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## Best Ochigbo and John Oyedemi's idiomatic reflections on their creative oeuvre surrounding climate change

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### Abstract

Best Ochigbo and John Oyedemi's idiomatic reflections on their creative oeuvre derive from the search for distinct aesthetic patterns that epitomize their individualistic expression. Artists over the centuries were inspired to evolved creativity that address each epoch. Today there are several outcry against the effect of climate change in varied perspectives. Hence the need to add our voices through the lens of our artistic altruistic visualization in non-representational aesthetic idioms. Efforts by individuals through protests, media hues and policies that are left unimplemented creates a yawning gap on the issue of climate change. This paper's objectives include: revealing the philosophy and techniques of the two artists, and the creation of wholly abstract visual relationships of a planet on edge. The methodology employed is the practice based studio approach. The findings reveals that the works explored the eco-system and the effect of climate change on our planet. Both artists have contributed their visual nuances as contribution to point to climate action. The paintings hold a place in an art historical paradigm as art communicates a universal language. It is recommended that every effort to mitigate the climate change effect should be put in place.

**Keywords:** Artist, creative, climate change, painting, pareidolia

### Introduction

Every artistic development at different times are a product of sources of inspiration. Artists the world over have been inspired by events, forms, colours and generally elements that have possibilities to be explored. Artists' quest for new idiom of expression often birth movements, techniques and genre. Oftentimes, the search for new interpretation of events takes precedence over identifiable reality. The stereotyped nature of art movements made it prevalent to explore other ways of expression. Also the changing environment and peoples are challenging the thinking of artists to begin to use different materials and mediums. Artists do not totally discard the ideas of previous knowledge but build on them for altered perspectives. Paul Cezanne (1839-1906) and Piet Mondrian (1872-1944), could easily be attributed to modernism in art. Hence the influence on the creative oeuvre of Best Ochigbo and John Oyedemi.

This in essence make artists to be sensitive to stimuli in the environment they are and locate what makes for exploration. Examples are; Henri Matisse (1869-1954) a principal artist of the Fauvist group, was influenced by impressionism and postimpressionism, high decorative motifs and brilliantly coloured art. Andre Masson (1896) an abstract surrealist was influenced by early 1920 cubism of Juan Gris (1887-1927), he experimented with automatism and expressive fantasies without abandoning the structure and space of cubism. The picture planes are often intense with innovative elements that complement the new order and ways of thinking.

However, certain distinguishing characteristics that mark an artist, or a period or culture is what constitute a style. Some other artists make their feelings known through their work to fight a system or to portray prevailing circumstances. Artists during or after the world war I and all for instance, began to paint distinctly with new directions which were mostly influenced by political considerations and events of the time. Guernica, 1937 regarded as a powerful political statement by Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), is an example of a painting influenced by tragedies of war. Reliance on peculiar experiences and vision encountered directly or indirectly affected practice then.

The creative oeuvre of John Oyedemi and Best Ochigbo lay credence to explorations that relate with the ecosystem and climate change as it affects humanity. Oyedemi reveals the usual perceptual aesthetic experiences of the coral reefs and region, while Ochigbo relates with emerging danger posed by climate change that is altering the ecosystem. At the time of growing up in the 70s in Jos. Plateau state, Nigeria Ochigbo and Oyedemi were oblivious of climate change, as it was not given any global attention due to its obscure nature. Glaciers melting and giving rise to ocean levels as a result of global warming was not a concern, but a prediction. Going down to the streams and rivers, one could see fishes and also other aquatic life in an interrelationship of sort, creating possibilities for artistic exploration. The disruptions of ecosystem by man, and aquatic elements that the resultant effect on societies evoked a nostalgia which Ochigbo and Oyedemi sought to represent in their paintings. Young (2016) avers that the world already experiences extreme storms because of climate change, and cities will experience even more flooding that is exacerbated by human actions. The aim of this treatise is based on a vision to build climate change resilience through art.

Danto's theory which claims that art must be about something to qualify it as a necessary condition of art is apt for this review and reflections of Ochigbo and Oyedemi's artistic exploits, as art is a language of sorts (Ochigbo, 2015)<sup>[11]</sup>. The discourse focuses on influence, Ochigbo and Oyedemi's creative oeuvre, confetti.

### Influences

Artist's influences on each other could be overwhelming in studio practice. Oyedemi is influenced by artists who created works with fluidity that challenged the established tradition of rigidity. Some of these artists used a combination of colours that represent aquatic life with inherent aesthetic possibilities for conceptual painting. Some of these include; Henry Matisse (1869-1954), Paul Klee (1879-1940), and Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944). In Nigeria, despite scanty information concerning artists who attempted the use of aquatic forms as a source of inspiration in painting, two artists were identified - Rukeme Noserime (b. 1959) and Tayo Adenake (b.1954) who developed a direction that combines different elements to arrive at a peculiar expression.

Ochigbo's inspiration on climate change painterly exploration derives from the inexplicable phenomenon based on the process of exploration, development, and understanding of different artistic currents and experiences while as a student at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. The Zaria art school has a lot to offer students because of the concept of free expression, where trainees are giving room to explore independently. It is common to see splashing and splatter technique by students like Mu'azu Mohammed Sani (b. 1958) GaniOdutokun (1946-1995) whose liquidized technique has influence on generations of artists. A direct encounter with Odutokun brings out the best in any student. According to Aondofa (2020)<sup>[11]</sup>, Gani's artworks explore philosophical concepts about "accident and design; fragments, and the unbalanced equilibrium. This accounts for the resultant effect of pareidolia in Ochigbo's paintings.

Artists attempt to create art pieces that suggest dynamics of colour relationships in a pictorial illusion. Different approaches are evident in a generation or genre depending on the ideas to be expressed. This is depicted in cultural

expressions that describe direction of artists approach to achieving pictorial illusion. That is, artists' manipulation of colours on canvas is usually with intentions of depicting situations directly or indirectly related to them and in another instance reporting or documenting events.

John Oyedemi and Best Ochigbo's pictorial illusions are examined in accordance to relationships that connects them in the course of training at the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, and by the sheer coincidence of their birthplace. The flow of relationship and friendship which is demonstrated in academic and practice is worthy of note. The two artists are hereby presented in their creativeness to reveal their philosophy and technique.

John Oyedemi (b.1966), in 1993, started an expedition on aquatic forms as sources of inspiration in painting. This was derived from a study that embodies the structural characteristic of aquatic forms as well as looking at various possibilities for adaptation and utilization in painting. The motivating factor for this direction, body of work constitute thought from within the potentials of using aquatic forms for expression. In exploring aquatic elements for mode of expression, it becomes necessary to fantasize with nature, images that depict or are found to create a dream world. The artistic diversity at the time encouraged a wide range of search for styles, techniques, and conceptual approaches in a perspective that shows artist's exposure and experiences. Different perspective of individuals and collective objectives in training facilitates shaping of artistic currents in terms of arrangements, exploration and development of ideas. It exposes the artist to deeper understanding of elements in space and how relationship of mediums can bring about harmony.

### Exploration of aquatic forms as sources of inspiration in Painting

Oyedemi's exploration started with various studies of aquatic forms, identifying specifically suitable patterns for painting. The study started out in 1991-1992 at a stream in Afaha Oku Village behind University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State and Bakana, a riverine area in Rivers State where the inspiration for this study derives. Sketches prepared from these areas consisted mainly of fish, waterlilies, and mangrove among other elements. Series of drawings executed from studying movement of elements and interrelationship of different patterns were used to create schemes. It is recorded that there are over a million different species of aquatic forms available for exploration by artists. These patterns inspire different design structure in an artist to create themes that are a representations of certain events or aesthetic order.

Mitchell (2023)<sup>[8]</sup> asserts, the world's oceans comprise a wide variety of aquatic habitats that range from coral reefs and oyster beds to salt marshes and mangroves. Aquatic habitats are water areas that inhabit the fish species and other aquatic organisms, along with adjoining land region that includes vegetation. These classes of vertebrates and invertebrates constitute the inspirational source for artists to explore. Generally, patterns and shapes of the coral region are an attraction for artistic consideration. In this context fish and plant (mangrove) which proliferate in estuaries and lagoon is desirable for this expedition. The environment of mangrove spidery like roots create a playground for birds, fishes and other animals. They provide a safe ground and

irreplaceable wild life habitats, a place of interaction between water, fish, plants and other aquatic life.

Artists have recorded their experiences from time immemorial in classical period to present times where conceptualism holds sway. Academic and Intellectual input are changing the narratives by the outcome of each exercise, giving room to different prospects. Early artistic representation of aquatic forms in painting according to Moyle and Moyle (1991) <sup>[10]</sup>, fish have been subject of works of art for at least 14000 years and appeared in primitive art from many cultures. In ancient civilizations of the West, fishes were a constant, frequent motifs. Fish designs in ancient Egypt were common and showed little change for 1500years. Other examples abound of the use aquatic forms (animals and plants) for decoration on walls of palaces, private homes, inner chambers, courts and cultures as posited by Myers (1977) <sup>[17]</sup>. In Egypt, representations using aquatic forms date back to about 14000BC.

The search for a new subject that would be meaningful is a great task, the motifs mostly found are used to encapsulate the structural characteristics' of aquatic forms. The artistic current of times has a way of shaping styles and techniques, analysis of symbols and motifs to make statements directly or indirectly to an audience in coded language. Wallace and Fargion (2015) <sup>[14]</sup> claimed that in many places in West Africa, people have invented patterns and symbols as a means of visual communication. In Cross River State of the south-south region of Nigeria, traditional artists employee nsibidi symbols to decorate gourds, houses, textiles, pottery and other items.

A cursory look at Oyedemi's approach to the exploration of aquatic forms begins with a restructuring of elements in a new spatial environment of design that inspires new strange thought in the mind. Though as stated earlier, there are over a million identified aquatic forms that offer painting possibilities, however, the selection of the aquatic forms with aesthetic desirable qualities was based on personal judgement which is scoped to principally cover fish, mangrove, water-lilies and sea weeds.

The development stage is a combination of series of studies of inter-marriage of forms of fish, mangrove and other elements in Plates 1-6. The processes of carrying out studies of this nature require understanding of how to manipulate abstract patterns to achieve poetic visual language. The elements relating to aesthetic aquatic qualities were studied in drawing and transformed to lose their natural state with less emphasis on representational rendering. Thin and thick organic lines were expressively used to loosely define forms of fishes and other elements. Conceptual approach was desirable which requires distortion, a bit of abstraction and reality as a result of addition and subtraction with flexibility. Colour exploration was needed to exasperate certain feelings on the beholder that may not necessary represent the real life situations. In another instance certain colour creates a sensation of fantasies that are found in aquatic life. The palette used is inspired by patches of representation of marine colours in the coral region based on observation. The blues, reds, purples, greens, yellows, whites and other colours are significant in this respect. Mediums such as oil, acrylic and water colour were explored due to flexibility and versatility. The dead fishes on the seashore an oil spillage in the oceans, and gas flaring are all a result of climate change

and how it affects aquatic life. This is where Oyedemi has contributed to climate resilience through his paintings, has he oscillates between the beauty and orgy of aquatic life.



**Fig 1:** John Oyedemi Mangrove 1994, Oil on canvas. 75x76cm



**Fig 2:** John Oyedemi Fish 1994, Oil on canvas. 89x122cm



**Fig 3:** John Oyedemi Friends 1994 oil on canvas. 76x76cm



Fig 4: John Oyedemi Congregation.1995,oilon canvas. 89x122cm



Fig 5: JohnOyedemi Composition 3'1995 oil on canvas 70x89cm



Fig 6: John Oyedemi Composition 1, 1995 oil on canvas 70x80.5cm

### Ochigbo Best Simon b.1958

Ochigbo, a pioneer explorer of pyro-technique in painting, and an abstract expressionist was in recent times inspired by climate change. Ochigbo sought to recreate patterns identifiable in a giving environment. Ochigbo was taught by

some of the most prolific lecturers and artists, among whom are Lukas Bentu (1939-1996), Tyrone Geter (b.1945), GaniOdotokun (1946-1995) and Jerry Buhari (b.1959).

Climate change has become a concern to everyone without a predictable course, thereby evolving an alteration in atmospheric condition and also affecting the entire ecosystem. Technological advanced and developed nations in America, Asia, Australia, are daily affected by the effects on their economies of raging wild fires, flooding, earthquakes, typhoons and many other disasters. Natural indices have become adverse to give rise to ocean levels resulting to flooding, erosion, devastations, and poverty, farmlands submerged even in Niger Delta, Nigeria, and in many other places. Ochigbo, advancing his contribution to climate change submits; 'I feel the pain, anguish, emptiness and nakedness of the earth and its neglect'. Olatunbosun (2021) <sup>[12]</sup> stated that "by 2030, there will be reduction submit; of course species will be lost and there will be speed in global warming, just nine years' time. By 2040, greenhouse gas will be many times more potent than carbon dioxide, accelerating climate change" Accordingly, Ochigbo avers; my works address planet on edge-flooding, rising temperature, wildfire, drought, hunger and deprivation. My works are expressed in pareidolia as climate change is an inexplicable and invisible phenomena.

Undefinable patterns created by unpredictable climate change are inspiring artistic contemplation and exploration. Climate change is also giving concern to muses, a situation that is bringing more voices to bear on the problems the earth is confronted with. Artists are seen to be using elements of design to make statements and contribute to discourse on global issues. Artists create images that illustrate the effect of global warming, desertification, erosion amongst others.

Ochigbo's pareidolia exploration express his ideas and emotions, with aesthetic qualities that possess a visual language that addresses climate change as a tool to draw world attention to the devastating effect. Ochigbo utilizes visual elements of lines, colours, shapes, texture and tones into expressive patterns to create wholly abstract visual relationships of the supernatural phenomena. The art as encapsulated here is meant to contribute and assist in the creation of a vibrant beautiful ecosystem, to enhance climate resilience and improve efforts geared towards a reversal of global emissions that have been on the rise.

This is the artists' way of adding visual nuances as contribution to point to climate action. Though a silent communication, the artists present a visual vocabulary of the pains felt, as words are not enough to describe the pains, grieving imagined loss and partly solving existential mysteries. While leveraging on art as a communication tool. Ochigbo's paintings, a discourse on climate change was inspired by Pareidolia. Seeing things varies by individual interests and experiences play a part (Earthskey. <https://earthskey.org/human-world/seeing-things-that-aren't-there>: 2023).

Ochigbo's exploration is academically tasking, the abstract formation created by juxtapositions of free flow of colours, randomly using pen and other mediums to outline images. Sometimes complexity results to describe complex nature of societal problems. At other times the artist and the audience are caught in a state of pareidolia when interrogating a piece of painting such as Ochigbo's unintended images begins to form. According to Wilner (2021) <sup>[15]</sup>, in art history, we

sometimes discover hidden images within a picture and conduct a subjective introspective analysis of the motivation behind these images'. Creatives in a bid to express themselves search for new sources of inspiration whether in imagination, dream or real-life physical dimension containing messages. Appearances of patterns on objects for instance gives a clue to the difference between artistic development and others. The artist sees what others necessary may not notice either through a search or random appearances due to sensual ability to see. By experience, one of the ways is through being quiet in the spirit to hear and see. This is personal to individuals whose spiritual awakening and understanding makes them portray their artistic adventure in a way that make others ask what a particular artwork expresses.

Like Ochigbo, Diane Burko's images of melting glaciers and dying coral reefs are not just pictorially impressive; they have strong emotional impact. His practices involve locating images that represent a thought or practice in another object. The movement in the 60s in environmental art paved the way for other possibilities. It takes a high level of creativity to see through in an atmosphere of pareidolia. In a bid to express inner quest, artists delight in exploring their environment for aesthetic patterns. Evans (2022) [3], states that the climate crisis is the greatest threat of our generation. The medium of art is used to raise awareness of the climate emergency. The search for solution to climate change did not leave the artists out of contributing on this subject. They are responding in many ways with their art practices and according to Heatley 2021 [5], more and more creatives are using a form of activism and striving to raise awareness about rising sea levels, increasing temperatures, deforestation, plastic pollution, and more.

Ochigbo's creative processes is often guided by principles that are adaptable for the success of a painting. The exploration of different idea processes of his work has shown that there can be discovery of more possibilities that are sublimable.

In his methodological processes of colour application, pigments are poured or splashed on canvas and allowed to flow freely creating accidental design and controlled in certain instances. Dark value is applied to outline the labyrinth of wavy formation that connect each other in a complex aesthetic weave. Ochigbo's paintings on climate change series can be categorized under what may be termed "abstract of object reality" – (artincontext 2023). Ochigbo's technique is spontaneous pure abstract form often achieved through immersion, pouring, dragging, scribbling and dropping liquidized paint across a surface. This typical exercise of a metaphoric depiction in painting is of occurrences caused by human activities. Poetic colour language has been a paradigm in painting by artists who are involved in subjective fields. The poetic liberty to express and converse with the audience in a colour setting or culture is attribute of an expressionist artist. Ochigbo's paintings are represented in Plates 7-12.



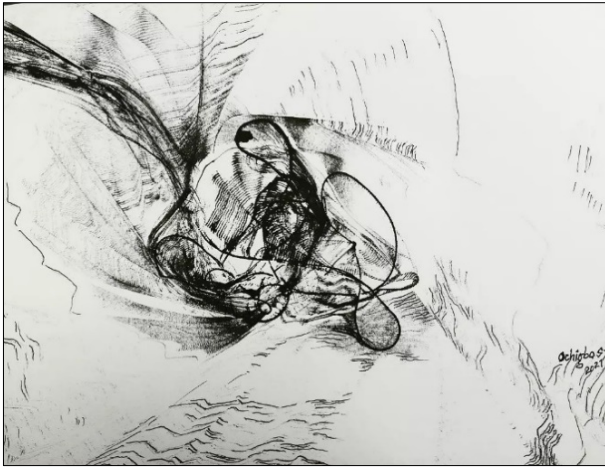
**Fig 7:** Best Ochigbo, 'Typhoon' 2022. Liquidized oil on paper



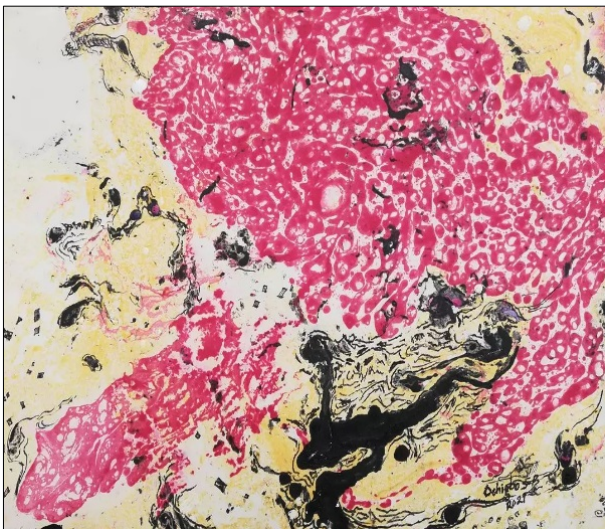
**Fig 8:** Best Ochigbo. 'Climate change innuendo'. 2021. Liquidized oil on paper



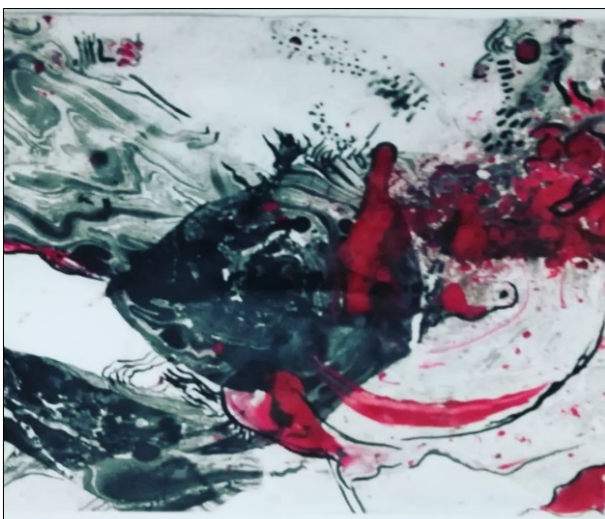
**Fig 9:** Best Ochigbo. "Thinking Mind", 2022. 32x41cm 32x51cm. Ink and watercolour



**Fig 10:** Best Ochigbo Vulnerable Sea Creature 2023. 39x41cm. Ink on paper



**Fig 11:** Best Ochigbo Wild fire and smoke' 2022. 52cmx36cm. Liquidize oil paint



**Fig 12:** Best Ochigbo "Heatwaves", 2023. 29x41cm. Liquidize oil paper

### Artistic interaction with symbols and imagery

Artists like Ochigbo and Oyedemi may have been subsumed in psychology, subconscious world of imagination and real realms. Blackie (2009) [2] contends that "we are each haunted by different images, poems, works of art; we each

resonate with different myths or fairy tales, and with different archetypal characters within them" According to Oloidi (2016) [13], many factors have influenced the history of painting-geography, religion, national characteristics, historical events and the development of new materials, all help to shape the artist's vision. Throughout history, painting has mirrored the changing world and our ideas about it.

The symbolic interaction results from juxtaposition of abstract elements in space. This perspective is common in practices that alludes to communal meetings of these elements in spatial relationship to create design. Every design results by the use of symbolic images that convey messages and invoke idealistic emotional connotations. Meaning designated to such may be subjective interpretation with duality of purpose. That is why certain artistic practices found in using symbolic images to convey ideas may in a way usually give the audience an understanding different from the intended one by the artist. Hickey (2009) [6] in 'the vehicle of communicating reality' posits that symbol embodies an idea and should not be mistaken for reality itself being the final term or for which or what the symbol refers.

In different settings, artists are communicators of certain ideas about now and the future, portray societal ideals, community setting, political and social mythology in a poetic manner. Artistic imagination can also be found in a dream world environment. Human interaction with images or symbols is not easily understood in a given archetype because it dwells in the realms of dreams, mysteries, imagination or mythology. Imagination can be like fantasy without specific destination, with fluctuation that undulates, blown as a tide of the ocean, swinging in different direction, and fantasies creating images. Fantasies were always drawn by what we see and experience. Creatives think differently and are prone to experiences which are created and retained, sustained in a creative environment for a long time. Ideas realized from stimuli in an environment is explored through rigorous studio practice. In the studio, images for exploration are developed in real /specific representation or in quasi-abstract. According to Blackie (2009) [2], what if they come to us as psych pomp, a beautiful old word of Greek origin which means soul guide? How then do we learn to listen to them to see them, and work with them? It might seem like a radical idea, but it is one with a long history. This is what defines Ochigbo and Oyedemi's vision in their confetti as they build on their diversity of creative oeuvres.

### Conceptual Lines

Abstract painters do not only use line as a method of representing imagery, but also as a way to bring perspective and dimension into undefined fields, to inhabit space, or sometimes to challenge it (IdeelArt <https://www.ideelart.com> .2016).

Line is one key element in the paintings in this paper as represented in plates 1-12. Oyedemi and Ochigbo's thoughts are encapsulated in pieces of artwork in which each one shows conceptual accentuated flowing lines in different focal directions. The encirclement with swathes of lines highlights colour patterns in a convention of the cubists and conceptual judgement of artistic conversation. The fluid lines flow in organic formation from one end to another, vertical and horizontal and other haphazard directions.

Winding and curve thick and thin lines, lyrical movements that define thoughts of the artists and leaves the audience asking for interpretation of their pieces. The twelve paintings capture the energy that significantly exhume the essence of the two artists' multifarious representations.

### Conclusion

Considering the global challenges facing humanity, the importance of Nigerian artists bracing up in art practice that contribute opinions to challenges on climate change and adopting and exploring different sources of inspirations cannot be underestimated. Both Ochigbo and Oyedemi derive their inspirations from aesthetic qualities inherent in aquatic life and conceptualization in pareidolia. It also embodies a variety of forms created through spontaneous interplay of colours. The two artists sought momentary effects through exploring images that have sensual and visual sensibility in the audience, thus lending their voices through the paradox of visual vocabulary arising from the effect of global warming or differential in weather crisis distortions. One connecting factor to the works reviewed is the use of lines, colours, forms, composition, and theme. The prevalent attributes that suffice in these paintings are the attempt not to create works that bear semblance to real life situation but through distortions- addition and subtraction. It is hereby submitted that the works of Ochigbo and Oyedemi hold a place in an art historical period such as the climate change debacle. These artist explored their individual subjective experiences as reactions about the way they felt about climate change. All the paintings are charged with a significance beyond their physical properties, and are a stimulus through which emotional responses to the climate change debate have been examined through the artists' lens.

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