



Madre de Dios – Fluvial Intervention Unit (Amazonia © Natural History Museum, London)

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AUTOVIEWER

## Art for the Amazon: Natural History Museum uses art to tackle eco-crisis

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**A new exhibition draws inspiration from the plight of the Amazon and uses artwork to suggest and inspire creative solutions to an impending environmental catastrophe**

Art and environmental activism are one and the same thing for wife-and-husband creative collaborators [Lucy and Jorge Orta](#), who present new works at the Natural History Museum this autumn in response to the Amazon rainforest ecosystem. The pair's pieces attempt to solve as well as reflect on ecological and social problems, setting them apart from eco artists who simply make pretty pictures of fragile landscapes.

'We're concerned with how far the artwork can function, activate and be activist, and move important issues forward,' explains Lucy Orta, as she puts the finishing touches to the *Amazonia* exhibition in the museum's Jerwood Gallery. The work in front of her, *Perpetual Amazonia*, is a case in point. In 2009, the Paris-based artists visited the Manú Biosphere Reserve in the Peruvian Amazon, where they catalogued and photographed vulnerable species of flora and fauna. Their radiant close-ups of flowers cover one wall and feature on posters that visitors can take home; but visitors are urged to contribute in return, to a donation box or via the [CREES Foundation](#), to the conservation of the plot of land where the plants grow.



The 'Fluvial Intervention Unit' carries model animals to safety



The piece makes us consider how much we value the natural world in monetary terms, in a way that mirrors the trend in green politics to focus on the financial impact of environmental degradation and climate change. We want the lovely poster of flowers on our wall at home, but are we also prepared to pay to ensure the flowers still exist in the future?

Each image in *Perpetual Amazonia* is bordered by a series of numbers, known as Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates, which denote the featured plant's exact location on the surface of the world, down to the nearest square-metre subplot in the reserve. A sign asks us to 'become collective stewards' of the area; as well as making a donation, visitors can travel to the particular subplots and participate in the conservation of the plants.



Is this art, or part of a straightforward fundraising strategy, similar to sponsoring a child's education in a developing country? The Ortas have spent two decades producing work that happily blends poetry and practicality in a similar way. In one project, they recycled scraps of leftover food from a market to make jams and preserves. In another they designed prototype water-purification units from everyday objects. While not all the prototypes could properly function, the point was to inspire individuals, corporations and governments to take responsibility for and think creatively about water conservation.

### Collaborating for change

The Ortas' practice has become increasingly multidisciplinary and global – before the Amazon it was the Antarctic, and next up is Egypt and Singapore. And they are keen to collaborate with figures from other fields. *Perpetual Amazonia* is a partnership with scientists from the Environmental Change Institute at Oxford University.

'Collaboration with other disciplines is a way to engage with different audiences,' Lucy Orta expands. 'Our idea is to spread out as much as possible. Art can help because it has a visual attraction, but there's no way that any artist can do it on their own – we can't get our message across half the time, so we need as much as possible to engage with others.'

They travelled to the rainforest as part of a group expedition organised by [Cape Farewell](#), who help artists, writers and other cultural figures respond to climate change. Eco poet Mario Petrucci has collaborated with the Ortas in a double-screen projection piece in the centre of the gallery, also called *Amazonia*, adding his words to their filmed images of the Amazon. 'Mario will publish his poetry and do readings, so the work will reach out to another audience, and we plan to send the video off to film festivals. We see it as a team effort. We're all working together for this issue.'

The museum commissioned the exhibition to coincide with the International Year of Biodiversity in 2010, together with other events such as the museum's Big Nature debate, held on 7 October, where members of the public discussed threats to biodiversity with an expert panel, in person and live online. Minds are being concentrated in time for the Nagoya conference at the end of the month, when countries meet to set targets for managing biodiversity.

### A sense of emergency

Fears have grown that the Amazon rainforest is close to the point of no return. Its burning in order to clear land for agriculture creates a vicious circle of climate change, with carbon released into the atmosphere and a means of sequestering carbon simultaneously lost. The subsequent increase in temperatures make forest fires more likely, as well as droughts that reduce tree species. At current estimates, half the Amazon will be destroyed by the end of the century, along with a huge variety of birds, mammals and insects. The Manú Biosphere Reserve is home to 11 primates and more than 400 species of birds, some of them already close to extinction, such as the blue-headed macaw and black spider monkey.

This sense of emergency is reflected in the piece that opens the exhibition: *Madre de Dios - Fluvial Intervention Unit*. A canoe has been carved out of wood to resemble those seen by the Ortas on the Madre de Dios, a tributary of the Amazon river, and it carries to safety hundreds of tiny model animals. Life-size, life-saving buoyancy rings flank this mini Noah's Ark. On an adjacent wall are drawings in ink and watercolour for similar planned sculptures about survival, in which parachutes and life-guards protect rare species of animals and plants.

Emergency aids and objects have long been a part of the artist's repertoire. Lucy Orta gained prominence in the 1990s with her series *Refuge Wear*, where overcoats, backpacks and sleeping bags were designed so that they could become tents for those in need of shelter. In 2007, the British-born artist and her Argentine husband created *Antarctic Village*, an installation of 50 domed tents on the ice of Antarctica that resembled a refugee camp, as a symbol of the plight of migrants.

The canoe sculpture is a metaphor for the journey the Ortas made in the Amazon, and the journey they hope visitors will make in the exhibition. The show also represents a journey for the staff at the museum, such as the conservators in the palaeontology department who helped the Ortas cast dinosaur bones for a series of bright-white porcelain sculptures.

'The bones themselves are not white, they're brown – they're a slushy colour. We tried to explain to the department what we intended while they were making the casts and they said, 'they're just bones, how can you make those into an artwork?'' recalls Lucy Orta. 'But now they're astonished by the finish, as the fossils have become these amazing objects. You get a definition of shape and contour in the porcelain that you don't get with the fossils.' These seductive ceramic pieces, printed with small drawings of living insects, remind us that species we now value will soon also be extinct, unless we act.

**Lucy + Jorge Orta: *Amazonia*, 6 Oct–12 Dec 2010, Natural History Museum. For information, visit [www.nhm.ac.uk](http://www.nhm.ac.uk)**

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