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Future Fossils

By Annabel Keenan



Julian Charrière, *Metamorphism XX*, 2016. Artificial lava, molten computer waste, Corian plinth, steel, and white glass, 22 1/10 x 9 4/5 x 9 4/5 inches. Courtesy the artist and Sean Kelly, New York, Los Angeles. Photo: Chi-An Chu.

When a curatorial conceit centers on a question, a kind of psychological game is at play. Such a choice inevitably primes the viewer to look for answers, framing their lens and creating a checkpoint with which to constantly revisit and ask, “Does this do what the curator says it’s doing?” The inherent risk lies in those circumstances where the show does not answer the posed question, or when the question itself is unclear of its own goals. Creating a lens is, of course, the curator’s job—to guide the viewer and tie the works to a hypothesis, hopefully offering new or deeper ways to understand the theme, the artworks, and (if we can be so idealistic) the world. Yet, adding a question amplifies the stakes, giving the visitor the expectation that the show will, at the very least, suggest an answer.

With *Future Fossils* at MassArt Art Museum, Ginger Gregg Duggan and Judith Hoos Fox curators behind the duo c2 (curatorsquared) query in their wall texts, “If life as we know it were to come to a sudden stop, what would archeologists find decades from now? ... When [the works are] viewed together as the remains from some kind of apocalypse, we get a glimpse into our current way of living.” The show features nineteen artists working in a variety of disciplines, though all works on view are in the sculptural realm, a refreshingly three-dimensional presentation. Some of the artworks are intriguing and explore urgent topics, such as *Fresh Artifacts* (2017), Maureen Gruben’s resin casts of her father’s fox stretcher, which the Inuvialuk hunter used to dry animal skins. The Roman numeral “IV” is visible in the resin, another reference to her father, who was stripped of his name and culture in his youth spent at a residential school and instead identified as “IV.” Gruben highlights the brutal, racist history of these institutions, the details and ramifications of which have only in recent years come to light. As a work about erasure, I do wish her father’s name were included in the wall text.



Installation view: *Future Fossils*, MassArt Art Museum, Boston, 2025. Courtesy MassArt Art Museum.

Though individual pieces, like Gruben's, tell important stories, there are inherent flaws in the curatorial brief itself, primarily that archeologists do not study fossils. The description of fossils that the curators pose, however, does fit what an archaeologist might study. Wall text describes the works as "relics," a word that, according to geologists I asked, is not equivalent to or associated with fossils. Archaeological remains, however, can certainly be viewed as relics and—as objects that act as traces of the past—they do indeed tell stories of the people who created and used them. Perhaps future "relics" would have been a more accurate title for the show.

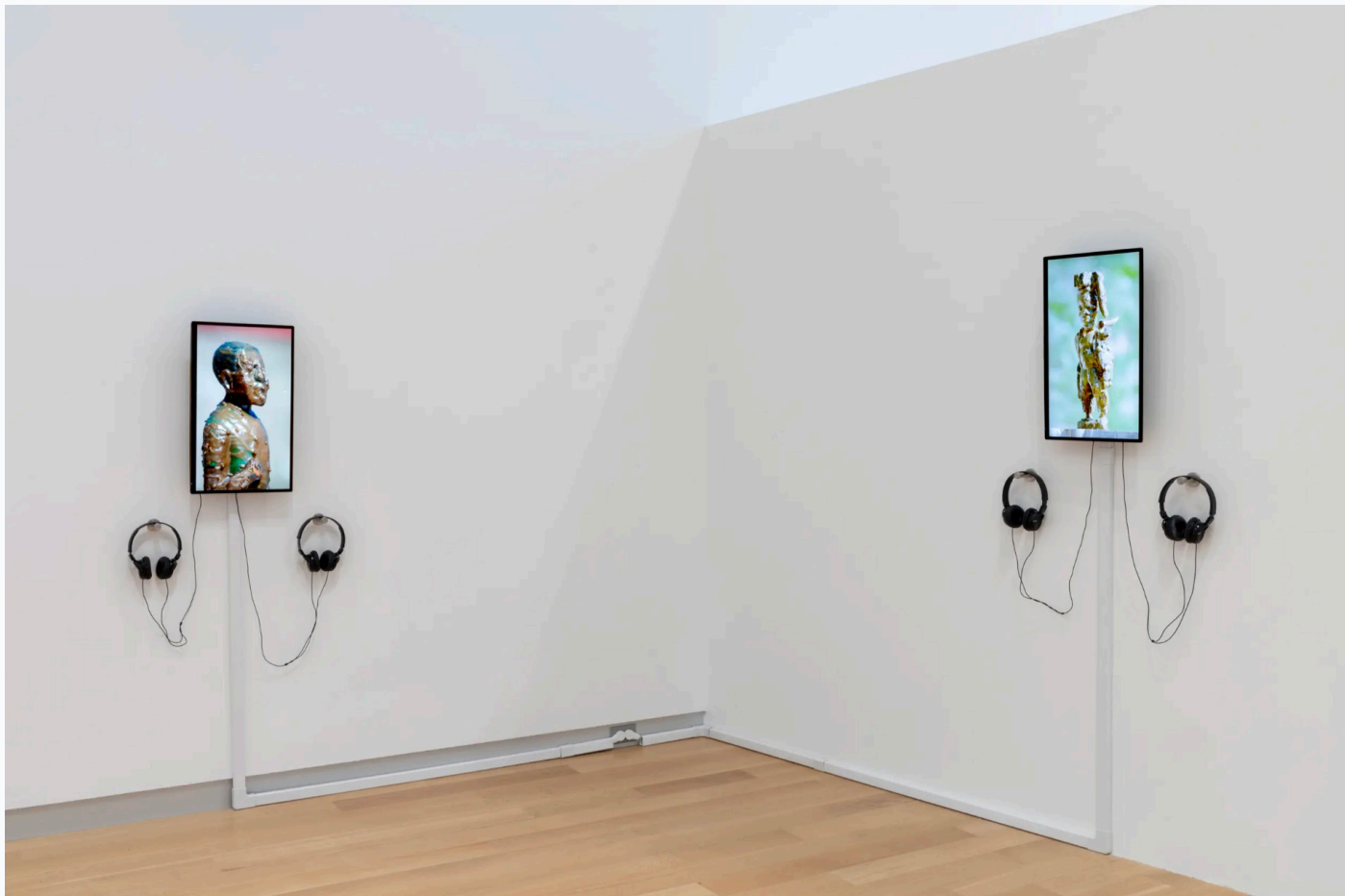
Further confusing the curatorial brief is its delineation of the timing of the post-apocalyptic future in which these fossils will be discovered: decades from now. Unless amnesia is part of the apocalypse, it's troubling to think a society so barely removed would need to use these things to understand the lost world they represent. Moreover, fossils—my geologist experts note—take far longer than decades to form, a timeframe closer to tens of thousands to millions of years.

Compounding this chronological oversight, the introductory text imagines these works were created by a contemporary Pompeii, a sudden, devastatingly catastrophic event. In this vein, though, the artworks would again not be considered fossils, but rather archeological remains. The question becomes whether the artists' creations are intended to be viewed as casualties of an unexpected disaster, or intentionally enshrined or preserved in order to be understood as relics. The show contains examples of both. Clarissa Tossin's work *Nova gramática de formas #4 (New grammar of forms #4)* (2020–21) falls into the former category. Borrowing traditional Amazonian techniques of weaving, the installation features baskets made of repurposed boxes from the Amazon company. Accompanying these are everyday devices like phones and bottles made in terracotta. Were these relics (not fossils) discovered in some distant future, one could deduce that they hold importance in our society.

Part of the latter—artists purposefully enshrining things as modern-day relics—is Matthew Angelo Harrison. His works in the show feature items associated with the auto industry encased in resin. The wall label accompanying these describes them as "artifacts [that] speak to histories of industry and their resulting environmental effects." Knowing Harrison's practice, and without further clarification in the text itself to elaborate on this oversimplification, the environmental angle is a stretch. Rather, the Detroit-based artist reflects more broadly on race, labor, and histories of colonialism, which he explores in what he calls "prototypes," a nod to his own background working for Ford Motor Company creating clay models. In addition to the works in the show, Harrison also consecrates items related to African heritage, such as traditional masks and sculptures. However, these examples are not results of an indiscriminately twenty-first-century Pompeii, but rather the artist's own effort to safeguard identity, history, and specific elements of culture he deems worthy of preservation.



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Discussing the works on view, the curatorial statement explains, “Actual fossils come in different forms, depending on the object or creature preserved and the site conditions where this transformation occurred. The works in this exhibition recall these forms remarkably closely.” Well, at least one does. The first piece visitors encounter, Julian Charrière’s *Metamorphism XX* (2016), is comprised of artificial lava combined with electronic waste like laptops and smartphones. The shape and components of the piece look like a rock—a literal representation of the show’s title. Part of a series of similar sculptures, the work points to the cyclical relationship between nature and its role in creating the items we consume—in this case, the metals and minerals extracted to make electronics—which are inevitably returned to the earth as waste. If future geologists and paleontologists (not the hypothetical archaeologists) were to find this piece, they could study its parts, identify specific minerals, and possibly deduce that this object contains parts of important tools of contemporary society. In this light, Charrière’s work could offer a “glimpse into our current way of living.”

If suddenly life stopped, this presentation could be what fictional archaeologists might find decades from now, though fossils they are not. And what exactly would archaeologists glean? There is no cohesive message, which the exhibition brief accounts for by saying the artists explore “different paths and issues.” But with such a broad scope, and with the provided interpretations hinging on tenuous connections, the show somehow simultaneously says too much and too little. While curatorial conceits should be taken with a grain of salt, this one might require a few extra shakes.



Suzanne Gruben, *Fresh Artifacts*, 2017. Cast resin, steel, copper nails, reflective tape, wax; three pieces, each piece 12 x 52 inches. Courtesy the artist and MassArt Art Museum.