

Signs of the Times - reading the environmentally focused works of Ileri Topete

Having recently exhibited her artists' books in an exhibition exploring nature and the environment, I interviewed the Mexican artist Ileri Topete about her *Termómetros (Thermometers) Project*, an ongoing, strategic visual recording of nature and its changes observed and created by the artist. This series of handmade artists' books and prints has emerged since 2019 as a means of Topete's aim to draw attention to the environmental crisis and humanity's impact upon our natural world. I was struck by the scale (the books are c. 1971 x 700 mm when unfolded) and beauty of these works, which show the hand of the artist in their multi-layered and sewn constructions.

Topete considers the series as both "testimony and reflection of the historical epoch in which these events have occurred". Although she says that her artworks do not necessarily reveal the comprehensiveness of the environmental crisis, creating artists' books such as *Semáforo volcánico (volcanic traffic light)*, dedicated to the Popocatepetl Volcano, popoka'tepetl, (nahuatl), 'the hill that smokes', one of the most active in central Mexico, c. 45 miles southeast of Mexico City), allow her to add her voice to that of the many others concerned about climate change. "Alerts are issued about this volcano according to the danger of the emissions of smoke and lava that it exhales daily. Natural events have skyrocketed over the last four years in their intensity, frequency and repercussions for both the natural environment and human settlements." Topete argues that "the times we live in demand our attention, care and responsibility for the most valuable common good of humanity: planet Earth. In this creative exercise of producing artworks, I have been as faithful an observer as a meteorologist, responding to real events that occur. I notice the evidence of changes in nature and how the environment is modified in relation to our human actions, which to a greater or lesser extent makes human activity responsible for the environmental crisis. In this project it is important to talk about the period of time we live in, and my focus is on nature and its significant changes."

Topete's project has developed as a thematic discussion of these events, through artists' books and prints created using relief print, woodcut, monoprint, rubber stamping, drawing with Chinese inks and tusche on copper foil, lithographic transfer, sewing. Topete uses her visual printmaking language to explore subjects such as the degradation of Polar ice caps or the ferocity of tornadoes across Cuba. Over the last four years she has completed 18 artists' books as large-scale concertinas, polyptychs and expandable formats, as visual records of nature and its changes.

Topete is now preparing new pieces within the series focusing on the urgency of time and temperature. "2°C is the safety limit marked in climate change, the global average temperature of the planet should not increase by more than two degrees, but since 2018 it has been pointed out that unfortunately we are close to the limit set by the 2015 Paris climate agreement. I am observing and recording the events that will happen in real time over the next 3 years, making a visual record of natural phenomena related to the environment and the natural landscape as it changes and is altered by the behaviour and consequences of natural events.

The prints and drawings that contribute to the work I make, break the conventionalism of the multiple-original for a unique approach framed within the artist's book and

printmaking through a fusion of matrices. These mixed media works can be displayed or handled in a variety of ways to encourage audience interaction and reception. Topete's artist's book *Fuego y viento... MMXIX Incendios forestales (Fire and wind... MMXIX Forest fires)* is on show in GRAPHIC VISIONS 7, Contemporary Graphic Exhibition of Mexico, curated by Lepasava Lepa Milošević Sibinović, touring Serbia until 19th October 2023. After our interview Topete wrote to say that the Popocatepetl Volcana has become increasingly active, "...the volcano traffic light goes up to Amarillo phase 3 making an eruption very likely, it's incredible and very timely to publish this article. A volcanic eruption is a natural phenomenon - an expression of our mother earth as manifestation of a living land."

The *Termómetros Visuales / Visual Thermometers* artists' books and printmaking project continues as a matter of urgency, the artist is "researching and learning from the medium of artists' books and their production" in order to utilise these skills to bear witness to our current state of climate emergency. Topete's works are "visual scales" promoting awareness of and hopefully a response to nature's ever increasing call for help.

<http://ireritopete.com>