

## Collection Insights:

# Janet Culbertson, *Future Tense*



*Carpool*, 2002, mixed media on paper

### Stormy Weather

When it comes to global warming, extreme weather, overpopulation and the general diminishment of planet earth, Janet Culbertson has had her eye on the storm for over forty years. It's an astonishing achievement. After all, a ravaged earth does not fit neatly into the modern art tropes to which we've grown accustomed. But for decades Culbertson has mined a territory that only now has fully come into global consciousness – the proliferation of nuclear reactors, strip mines, horizons of oil rigs, animal extinction, the bleak, deforested landscape and the sludge, heat and black-hole psychology that inch by inch has devolved into a portrait of our home. Not a pretty picture. But, in the hands of Culbertson, whose mixed-media paintings, monumental drawings and elaborate collages have been exhibited across the United States, even these Boschian nightmares exude the seductions of pictorial depth, tactility and radiant, iridescent color. Islip Art Museum is pleased to have an opportunity to examine the works of this devoted artist in the exhibition, ***Collection Insights: Janet Culbertson, Future Tense***.

Growing up in Pennsylvania, Janet Culbertson witnessed a landscape mutilated by strip mining and coal slag heaps, its rivers contaminated with orange sludge, its mountaintops sheared off and reduced to rubble. The effect it had on her would be life long, and it would take on the dimensions of not only an artistic quest but a spiritual one as well.

After studying art and design at Carnegie-Mellon University she moved to New York and immersed herself in painting, teaching and broad experimentation while doing graduate work at N.Y.U. While her artistic focus was squarely on the landscape, the conventions of painting at that time -- let alone painting the landscape -- were met with indifference; even disdain. Politics and polemics entered the art world. Landscape painting became Earth art; feminism roared; environmental concerns began to make headlines and artists, frustrated with the limitations of the gallery system, ventured out into the field. Culbertson remembers a photo essay in National Geographic that depicted the tragedy of oil-soaked birds. Her focus shifted. She had found her mission.

Since that time, she has concentrated on the plundering of the landscape -- the proliferation of billboards and automobiles, asphalt and electricity pylons and the myriad industrial accidents that have ravaged planet earth. Prescient and astute, her work has never been more germane than it is today.

In her "Industrial Park" series the artist explores the underbelly of beauty. The works ricochet between foreboding and seduction, tragedy and irony, splendor and squalor. Culbertson's use of iridescent pigment is effective in communicating the toxicity of humankind's unrelenting greed and its reckless contamination of the landscape. She creates a high-octane vocabulary of exquisite severity through the use of found objects, broken glass, shards and spills of tar and glistening, textured surfaces. Yes, there is an implicit doomsday message here, but it is mitigated by the artist's luscious color and exacting and dramatic pictorial sense.



*Who Killed Cock Robin*, 1998, mixed media on panel

Culbertson's dramatic perspectival views of the landscape provide her works with a depth of field that is theatrical and mesmerizing, creating a hyper-real dystopia that is as alluring as it is grave.

**Janet Goleas, Curator**

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### **Islip Art Museum**

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[www.islipartmuseum.org](http://www.islipartmuseum.org)

Hrs: Wed - Sat 10am - 4pm  
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