consider the length of time required for their construction. Adding to the work’s wry sensibility are the actual cross-stitched images, some of which show exploded cars and drilling rigs, burning mercilessly as a result of the very oil that fuels them.

When Healy and Cordeiro first began their collaboration in the late 1990s, Sydney was in the middle of rapid development in anticipation of the city’s hosting of the 2000 Summer Olympics. After seeing historic buildings and sites demolished to make way for sports facilities, the artists began investigating the cycle of destruction and reconstitution, which has since become a recurring motif in their work. “Architects of Destruction” looked at how society’s ravenous development is, ironically, accelerating the demise of the environment and, hence, the human race. Healy and Cordeiro’s use of toys, office supplies and crocheting materials to convey this message accentuates the idea that the danger of human hubris is hidden even within the most innocent, mundane elements of everyday life.

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T+85_red

2013

Lego, 123 x 118 cm.

Courtesy the artists and Gallery Wendi Norris, San Francisco.

