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Descanso Garden's Sturt Haaga Gallery weighs urbanization against environmental concerns



The upcoming exhibit "Farwell, Eden," which runs Jan. 19 through April 3 at Descanso Garden's Sturt Haaga Gallery, encourages viewers to question the ever-changing relationship between civilization and the natural world. Artist Jennifer Gunlock created this piece, titled "Mothership (Sequoia)." (Courtesy of John David O'Brien)



By **Sara Cardine • Contact Reporter**

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Gazing at a pastoral landscape painting may evoke feelings of peace and well-being, but could centuries spent viewing nature through rose-colored glasses be harming our very real and complex relationship with the planet we live on?

"Farewell, Eden," a new exhibit opening at Descanso Garden's Sturt Haaga Gallery on Jan. 19, asks audiences to consider whether the old vision of nature as a pristine, romanticized notion still serves a humanity that is struggling with 21st-century issues such as climate change, species extinction and global urbanization.

The show will feature 62 pieces by 13 area artists whose work intends to inspire and evolve conversations about the possible imbalance between civilization's demands and nature's ever-shrinking resources, and what might be done to restore order.

"Art is not very good at moralizing, but art is a very useful tool to investigate moral quandaries that arise," said John David O'Brien, curatorial coordinator for Descanso's Sturt Haaga Gallery, about the theme. "As we civilize our way through nature, studying these things becomes ever more urgent."

"Farewell, Eden," is presented in collaboration with another, similarly themed show called "Urbanature," running at the Art Center College of Design's Williamson Gallery in Pasadena from Feb. 22 through May 8. The two shows will hold a joint reception on Feb. 21 at both venues.

David Brown, executive director of Descanso Gardens and a former chief executive at Art Center College of Design, said that while the Williamson exhibition will focus on architecture and design, the Sturt Haaga pieces intend to explore a shift in artistic representations of nature from romantic, almost idealized by human intervention, to a more realistic vision that irrevocably shows the vast handprint of urbanization.

"Eden represents this highly idealized, perfect natural environment in which all the species and processes are balanced," Brown said. "So the idea of saying goodbye to Eden or, more specifically, to these highly romanticized beliefs about nature is probably a good thing. Because it's standing in the way of individual and collective action."

Long Beach artist Jennifer Gunlock, who will have three collage pieces in the exhibit, explained her method of mixing images of trees and architecture to create fused mythical structures that stand alone in a context of their own, but which draw on the viewer's own experiences.

She said she aims to create timeless images, which at once seem futuristic and of an era that existed eons ago. Somewhere within that expansive fictional time span viewers insert themselves.

"Humanity is kind of domineering, (but) we as a species only have a limited time on the earth," Gunlock said. "I really want people to be more sensitive about the environment they're living in and how we as a whole are treating our environment and our relationship with it."

"Farewell, Eden" runs from Jan. 19 through April 3 at Descanso Garden's Sturt Haaga Gallery, 1418 Descanso Drive, La Cañada. It is free with admission to the garden.

"Urbanature," will run from Feb. 22 through May 8 at the Art Center College of Design's Williamson Gallery, 1700 Lida St. A joint reception takes place Feb. 21, from 2 to 4 p.m. at Descanso and from 4 to 6 p.m. at the Art Center. For more information, visit descansogardens.org/explore/upcoming-exhibition.

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