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“Review: Environmental warning as art exhibition: The Harrisons at Various Small Fires”

By Leah Ollman

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The Harrisons' "Composting in the Pentagon With Worm Tailings," 2017. Wood, 2,000 red worms, steer manure, chicken manure, soil, compost and plastic sheeting. (Various Small Fires)

Long before sustainability became a buzzword, Newton and Helen Mayer Harrison were delving into the human motivations and actions that run counter to the best interests of the planet. Their work has been featured in museums around the world and their voices heard at international conferences on the environment and public policy. In their 80s now and living in Santa Cruz, they remain visionaries with eyes and feet on the beloved ground.

The Harrisons' work feels more urgent than ever as fears grow that the EPA will shift its mandate from environmental protection to environmental profiteering. Pay attention, the Harrisons exhort: Pay attention to the costs of the belief that "the life web can ruthlessly be exploited and landscapes ... exhausted," polluted then revived. These words appear in a 2011 piece at the L.A. gallery Various Small Fires, which has assembled a fine mini-survey of work by the Harrisons from 1971 to the present.

Each project encompasses both warning and plan — what if and what next. Maps, photographs, drawings and text have been the couple's formal mainstay, but so have installations resembling science experiments that demonstrate a particular phenomenon. Here, a pentagonal wooden enclosure filled with manure, soil

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The Harrisons' "The Fifth Lagoon," 1975. Photography, oil, graphite and ink on canvas, 95 inches by 101 inches. (Various Small Fires)

and worms illustrates how compost might regenerate depleted topsoil. A video addresses the clear-cutting of old-growth forests. Another piece, joining text and aerial map projections, considers the effect of rising ocean levels on the San Francisco Bay Area.

Transformation, restoration and preparation are the operative forces at play. If the work oscillates between the juicy lyricism of poetry and the dry demands of policy, the narrative drive of storytelling and the analytical precision of environmental science, it remains never less than relevant, earnest, necessary.

The Harrisons' practice emerged at the intersection of art and environmentalism, dovetailing neatly with the interdisciplinary, socially engaged character of the visual arts department at UC San Diego, where they shared a professorship through the 1990s. They propose an ethics of being, on a global scale (steeped in the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, healing the world), but from the start have also devised practical solutions on a personal level.

Among their very earliest works, the "Survival Pieces" (1971-73) are blueprints for edible gardens, portable fish farms and orchards. They implore us just as clearly today to adopt gentler, more respectful ways of occupying the Earth — to take heed, and to take action.

Various Small Fires, 812 N. Highland Ave., Los Angeles. Through March 18; closed Sundays and Mondays. (310) 426-8040, www.vsf.la.