

Exhibit Links Climate Change, Art, Tikkun Olam

ART

SELAH MAYA ZIGHELBOIM | JE STAFF

AT THIS POINT in Diane Burko's artistic career, she needs a little more than just the promise of an audience to get her to agree to an exhibition.

So when a Congregation Rodeph Shalom board member told her about the potential educational and social programming she could have at the synagogue, Burko's interest was piqued.

That's how The Philadelphia Museum of Jewish Art, located at Rodeph Shalom on Broad Street, ended up with "Repairing Our Earth (Tikkun Olam)," an exhibition of paintings and photography around the theme of climate change. The exhibit is now open through April 2.

A synagogue is not her usual venue, Burko noted. She is a nationally renowned artist, and her work has been shown in numerous museums and galleries, including her most recent exhibit at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. But with this exhibit, Rodeph Shalom gave her the opportunity to reach out to new audiences.

"Being that I've had, I don't know, maybe 100 shows or more all over the country, I don't need another show," said Burko, who is Jewish. "I don't need a resume at this point."

But Burko is using this exhibit as a platform to speak about climate change. She gave a lecture to the congregation in the sanctuary in December, and spoke to some of the synagogue's Hebrew school students in January.

"I've been an artist for over 40 years, and basically, the content of my work has always been the landscape — mostly monumental, geological kind of landscape," Burko said. "I did a project on volcanoes, where I went to many sites. I did a project on the Grand Canyon.



▲ Nunatak Glacier #1 and #2

Diane Burko

Geology's in my blood."

For this exhibit, Rodeph Shalom reached out to Cynthia Veloric, a researcher at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, to be the guest curator. Veloric worked with Burko to conceive and execute "Repairing Our Earth."

Veloric started by looking for a new way to frame Burko's work that would connect to the synagogue. She found that connection through the concept of *tikkun olam*. Veloric included quotes from Jewish scholars and texts about caring for the Earth throughout the exhibit.

"I took that phrase — *tikkun olam* — and made it more specific to repairing the Earth and our seas, creating an action in thought and deed that would help repair the physical Earth," said Veloric, who is involved with Beth David Reform Congregation in Gladwyne and is a supporter of the Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia. "I felt that her work on behalf of climate change ... is a social action as well as a work of art. Everything she does is connected to her mission to educate and inform and hopefully change people's minds about the state of the planet right now."

Landscapes have long captured Burko's imagination. They combine color and composition in a way that speak to her. Even before environmental activism became a part of her work, she would go out into landscapes to paint and photograph.

Burko, a native New Yorker,

moved to Philadelphia to go to graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. After completing her MFA in 1969, she stayed in the city because real estate was cheaper. She could afford to have her own studio and got a job teaching at the Community College of Philadelphia.

She described herself as a "political animal." In the '70s, she was active in the feminist

environmental activism into her art, blending her political and artistic selves.

"Climate change was in the air in the 2000s," Burko said. "It occurred to me that I should be doing more than just making beautiful images of landscapes. I needed to make sure they would continue to be with us, that the planet wasn't going to be destroyed with

movement, though her art didn't delve into that issue.

Over the years, she learned more about climate change from Al Gore's *Inconvenient Truth* and Elizabeth Kolbert's *Field Notes From a Catastrophe*. Climate change was transforming her landscapes, so she began to incorporate

fires and droughts and floods. I decided my work could have more meaning for me and for the audience if it had a social practice component in it."

Her work has taken her around the world, from the glaciers of the Antarctic to the coral reefs of the Pacific Ocean, to bear witness to climate change. She has studied NASA and NOAA repeat photography and has spoken to scientists about the issue. She has also attended conferences, where she has talked about how art can communicate the issue of climate change.

"I'm steeped in it," Burko said. "It's a wonderful way to bring a lot of who I am together. My work and my beliefs are all one piece." •

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