

Beyond political labels

By T. Lee Brown
Correspondent

Photographer Carolyn Monastra fits the image of a liberal environmentalist. She lives in Brooklyn, works as a community college associate professor, takes photos of trees, and was a climate leader with Al Gore's Climate Reality Project.

But traveling and meeting people from all walks of life taught Monastra something intriguing: climate change reaches across the left and right divide.

"I actually grew up in Ohio," Monastra says. "My mom was very liberal and my dad was more conservative."

At age 18 she moved to New York. From fine art photography to the arresting documentary-activist style evidenced in her series "The Witness Tree," her work earned accolades, exhibitions, and awards.

A pivotal moment came when she visited South Carolina.

"I went to photograph these trees that were ending up in the ocean," a striking image of climate change in action.

Monastra said to a retired activist there, "Everyone here

is so conservative."

His answer taught her "a really interesting lesson, and it's one that stuck with me. He said, 'I don't talk to them about climate change. I talk to them about things they love.'"

Hunting, fishing, and the land are loved by Americans of all political stripes. So is birding.

At Caldera in Sisters Country this month, Monastra is working on "Divergence of Birds" (pictured).

Several years back, she read an Audubon Society report on bird migration, which has been hugely altered by climate change.

She also read Philip K. Dick's cyberpunk novel "Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep," which inspired the movie "Blade Runner." In the book's dystopian future,

"most of the animals that exist are just electric versions," Monastra remembers.

The combination inspired her current series. To bring attention to the birds' plight, she starts with a public-domain photograph of a real bird. She prints and cuts it out, attaching the cutout to a twig or hanging it from fishing line. Then she photographs her faked bird in the real environment where the bird would normally be living — if climate change hadn't forced it out.

The process is Monastra's way of "mimicking nature photography. But when people see the photography, they think 'Something's wrong! What's wrong?'"

Monastra has an answer. "What's wrong is that climate change is affecting these



PHOTO PROVIDED

Is there something strange about this white-throated sparrow? Photo from the "Divergence of Birds" series by Carolyn Monastra.

species. In a future world, if you want to see this bird, you're going to have to prop up a picture in the landscape."

She considers environmentalism a social-justice issue, disproportionately affecting people from lower socioeconomic classes, such as many of her students.

Monastra described how wealthier denizens of Miami, Florida responded to rising

ocean levels and devastating hurricanes: "Okay, when the sea rises, I'll just move." That isn't an option for everyone.

At Open Studios, Monastra will show works from "Divergence of Birds." She will also show postcards made by youth in a workshop she leads this week. For more information see related article on page 3 or visit www.calderaarts.org.

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