

Repurposing with a Purpose

New Orleans artist Hannah Chalew uses her work as a tool for change

BY JOHN R. KEMP

The 19th-century American artist James McNeill Whistler once wrote, “Nature sings her exquisite song to the artist alone.” Today, however, a growing number of passionate young Louisiana artists are hearing not nature’s “exquisite” song but one of ecological distress in a rapidly changing world.

One answering that call is New Orleans artist Hannah Chalew who is working with various Black-led community activist organizations in Louisiana’s River Parishes, so-called Cancer Alley, to call public attention to what she describes as social injustice and environmental issues brought on by the fossil fuel and plastic industries. Chalew equates the refineries along the river to the old sugarcane plantations in that both, she says, victimized local African-American residents, many of whom are descendants of those same enslaved people. Today, it’s fossil fuels and plastics, she says, back then, it was sugarcane.

This venture into environmental advocacy art has been quite a journey for Chalew. Born in Baltimore in 1986, she grew up in New Orleans where she attended Benjamin Franklin High School and the New Orleans Center for Creative Arts. She majored in art and

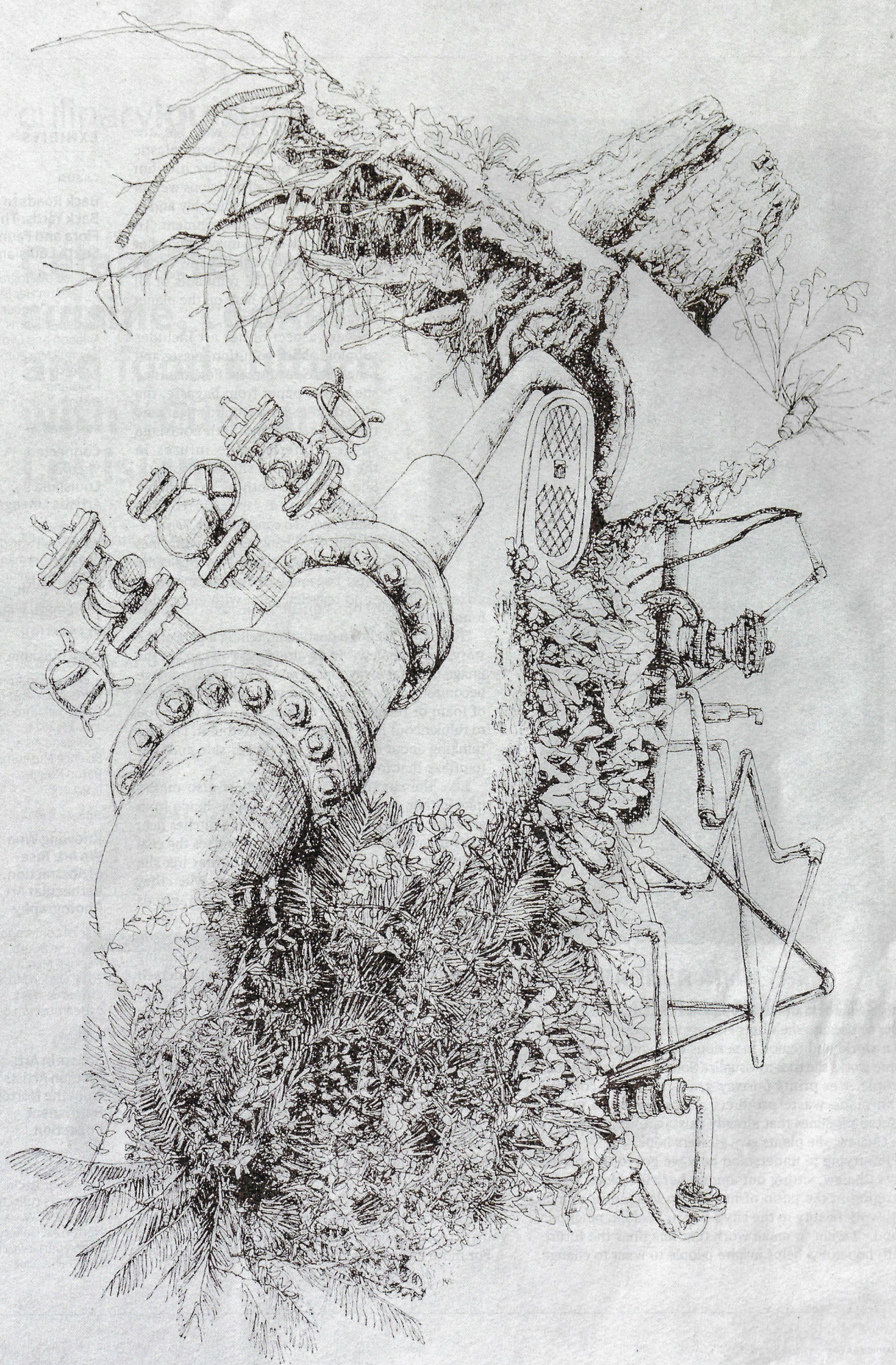


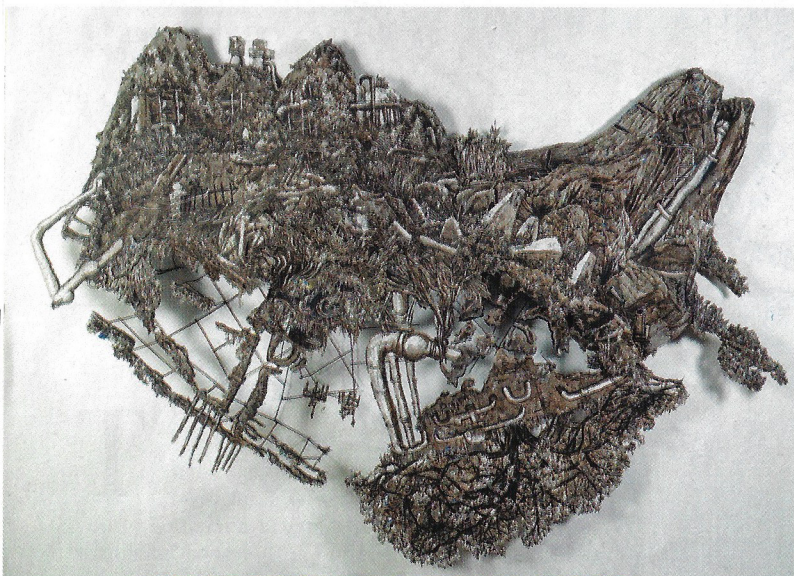
(Left) “Embodied Emissions”
(Above)
“Overburden”
(Right, Top)
“Petroplexus”
(Bottom) Hannah Chalew

minored in anthropology at Brandeis University before going on for a master’s in fine arts at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Michigan. Returning to New Orleans in 2018, she signed up for the Fossil Free Festival’s “toxic tour” of the River Parishes. It changed her life and gave new direction to her art.

That journey hasn’t gone unrecognized. She has received numerous grants and her work has appeared in shows across the nation. Last summer she received the Southern Prize awarded by the Atlanta-based South Arts organization. Her work placed first among artists from nine southern states. The natural and unusual materials she used in her art impressed jurors.

Those materials are indeed unusual. Not shy about wallowing in the muck, she makes her installations, drawings, prints and conceptual sculpture with pollut-





and reconsider the way we are living. We can't avoid using plastic products in our everyday life, but there are individual decisions we can make to live more sustainably and in harmony with the environment. To me this work is like imagining what the future might look like if we don't change course. The remnants of all of this will still be here on the planet but maybe we're not."

Every aspect of her art includes subplots about pollution, waste and renewable resources. For instance, she makes paper from bagasse, the pulp residue from ground sugarcane that she gets from South Louisiana sugar refineries. She infuses in the paper bits of shredded plastic. She describes both as sustainable resources and "specific to this landscape." To construct her "Orbs" — varying sized hanging pods with vines growing from within — she uses the same bagasse-based sugarcane paper

mixed with lime and recycled paint with embedded found objects.

"The paper itself is a document, telling a part of the story," says Chalew. "In my drawings you can see the image from far away, but as you get closer the image becomes less discernible and you might see a piece of foam or recognize a product. Again, I want you to think about how you are implicated in it. I'm also thinking about beauty and this darker side and how to utilize that to move people."

Like the sugarcane paper, Chalew also makes inks for her drawings and prints. One is made from grinding chunks of coal she finds in the ditches near a River Parish coal transfer plant. She mixes the coal dust with gum arabic and water. Another ink she makes from oak gall pods made by wasps when they lay eggs in oak trees. She soaks the nodules, grinds them and adds iron.

Chalew supports her art through sales but mostly by grants that she shares with activist groups. Staying true to her beliefs, she says she is divesting herself as much as possible from fossil fuels. That includes refusing to accept money or participate in art shows underwritten by fossil fuel corporations. She also rides her bike to and from her studio and powers her studio and artworks with solar energy and rainwater.

"It's hard in Louisiana because it is our industry," she says, "but we can think bigger and imagine a different future."

For Chalew, art is not simply the old axiom "Art for art's sake." Art is a tool for change, a tool for survival, a tool for social and environmental justice and responsibility.

"I think when we have deeper relationships to our environment," she says, "it's harder to exploit a place if you are more connected to it."

For more information, visit hannahchalew.com ■

EXHIBITS

CAJUN

Back Roads to Back Yards: The Flora and Fauna of South Louisiana

Wildlife photography by LeeAnn Hepler, through October. Wedell-Williams Aviation and Cypress Sawmill Museum, Patterson. louisiana-statemuseum.org

CENTRAL

Connected Visions: Louisiana's Artistic Lineage

Overview of Louisiana's artistic heritage, permanent exhibit. Alexandria Museum of Art. themuseum.org

PLANTATION

Our Louisiana

Louisiana art from the permanent collection, through Jan. 14, 2024. Louisiana Art & Science Museum, Baton Rouge. lasm.org

NOLA

Knowing Who We Art: Rise of Abstraction, Vernacular Art Photography

Rise of contemporary art in the South, through March 3, 2024. Ogden Museum of Southern Art. ogdenmuseum.org

NORTH

Sisters in Art: Women Artists from the Norton's Permanent Collection

Historical and contemporary women artists in museum's collection, ongoing. R. W. Norton Art Gallery, Shreveport, rwnaf.org

ants she finds in the streets and near industrial sites. She does so because she wants viewers to respond "viscerally" to a world and region in serious ecological trouble. In some works she tries to visualize South Louisiana without people. Her prints portray grass- and vine-covered man-made waste products and abandoned underground pipelines that already exist in South Louisiana. To Chalew, the plants give viewers hope.

"I'm trying to understand how we got to this place," says Chalew, sitting out among her vine-laced "Orbs" hanging in the patio of her studio located in an old millwork factory in the city's Bayou St. John neighborhood. "I want to make work that imagines the future and, hopefully, helps inspire people to want to change