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Keystone XL Pipeline Art Activists Undeterred by Recent Report

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Activist-artists Mia Feuer, David Dufresne and Franke James use very different mediums to examine the controversy surrounding the building of the Keystone XL pipeline, a proposed pipeline extension that would help carry low-quality crude oil extracted from Canada's tar sands to refineries on the Gulf Coast.

Feuer's exhibition, called "An Unkindness" and currently on view at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., includes a mammoth sculpture of twisted metal, oil drums and stuffed ravens hanging over a black "ice rink" (actually made of a dense black plastic) that viewers can try out for themselves after donning skates. James' blend of cartoon and pop art criticizing President Barack Obama and Canadian leaders recently appeared on bus stops across Washington, D.C. Dufresne's "Fort McMoney" is a video game-documentary hybrid, in which participants play a "SimCity" of sorts focused on the social, economic and political choices that can be made for a simulated version of Canadian tar sands town Fort McMurray.

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Feuer, Dufresne and James took the stage at the Corcoran Thursday evening, joined by Washington Post reporter Steven Mufson, who was quick to point

out he was neither an artist nor an activist, although his coverage and book about Keystone XL have incorporated artistic elements like photography and video. The event came a few days after the release of a State Department report that brought the debate about the pipeline back to the forefront. Many have assumed the report's findings – that building the pipeline would not increase carbon emissions, one of Obama's primary stated concerns – will force the president into making a final decision to approve its construction.

But Keystone XL opponents have found elements in the report they say work in their favor as well, and the artists present at the Corcoran panel remained undeterred in their efforts to weigh in on the subject matter.

"The long and short of it is that it didn't end the debate, it just seems to have recharged it," Mufson said.

A Pew Research Center poll last year showed that two-thirds of Americans approve of the construction of the pipeline, which proponents say will create jobs and lessen American dependence on foreign (or at least non-North American) oil. However, critics say the toll the development of the tar sands takes on Canada's natural

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landscape and the environmental risks the pipeline poses are not worth the jobs it would create, as most of them are temporary.

The issue of whether the pipeline would increase the pace of climate change – an issue that some say was rendered null by the State Department report, as it appears the tar sands oil will be extracted, exported and refined into petroleum

regardless of whether the pipeline is built – is only one element of the artists' concerns about its construction.

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Feuer's work – the most abstract, but in a way, conventional of the three – seeks to evoke an emotional reaction to how she felt when she toured the Suncor Energy extraction plant in Alberta, Canada. James' posters, which have also been transformed into a visual essay, are a more explicit call to stop the pipeline and end tar sands extraction, and invoke the rhetoric Obama has used in the past about finding clean energy alternatives. Dufresne's "Fort McMoneY" game takes into account the economic and social consequences of the decisions surrounding tar sands extraction. Players, for instance, are able to vote on initiatives to raise taxes on oil companies, nationalize the industry or continue as is, and see the effect such moves have on the simulated town.

"There are different ways to sort of address issues in a way that is not necessarily ... the literal making of a statement," Feuer said.

Though they may represent a minority view in their opposition to Keystone XL, that view thus far has proved influential in stalling the president from taking action. Be it the graffiti art that pushed back against South African apartheid, internationally known sculptures and installations by Chinese activist-artist Ai Weiwei or the artists now advocating for comprehensive immigration reform in the U.S., art typically has played a role in activist movements.

The movement against Keystone XL has been no different, with artists hoping their work can help activate the debate.

"We are in competition with mass media, and the authenticity of the works can break through that clutter in really encouraging ways that can move people to action," James said.

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