What happens when the elemental features are changed? What happens to the landscape—and what happens to me? To us? To other species? The sea level rises. The beach erodes. A part of an island is waterlogged, another washed away. But that cannot be all.

A key message of the most recent National Climate Assessment states:

The Southeast’s coastal plain and inland low-lying regions support a rapidly growing population, a tourism economy, critical industries, and important cultural resources that are highly vulnerable to climate change impacts. The combined effects of changing extreme rainfall events and sea level rise are already increasing flood frequencies, which impacts property values and infrastructure viability, particularly in coastal cities. Without significant adaptation measures, these regions are projected to experience daily high tide flooding by the end of the century.¹

A tale of disintegration and loss has begun to unfold. Can we cope? Can we adapt? Can we live well? These are concerns for those who see signs of climate change in a beach vista along the Georgia coast. Furthermore, who is the “we”? Is it tourists, residents, business owners, the state? Does “we” include indigenous people? Descendants of formerly enslaved people? Immigrants? What about other species? Does it include the natural resources that support life?

In her ceramics and wall panels, mixed media artist Erin Jane Nelson evokes appreciation and unease about familiar scenes of a typical beach holiday. Because she grew up in Georgia, she considers it home, though she was educated in New York and lived in California. She currently resides in Atlanta and is executive director of Burnaway, an online magazine focusing on the arts in the American South. Moreover, she is a studio artist at Atlanta Contemporary, an art center. A watchful and vibrant person aware of injustice and change, Nelson creates works that are simultaneously whimsical and wrenching, endearing and disconcerting. During an interview with her this past February at her studio, I learned of her approach.

“Southeastern barrier islands and the gulf coast to me contained all of the markers of America’s original sins: physical scars of climate crisis, of oil production, drilling, indigenous genocide, slave trade—it’s all there. And yet in this moment where we’re talking about preservation of history and monuments, there’s very little documenting the things in the South,” Nelson explained.

Her studies of barrier islands are initially scenic but reveal themselves to be expressions of apocalyptic change. “Jekyll” (2018), for example, portrays a standing skeletal remnant of a tree overcome by the tides on the island’s Driftwood Beach. Composed of a photographic image printed onto resin and applied to an island-shaped ceramic base, the tray-size sculpture evokes the complexity of the coast’s history. A fanciful assortment of ceramic knobs and
twists, some nautical, some shell-like, decorates the rim. “I like to have a documentary photo mixed with more intuitive decisions. I love that [the attachments] bother people and they want to know what they mean when they don’t have a meaning,” she said.

Her idiom is photographic collage and, counter-intuitively, palimpsest: items are added and others are erased or diminished. The tree is present, but it is not the tree it once was. “I’ve always been interested in photography because we have so many tools to see, and yet climate change is the ultimate unseeable threat. I’m really interested in the play between visibility and invisibility and how to make visible something that people can’t see. This one is made for Jekyll Island as a marker,” Nelson stated.

A fortuitous accident of shipping the work across the country during winter storms and temperature extremes cracked the resin, altering the message and deepening its mood: “I love keeping this piece in circulation that has literally been acted upon by climate change and bears the mark of vulnerability. I love the fact that the clay, which comes from the earth, is fine, but the plastic, which is manmade, was shattered in the climate change,” she confessed.

Nelson’s purposes may be subtle, but they are extant: “I think that making people feel complicated emotions about climate change is just one more way to break down that apathy that allows [the response of] of ‘someone else will fix it’ or ‘it’s impossible [to fix] because it’s already underway.’” Psychologists have recently coined the term “solastalgia,” which means “the distress that is produced by environmental change impacting on people while they are directly connected to their home environment.”

The concept highlights the notion that the places people view as their homes are now being transformed by climate change. Droughts are causing fires that destroy cities.

Solastalgia describes the distress people feel about environmental changes in the places they know best.

Massive storms flatten counties. Torrential rain breaks dams. Sea levels rise so coastal cities flood even on rain-free days. Keystone species made vulnerable by habitat loss and shifting seasons are attacked and endangered by invasive insects, animals, plants and fungi. Climate change, no longer an abstraction, is a phenomenon people observe directly where they live, causing anxiety and sadness. The solace of home, of familiar places, is lost or diminished even while the longing for its comfort is heightened.

Nelson plays with this concept. She offers aesthetic delight in the composition of her art but complicates a familiar, often sympathetic dominant image with unsettling details that serve as critique. The approach continues in her large wall panels featuring sea turtles, "The Tree of Diagnosis" and "The Tree of Treatment" (2019). She commented that the titles allude to the Tree of Life, an icon of Jewish and other cultures, usually underscoring the interdependence of all life. When viewed alongside "Jekyll," the heart-shaped pieces nod directly to the Georgia Sea Turtle Center located on the island. Indeed, Nelson has visited the center—part rescue hospital, part research center, and part tourist attraction. The former of these works suggests a turtle in the sea, its native habitat, by centering a photograph of a turtle swimming in a sky-blue field. White patches evoke reflected sunlight or clouds; attached organic forms mimic seaweed and sea grass. But the turtle appears to be an object of study, rather than one of casual observation: a clock is pasted onto the center of its back, like a target. Stray images are affixed, one of a stylized dog drawing and another an actual window, their meaning ambiguous. In the companion "Tree of Treatment," the turtle has been transported to a human setting, the hospital. Its pale belly is exposed and gloved hands hold it upright in an awkward position, out of water. The heart shape of this panel has become distorted and its purple-and-patchwork background troubling. In the top left, just above the turtle, a photograph of a smiling woman with one arm above
her head mirrors its pose. Are both vulnerable? Most notably, the belly of the turtle and the face of the woman bear pansy impressions. Because they are displaced, the flowers suggest wounds. Flowers also appear in “Diagnosis,” but less alarmingly because there they adorn the white patches, rather than mar the central image. Analogues of the ceramics’ appendages, the flower impressions provoke questions and hypotheses.

To create the flower impressions Nelson uses the Asian technique of hapa-zome printing, or flower pounding. She transfers the image to the surface by hammering actual pansies. The practice connects to Nelson’s themes and preferences, as she explained: “Taking this traditional ornamental plant and making it a bit more evocative felt important to me. One of the words that I love when I think about climate change—it’s really the Southern Gothic in a way, it’s the fecundity of things. Things are strangely fertile—there’s growth and blooms—these sort of processes that are not clean. They’re a messy, seepage-y, feminine thing. I like to evoke these symbols of fertility and femininity because I think that’s really what we’re seeing happening in the world—this kind of unpredictable inside-outside, gooey, messy thing. It’s not this rectilinear, architectural, logical grid-like nature anymore despite efforts to try to make it such.” Ephemera and their impressions can last. They have a haunting presence, which leads a viewer back to uncertainty. The familiar is no longer familiar, but unsettling.

Another facet of Nelson’s work is its employment of anthropomorphism. The sea turtle’s identity in popular culture, strongly influenced by Pixar and Disney’s Finding Nemo (2003), is enviable, relatable, and sympathetic. In the way that people adore birds because they can fly, people admire the apparent ease with which turtles survive in the sea, especially

Posthumanism re-centers humans within ecosystems and alongside other species.

those of us who enjoy the sensations of swimming. Add the empathy evoked by the struggle of female turtles who drag themselves ashore to dig nests for their eggs and the hatchlings that scramble from these nests into the water, attempting to evade predation by birds and mammals. These narratives lead to a human perception of a remarkably foreign creature that is appealing because of its numinous otherness. While once ethologists viewed anthropomorphism as unscientific and categorically absurd, more recently they have begun to see the usefulness in cautiously employing the structures of human culture and society to study animals’ lives. The more they learn about animals, the more complex their lives are revealed to be. Beyond this shift lies a broader one in the humanities, posthumanism, which considers human compassion for the fates of other species as essential—rather than sentimental.4 Recognizing the precariousness of other species’ lives (which are as rich as ours), along with the absolute human dependence on other species for humans’ own survival, may encourage human action to minimize the destructive trends and cycles that humans have initiated and continue in the so-called Anthropocene epoch. The sea turtle has become a patient because of injury from fishing nets or ship propellers, or resulting from exposure to toxins, or weakness from habitat degradation. The sight triggers alarm on behalf of the reptile as well as the hominid. Nelson noted the irony: “They’re such empathetic creatures and the hospital is such a bizarre and sweet and important place, but also the turtles are getting better healthcare than many Americans, so the preservation of these cute animals is mixed with how threatened people and less sympathetic animals are and using them. It points to this interesting approach to conservation that doesn’t go far enough in my opinion. I’m still curious about how as an empathetic subject that they can be a gateway into these conversations.”

Alternatively, Nelson uses the octopus, an animal far less empathetic, to illustrate that necessary

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future adaptations that may enable a new kind of existence. “Live. Leaky” (2016) is a cloth panel with printed organza images. The colors of the abyss (blue, black, gray, rust, violet) predominate in image frames of swirling water and octopus tentacles. Wonder and mystery reign; viewers cannot tell what is going on. Nelson sees the “octopus as a hyperintelligent counterpoint to humans in the ocean and also an adaptive feminist alien.” Her cli-fi story, “Psychopompopolis,” resettles humans inside these creatures of the deep as disembodied consciousnesses that retain their individual identities. As residents of a new home, they miss their former lives, forfeited through arrogance. Solastalgia indeed.

Despite United States residents’ preference for optimism, these days, doubt, loss, and sadness surround us, not just because of the coronavirus pandemic, though surely it has caused a sea change. Many of us seek a “new normal” to redesign our lives. This is an opportune time to assess what is lost, what remains, and what can be done. Taking an expansive approach to these questions may lead, could really lead, to a beneficent and beneficial re-orientation, away from the vertical hierarchy of anthropocentrism and towards the wide, inclusive one of biocentrism. If we earnestly begin to see ourselves as a part of the world, we may find ways to sustain it, and ourselves.

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This essay was written to accompany “It’s your world for the moment,” an exhibition at the Zuckerman Museum of Art about the precariousness of our geographic and shared spaces and explored through “environmental portraits,” explorations into ecological sites, and art-making tactics that incorporate cultural and symbolic meanings of both our natural and cultural spaces. The show is open from 29 August through 6 December 2020 and features the work of Allison Janae Hamilton, Yoshua Okón, Erin Jane Nelson, Ana Mendieta, and Lauren Bon and the Metabolic Studio.