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“Critics’ Pick: The Harrisons”
by Steve Kando

ARTFORUM

The Harrisons

VARIOUS SMALL FIRES

812 North Highland Avenue

January 24–March 18

The Harrisons have reconstructed two of their large 1970s “Survival Pieces” for this exhibition. Aesthetically, the works are weirdly rich, combining minimal sculpture, cybernetics, process art, color fields, and proto-relational aesthetics all within a sci-fi ecology that’s more *Silent Running* than *Silent Spring*. *Survival Piece #2*, 1971, has been remade as *Notations of the Ecosystem of the Cargill Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp*, 2017—five courtyard-filling trays of saltwater, each of which change color as different concentrations of salinity are added. This affects the resident algae, which the brine shrimp eat, and their processing of sunlight. Together, the shrimp and algae function as a kind of protein farm, as the crustaceans are to be cooked and eaten at the end of the exhibition. The word survival in the original title is ambiguous. The work was installed as part of LACMA’s 1971 “Art and Technology” show, and given its Cold War time frame and the then-nascent awareness of teetering on the brink of ecological collapse, you can’t help but wonder if the title referred to survival for those terraforming a moon base or for us sheltering in galleries from the “Event.”

Also displayed is a delightful set of the duo’s working drawings. These describe plans for setting up food-producing ecosystems in art institutions using agricultural practices for which current enthusiasm is tempered. Hydroponic beans might be one thing, but farming seafood in small, contained tanks, which the artists’ did inside London’s Hayward Gallery in 1971, now seems awful.

The Harrisons’ works are a message from the past about a possible version of the future. They call out our existing systems as inadequate but seem sustained by the belief that we can find creative solutions to the problems we’ve made for ourselves. The result is neither utopian nor dystopian, yet what is evident throughout is an approach that, though earnest, is entirely experimental and subtly reckless.



Newton and Helen Harrison, *Notations of the Ecosystem of the Cargill Salt Works with the Inclusion of Brine Shrimp*, 2017, Dunaliella algae, brine shrimp, saltwater, wood, plastic sheeting, 20’ x 32’ x 11”.