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Students visit Fairfield University Art Museum to explore the "To See This Place: Awakening to Our Common Home" exhibition. The students were visiting from Fairfield Prep's Environmental Justice classes. (Fairfield Art Museum/Facebook.)



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It is not often that a papal encyclical inspires an art exhibit.

But Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution in Connecticut, is exhibiting works by three artists who were selected because their work resonates with themes from Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical "*Laudato Si*': On Care for Our Common Home" and his 2023 addendum *Laudate Deum*.

"It's an exhibit of the moment," Carey Mack Weber, executive director of the Fairfield University Art Museum said of "To See This Place: Awakening to Our Common Home." It is on display through March 29 at the museum's Walsh Gallery in the Quick Center for the Arts.

The exhibit is meant to prompt dialogue, reflection and perhaps action, Weber said in an interview. That is not surprising given that care for the Earth, veneration of creation and worries about climate change and other environmental threats are subjects of concern at Jesuit institutions, where *Laudato Si*' and *Laudate Deum* — penned by the first Jesuit pope — are sources of study, debate and attention.

"I would describe *Laudato Si*' as a wake-up call," said exhibit co-curator David Brinker.

An exhibit catalog, written by Brinker, notes that the three artists "are not explicitly responding to Laudato Si', their work resonates with its themes and makes multiple points of connection."

The three artists — Athena LaTocha (Peekskill, New York), Mary Mattingly (Deer Island, Maine) and Tyler Rai (Piermont, New York) — come from different religious and cultural backgrounds and have differing approaches to the theme. And each employs different media. The current exhibit includes painting, photography, sculpture and video.

Among five pieces by LaTocha, the Hunkpapa Lakota/Keweenaw Bay Ojibwe artist's massive "Lightning Strikes Twice, No. 2," a mixed media abstract painting, dominates the gallery space. It is an arresting piece of shellac ink, mica from a mine, sediment from a rock crusher washing pond, charcoal and ash from burned New Hampshire trees — all on 7.5- x 16-feet paper.



Tyler Rai's video work reinvigorates the Eastern European Ashkenazi practice of grave-measuring by conducting it on ecological relatives in peril. (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

Rai's video work — quiet, reflective — draws on her mixed Italian and Jewish lineages for "insights into how grief paradoxically sets the conditions for joy, and how mourning and celebration intertwine," says Brinker's catalog essay.

Rai, Brinker writes, "reinvigorates the Eastern European Ashkenazi practice of grave-measuring by conducting it on 'ecological relatives in peril.' And the artist's consideration of trees, waterways and other 'more-than-human' life as ancestors echoes 'The Canticle of Creatures,' a hymn written by St. Francis of Assisi that gives *Laudato Si*' its title."

The work of Mary Mattingly crosses disciplines, with work in performance, photography, portable architecture and sculptural ecosystems — all aspiring to "poetic visions of adaptation and survival," Brinker said.

In this exhibit, Mattingly focuses on photography of water. The importance of water is a particular concern of *Laudato Si*', and concern about water was a foundational experience for Mattingly as she lived in a community in northern Connecticut that was exposed to contaminated water due to agricultural runoff.

"Water was my first subject," she said, quoted in the catalog, "and having an ecological focus that responded to a place and encompassed home wasn't a choice, but probably more of a fundamental part of how I perceive living in the world."

Q&A with Mary Mattingly

***NCR*: How does your Catholic upbringing affect — or not — your artistic work?**

Mattingly: I was raised in a tradition of Catholicism, and while I don't actively practice, I'm grateful for my upbringing and experiences with ritual, interconnectedness and responsibility toward others. These ways of being have shaped how I approach my life and work. There's a strong ethical undercurrent in what I do, where questions of care, stewardship and reciprocity resonate and are deeply a part of me.

I think about systems of dependence, about what sustains us: water, land, food, love and our spirituality, and how we can reimagine relationships with them in a way that acknowledges responsibility rather than extraction. So, values of collective care and ethical questioning which I have found were instilled within me through Catholicism, are for me part of being a human and an artist.

Did the curators commission artwork from you or did they select work that had already been done?

The curators selected work I'd already made that aligned with the exhibition's overarching attempts to underscore beauty and spirituality of the natural world. I have appreciated the conversations with both [co-curators] Al [Miner] and David [Brinker], and appreciate that they are interested in not just the work itself but also

in how it might evolve in dialogue with a particular space or context. That back-and-forth can be generative, allowing the work to shift or deepen in response to the exhibition's framing.

Could you explain why water is an important theme in much of your work?

Water is a constant thread in my work, and a lot of that comes from early experiences learning that the well water my family had access to where I grew up was contaminated from industrial agriculture in northern Connecticut, and we relied on neighbors as well as bottled water for stretches of time.

That experience made me hyper-aware of access and inequity, of how something as fundamental as clean water isn't guaranteed. Later, I started thinking more about water beyond drinking: water's lifeforce, how it's contained and how it floods, the perils of privatization, and water as a form of love, poetry and even a teacher, and how water systems just completely shape our environments and can shape our relations with one another.

Mattingly, who was brought up Catholic, said that she feels "an affinity with *Laudato Si*', especially its call for an ecological consciousness that acknowledges our interconnectedness."

"What resonated with me most was its framing of environmental destruction as a social and ethical crisis, not only an issue of science or policy, but one that's deeply tied to justice and responsibility, inequality and human dignity."

The encyclical, Mattingly said, also asked her "to understand creativity in a way that was expansive, and not always what one would consider moral, but rather an innate human drive."

"It asked me to see the contradictions I witness in my own practice as not a stumbling block that leaves me unable to creatively act. I appreciate that the exhibition expands on its concerns through different artistic lenses. That space for interpretation and critique is important."

As the catalog notes, Francis has said the solutions to the ecological crisis and its multiple causes "will not emerge from just one way of interpreting and transforming reality. Respect must also be shown for the various cultural riches of different peoples, their art and poetry, their interior life and spirituality.

"If we are truly concerned to develop an ecology capable of remedying the damage we have done, no branch of the sciences and no form of wisdom can be left out."

In a joint interview at the gallery on the day that the exhibit opened (Jan. 24) Brinker, director of the St. Louis University Museum of Contemporary Religious Art and his co-curator Al Miner, an independent curator and the deputy director of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C., said it took three years from the idea's conception for the exhibit to become a reality at Fairfield, its initial venue. (The exhibit will travel in the fall to the St. Louis museum.)

Miner recalls that in 2022, when he was teaching at Georgetown University, he and Brinker began discussing a possible exhibit. "*Laudato Si*' was in the air at the time," he said.

Any exhibit focusing on climate change will inevitably be political in some respects, and both wondered how best to convey the "spiritual, poetic and evocative" elements of what the pope spoke of in his work, Miner said.



Athena LaTocha's massive "Lightning Strikes Twice, No. 2" is a mixed media abstract painting that dominates the gallery space in the exhibit "To See This Place: Awakening to Our Common Home." (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"We didn't seek artists who would seek to expressly 'illustrate' *Laudato Si*'," Brinker said. Brinker, who had worked as head of a museum at another Jesuit institution, was intrigued by the elements of Ignatian tradition that could underline an exhibit: body, mind and spirit.

The three artists ultimately selected offer challenging work that "invites a response by the viewer," Brinker said. That, in turn, invites "dialogue and respect."

Writing in the catalog, Brinker said the work of the three artists call us to a "loving awareness," quoting Francis, "of our common home."

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Carey Mack Weber, executive director of the Fairfield University Art Museum, center, sits with co-curators David Brinker, left, and Al Miner, right, in the exhibit space of "To See This Place: Awakening to Our Common Home" at the museum's Walsh Gallery. (NCR photo/Chris Herlinger)

"By awakening us to the particularities and interconnectedness of the spaces we inhabit, these artists help transform climate despair into climate hope," Brinker writes, "With this shifted perspective, we may be ready to answer the call of *Laudato Si*' and so many other voices, to move from awareness to action."

Francis, again quoted in the catalog, said, "Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. … A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal."

That resonates with Mattingly, who believes exhibitions are opportunities for conversation.

"Exhibitions aren't only about representation, they can be spaces to test ways of thinking, building, and being in relationship with the world," she said. "I'm interested in how we can push beyond critique into action: how exhibitions can propose, experiment, and invite people into imagining and enacting change."

"*To See This Place: Awakening to Our Common Home*" *will be on display at the Fairfield University Art Museum's Walsh Gallery in the Quick Center for the Arts, Fairfield, Conn., through March 29.*