

cynthia byrnes contemporary art

J. Henry Fair Artist Statement

My work is about the conflict between our dependence on nature for life, and the damage we do to it through our desire for materialism.

After seeing a coal power plant shrouded in fog on a cross country flight, it occurred to me that the aerial perspective provided access to what was hidden behind fences, but also allowed a unique viewpoint that was inherently fascinating. The area of the Mississippi River known as "Cancer Alley" seemed like the logical starting place, so I went to New Orleans and chartered a small plane and pilot. The resulting pictures were fascinating, but demanded the back story, which prompted an immersion into research of the processes, collaboration with environmental groups, and a more activist role than is typical of artists.

The reach of the project grew as I went from looking at specific areas to following industries and production processes. Initially, the only goal was getting the greatest images. Then I started to anticipate regulation or legislation and choose projects to affect those. In other cases, situations of blatant wrongdoing could become the subject, the images then finding their way to the different agents who might be able to right the wrong.

As the USA slipped in to paranoia after the World Trade Center bombings, my work became more difficult. On several occasions the FBI came looking for me. Once, they appeared at the hotel early in the morning and questioned me after a pilot reported that a suspicious "Arabic looking man" was photographing industrial sites. The second time, when a particularly windy day made it necessary to circle a few times too many around one of the most toxic and explosive refineries in the country to get the shot, someone at the refinery reported the tail number of the plane to the FBI who tracked me down and questioned me by phone. After that I started using a fake name and paying cash for the plane rentals to avoid any recurrence.

What interests me about this work is its essential irony and hope. The thinking person participating in the modern world understands that all of us are living unsustainably, and that the impending consequences on our lifestyle are real and significant. This is one of the essential ironies of the modern world. But in fact, with a little effort and luck, these futures could be altered, ensuring a more secure destiny. And so, we must hope, as we are all invested.

My goal is to produce beautiful images that stimulate an aesthetic response from both the aesthete and the layman, and thus dialog. There must be background information to respond to the dialog, but if the pictures are not beautiful, the viewer will not stop to consider them, or cherish them.