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Combining Art and Data to Spur Climate Action

YSE alumna Allyza Lustig '17 MEM led the Art x Climate project, the first-ever gallery of visual art featured in the National Climate Assessment.

From Keith Haring's brightly colored murals on AIDS and drug addiction to [Jean-Michel Basquiat](#)'s equally colorful works addressing police brutality, racism, and issues of identity, art has increased our understanding of a wide range of social, political, and even scientific issues. Allyza Lustig '17 MEM believes that art, when combined with science, can do the same for the climate crisis — deepen our understanding of climate change and perhaps spur individual and collective action.

“Art engages emotion and expands our capacity to connect with the issue of climate change, which is, after all, a deeply human and emotional issue. We need this connection more than ever,” Lustig said. “Art also allows us to connect, transcending our individual perspectives in the midst of global transformation.”

As part of her work with the [U.S. Global Change Research Program](#) (USGCRP), Lustig led [Art x Climate](#), the first-ever selection of visual art featured in the federal government's [National Climate Assessment](#). Written by more than 700 scientists from across the United States and released in November 2023, the fifth National Climate Assessment (NCA5) is the most up-to-date and comprehensive assessment of climate change in the United States. It lays out the science of global warming and examines how climate change

affects transportation, ecosystem resilience, infrastructure, and other areas at the national and regional levels.

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Traditionally, the National Climate Assessment reports, which come out about every four years, rely on extensive text, figures, and data, but don't necessarily convey the psychological and emotional impacts of climate change. Allison Crimmins, director of the Fifth National Climate Assessment, told Lustig and others working on NCA5 that she wanted to see more visual art in the report. It was an idea that Lustig, who has an informal arts background, asked to

spearhead.

“At YSE, I thought about different ways of valuing the environment,” Lustig said. “Here at USGCRP, I’m working in a scientific and often quantitative space, and that draws me for many reasons, but there’s always this thing in the back of my mind — I know there’s so much more to how people are in touch with the environment.”

Working with partners NOAA, FEMA, NSF, and the Smithsonian, NCA5 put out a call for artists to creatively visualize the causes, impacts, and the collective response to climate change in the U.S. After receiving more than 800 submissions from across the country, Lustig worked with a team of jurors with expertise at the intersection of art and climate to select 92 pieces to display throughout the NCA5 chapters and in an online gallery.

The selected works cover a range of topics in various

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media and were chosen for their general artistic quality, accuracy in describing and depicting science and climate change, innovation, and thematic diversity. Lustig said there were a lot of wildfire submissions and a lot of glacier submissions, for example, but fewer submissions about a hopeful future. Wherever possible, the juries tried to find a balance of topics.

"You get a sense for where people are at in their thinking. A lot of people are processing; a lot of people are grieving; and some people are quite anxious. It all came through in the art," she noted.

The Art x Climate gallery is the second-most visited page of the report website, behind only the [NCA5 Overview](#) chapter. Through this work, Lustig hopes to bring even more people into the climate change conversation. In late 2023, the NCA artworks were featured at the San Francisco Exploratorium and the American Geophysical Union annual meeting, and Lustig is currently working on [programming](#) with the Climate Museum in New York City.

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