

SEPTEMBER 8 - OCTOBER 30, 2020

**THIRD COAST DISRUPTED:  
ARTISTS + SCIENTISTS  
ON CLIMATE**

**MEREDITH LEICH**

**DEPS ARTIST PROFILE**

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Glass Curtain Gallery - Columbia College Chicago  
1104 S Wabash Ave, 1st Floor, Chicago, IL 60605  
Gallery Hours: Monday - Friday, 9 a.m. - 5 p.m.  
*Capacity of gallery is 10 visitors and masks are required.*

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# THIRD COAST DISRUPTED:

## Artists + Scientists on Climate

*Third Coast Disrupted: Artists + Scientists on Climate* is an exhibition of newly commissioned artworks culminating a yearlong conversation between artists and scientists centered on climate change impacts and solutions in the Chicago region.

Through science-inspired sculpture, painting, collage and more, the artworks examine local impacts -- happening here and now -- ranging from extreme heat to flooding to habitat loss, and beyond. They also shine light on local solutions underway, like "cool roofs," nature-based approaches to slowing stormwater, and backyard habitat restoration. Some imagine future possibilities.

*Third Coast Disrupted* is based on the notion that art can connect and engage with people on an emotional level. It can pique curiosity, be unexpected, tactile, interactive, evocative, and memorable. It can slow people down, inspire them to reflect, move them to talk to each other -- and spur them to act.

**Curatorial Team:** Project Director & Lead Curator, Christine Esposito; Science Curator, Liam Heneghan; Art Curator, Lisa Roberts; Senior Consultant, Meg Duguid

**Participating artists:** Jeremy Bolen, Barbara Cooper, Hector Duarte, Rosemary Holliday Hall, N. Masani Landfair, Meredith Leich, Andrew S. Yang

**Participating scientists:** Elena Grossman, MPH; Daniel Horton, Ph.D.; Abigail Derby Lewis, Ph.D.; Aaron Packman, Ph.D.; Katherine Moore Powell, Ph.D.; Desi Robertson-Thompson, Ph.D.; Philip Willink, Ph.D.

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# MEREDITH LEICH

**Meredith Leich** works with animation, video, performance, and painting in response to our evolving relationship to climate change. Her process begins with research into science, psychology, and cultural history, evolving into fantastical imagery and narratives, as she explores how we exploit, fear, deny, and revere our natural environment. Her interest is driven by her boundless curiosity about the natural world and by her fear of how our communities will change, destabilize, and be wounded due to altered resources. Aware of how fear can stymie or paralyze, she seeks psychologically attuned ways of working with these themes. Rather than induce terror, Leich aims for wonder, imagination, and even humor as means of creating a receptive state in which to consider unpalatable facts and solemn predictions.

**Meredith Leich** has exhibited and screened work nationally and internationally, including at the Ann Arbor Film Festival, the Athens International Film and Video Festival, and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, as a part of Chicagoland Shorts. Her collaboration with glaciologist Dr. Andrew Malone was awarded a 2015-16 Arts, Science + Culture Grant from the University of Chicago. Her short film *Scaling Quelccaya* won Second Prize in Deutsche Bank's 2017 Macht Kunst Contest in Berlin and received a 2018 Individual Artist Grant from Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events. Leich has participated in several residencies, including the Studios at Key West, Ragdale Foundation in Lake Forest, Illinois, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Wrangell Mountain Center in the Wrangell-St-Elias National Park and Preserve in Alaska. She received her MFA in Film, Video, New Media, and Animation from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and her BA from Swarthmore College, and she currently lectures at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and Loyola University in Chicago.

<http://meredithleich.com/>

<https://www.meredithwatercolors.com/>



*Animated Drawings for a Glacier*, 2018, documentation of projected animation on ice

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*Animated Drawings for a Glacier*, 2018, documentation of projected animation on ice

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*Scaling Quelccaya*, 2017, video still of digital animation

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*San Francisco in the Snow - Bernal Heights, 2013, watercolor on paper, 30" x 22"*

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*San Francisco in the Snow - Dolores Park, 2020, watercolor on paper, 15" x 11"*





*Manhattan Icebergs*, 2015, watercolor on paper, 17" x 11"

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*Prince William Sound*, 2019, watercolor on paper, 22" x 15"

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# ARTIST INTERVIEW

Conducted by Kaylee Fowler

**Kaylee Fowler:** How do you choose the locations that are subject in your watercolor work? Do the environmental issues specific to each place affect the location you choose as subject?

**Meredith Leich:** As I move through the world, I take photographs every time my eye lands on a landscape I find visually compelling— usually spurred by a combination of light, textures, spatial complexity, and subject matter, whether it is environmental or architectural. Sometimes I know these photographs will become paintings; sometimes, I am sparked by the subject matter several years later.

**KF:** You often work in both watercolors and in video work; what are the differences and overlaps between these two mediums that draw you to using both?

**ML:** Watercolor and video/animation have very different technological histories and function differently within the contemporary world, in terms of how they are viewed and distributed. Both, however, are process-intensive, and allow me to

muse, dream, and reflect as I work, whether it's layering watercolor washes, capturing stop motion animation line by line, or editing together clips of video. Both media are also relatively lightweight: I can move through the world with some water-soluble paints, brushes, paper, a camera, and a computer, and that's pretty much my whole studio.

**KF:** How did you create the *Animated Drawings for a Glacier* work? How was the idea to create an image directly on a glacier started?

**ML:** About five years ago, I began a collaboration with glaciologist Dr. Andrew Malone on a project about the Quelccaya Ice Cap, the world's largest tropical glacier. Because the glacier is in Peru, our research was remote, and very remote at that: Andrew used satellite footage to observe and calculate how the glacier has shrunk over the last 30 years. Using a radar image of Quelccaya, I reconstructed a virtual 3D topography of the glacier with animation software and merged it digitally with a model of Chicago to demonstrate the change, relative to a more familiar landscape.

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# ARTIST INTERVIEW

## Continued

Andrew calculated how much ice had melted on Quelccaya in the last 30 years, and we simulated through animation an equivalent amount of snow falling on Chicago.

Throughout this process, I had never seen a glacier up close. In 2017, I had my chance, as an Artist-in-Residence at the Wrangell Mountains Center, deep in the Alaskan wilderness. Surrounded by ice pouring off of high mountains, I met the physical reality of the glaciers: full of the motion and noise of running water, much more lively than apparent from the great heights of a satellite. I wanted to make something much more immediate and visceral than in my previous digital work. The following summer, I returned to project hand-drawn animations directly onto glaciers. Following hikes during the day onto the glacier, I made a series of animated charcoal drawings that reflected the history of how glaciers gradually form and melt, using only a free app on my cell phone to capture the stop motion. I then led night hikes, carried out with groups of local residents, who accompanied me onto the ice at the August sunset of 11 pm, and brought small, battery-powered projectors to cast the animations onto the ice.

In both animation and glaciers, time is compressed; in sharing these works, I hoped to make the centuries and millennia that have passed in a glacier's history visible, legible on the surface of the ice. The local attendees spoke to me of their view of the glaciers being transformed. If we know how much things have changed in the past, perhaps we can imagine how much they could change in the future.

**KF:** What are some ways you have reduced your ecological footprint in your own practice, and what can you recommend to other artists to be more conscious of how their work impacts the environment?

**ML:** Frankly, I don't feel like I have done a great job of reducing my ecological footprint, especially given the air travel involved in traveling to Alaska, for instance. Other artists have merged their art and activism with much more nuance and thought; I think of Jenny Kendler here in Chicago, among many others.

**KF:** Using watercolors to present the destructive forces of water creates an interesting dialogue about the nature of water within the materials of the

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# ARTIST INTERVIEW

## Continued

work itself, as something of both creation and destruction. Is this kind of duality, the multifaceted aspects of nature, something you intend for viewers to take away from a piece, or is it more important that such impactful topics be taken at face value?

**ML:** I've always loved water and its properties. We know water in so many states, we rely on it, we can be destroyed by it. In a single day, we might have a steamy cup of tea to start our morning and a glass of water with ice cubes on a hot afternoon. It is a vital, domestic presence, and it also has the power to tear apart houses and reshape land. When I work with watercolor, I feel connected in some very small way to this property of our world; as I paint, I am in tune with the flow of water, the formation of droplets, and the rate of evaporation. Painting floods and rain with watercolor feels like yet another prong to this fascination, as I try to turn my and others' attention to this force that can both nourish and wreak havoc on our lives.

**KF:** Some of your environmental work presents both a harsh potential future, as well as references to the past;

how do these imaginings of the future and references to the past speak to our present environmental reality, and do you think these works are more of a warning for the future or function as more hopeful, given the past we have already come from?

**ML:** That's a great question. I try to walk the line between the harshness you mention and a more optimistic vision. My work is informed by my lifelong interest in historical societal disasters; perhaps this interest relates to my family's losses in the Holocaust, or maybe it's just a function of my sometimes-saturnine personality. I believe there is a psychological tendency to push away the possibility of negative outcomes in order to preserve a sense of calm. As we're seeing with COVID-19, however, we need to be able to think about disasters to prepare for them and protect people, most especially people in need — those without homes, in jail, in poverty, fleeing countries, fleeing domestic abuse, and/or living in the shadow of oppression due to a legacy of slavery, genocide, and disenfranchisement in our country. I see climate change as a near unimaginable agitator of difficult conditions for everyone. I draw on the

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# ARTIST INTERVIEW

## Continued

past to create recognizable references to help people imagine and visualize possibilities that are hard to bear, and I try to give these images a fanciful spin to invite people to stay in that space without creating additional fear. At the same time, I believe in the ingenuity and adaptability of people, and I think there's a lot of creativity and the possibility of social reinvention that comes with a sweeping change. In a sense, even the act of painting is optimistic, because I believe there is still so much that can be done, learned, and appreciated about our world and our role in it.

**KF:** What are some of the ways you would recommend viewers can become more directly engaged with some of the issues you address, beyond the gallery and viewing experience?

**ML:** In working on this project, I've learned a lot from our scientist partners, and they possess many resources to become more engaged; I would recommend checking out their research and writing. The Center for Neighborhood Technology here in Chicago is also a great non-profit that creates local initiatives for sustainability,

including their RainReady program which works with municipalities and communities to help prevent urban flooding. Other local organizations where folks can learn more, donate, or volunteer include the Blacks in Green: BIG, Little Village Environmental Justice Organization, Neighbors for Environmental Justice, the Southeast Environmental Task Force, and more. Personally, I've also appreciated the podcast "America Adapts," which focuses on adaptation to climate change and features conversations with professionals working in many different capacities. It's both educational and optimistic in its innovation, curiosity, and interest in concrete next steps for navigating a changing world.

# DEPS ARTIST PROFILE SERIES

The DEPS Artist Profile Series, presented by Columbia College Chicago's Department of Exhibitions, Performance, and Student Spaces (DEPS), is a virtual publication on select artists involved with the DEPS Galleries and the Columbia College Chicago community. Our goal with this series is to connect artist and viewer on a deeper level, and to highlight the amazing works and thoughts of our featured artists through interviews, artist biographies, and catalogs of work. Art has always been a way to connect with others, no matter where one may physically be. We hope by presenting the creativity and insights of the people involved in the DEPS Artist Profile Series that viewers may have one more way to stay in touch with and support the arts community.

The DEPS Artist Profile Series is managed by Fine Arts major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Kaylee Fowler. Design, animation and illustration by Graphic Design major and DEPS Exhibitions Assistant Gianella Goan.

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Learn more at <https://students/colum.edu/deps> and [www.ThirdCoastDisrupted.org](http://www.ThirdCoastDisrupted.org).

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