

CRISTIN TIERNEY

# Tampa Bay Times

## USF art exhibit is a wakeup call about the health of our world

**This show is about life and death. It's about the health of our planet. Because everything is connected to everything else, it's also about us.**



**By Joanne Milani**  
**Times Correspondent**

**Published** January 17

TAMPA — It's easy for some folks to dismiss museum art. After all, much of it can seem to have nothing to do with real life.

It's not easy at all, however, to dismiss what is now on view at the University of South Florida's Contemporary Art Museum. Seen together, the work by four different artists delivers a punch to the gut. It's all a dose of frightening reality.

Forget the sleep-inducing, academic title of the exhibition, "The Visible Turn: Contemporary Artists Confront Political Invisibility." This show is about life and death. It's about the health of our planet.

Because everything is connected to everything else, it's also about us.

Karolina Sobecka of Poland exhibits the vacuum pump, bell jars and aerosols she uses in her studies of the atmosphere. She gathers particulates found in clouds over different areas of the world: dust from an 1815 volcano eruption in Indonesia and silver and iodide above a General Electric Research lab in New York state. In coming months, the clouds above Tucson, Ariz., will also be examined.

Whether from natural phenomena like volcanoes or human activities studied in research labs, evidence shows the atmosphere is altered every day, with some changes lasting for centuries.

Sobecka's work reveals the truism: A cloud is an imprint of earthly activities.

Other changes are violently dramatic, like the ferocious 2018 bombing of the Syrian city of Homs. Chilean artist Jorge Tacla uses oil paint and cold wax on his 26-foot-long canvas to eerily evoke an entire cityscape reduced to hollowed-out buildings. The expanse of abandoned high-rises resembles the caves of the Puebla Indians who carved out dwellings in the sides of cliffs centuries ago.

Tacla's mural brings to mind blurred photographic negatives, as if the memory of the bombings is fading in and out of consciousness.

"After the 1985 earthquake in Chile," Tacla once said, "I was able to see, through a tragedy, the weakness behind constructions that appear indestructible."

It's as if human hands had tried to carve away at the landscape, but nature has reclaimed everything.

The exhibition's biggest punch comes with *130,000 Years*, a room-sized installation from Bahamian artist Tavares Strachan.

One part of the installation consists of three 5-foot-tall collages that are studies for works exhibited in the 2013 Venice Biennale. They show what seem to be — at first glance — huge photographs of a bear, a leaping whale and a reindeer. Close examination of these magnificent animals

reveals that the images are made up of tiny collaged photos of Coke cans, a gas pump, a burning building, all kinds of human faces, birds, leaves, a trash can and even a Band-Aid.

This underscores what scientists have been saying: that human activity affects the DNA of even the most distant, powerful animals.

The other part of Strachan's installation consists of a video loop and monitors incorporated in a series of display stands. The video shows polar bears stranded on melting patches of ice.

One stand shows the slashed-out photograph of Matthew Alexander Henson, an African-American explorer who was part of Robert Edwin Peary's 1909 North Pole expedition. He was one of the black or feminine notables largely ignored in mainstream history books, an issue tackled by Strachan in an earlier work, *The Encyclopedia of Invisibility*.

In this case, Strachan is dealing with the invisible pollution of the earth's environment. He is making the case that we are all connected, and we ignore this at our peril. One piece of his installation expresses this willful blindness most powerfully. It is a pair of spectacles lying in a tank of water. The spectacles are rendered nearly invisible by being submerged.

Mexican artist Bosco Sodi underscores our planetary connection with *Muro (Wall)*, a 6-foot-high, 20-foot-long wall of clay bricks. In 2017, Sodi erected a brick wall in New York's Washington Square Park for one day. Visitors were invited to take down the wall and take home a brick. He repeated the event in London in 2018.

On Jan. 24, *Muro* will be reconstructed in front of the museum and dismantled yet again.

Sodi's work, as well as the work of everyone in the exhibition, is an appeal to the world that we are all in this together, that everything seeps across and that you can't wall anything out.