

## exhibitions



Diego Perez, *Untitled (Yonque)* from the series "Obra Negra," C-print, 2004-06. Courtesy the artist

**CRITERIA**  
at A + D Gallery, Columbia College, Chicago

by James Yood

Green has become the ultimate escapist geopolitical fairytale, the soothing fiction that if I just drop that Perrier bottle into the recycle bin, I've somehow done my share to redress two centuries of systemic human assault on the environment. This extraordinarily intelligent exhibition of work by sixteen artists and artist groups is, as curators Jimena Acosta and Emiliano Godoy tersely put it, "not about green design, ecology, or environmentalism. It's about humanity and its incapability to sustain its habits and culture for future generations. To be precise, it is about the inability to foresee the long-term consequences of industrial development." It's a sobering and—in the best possible way—fairly depressing exhibition, one that convincingly argues that, when it comes to sustainability, not only is the glass half empty, it's replete with muck and poison. It is a position made clear in the brochure essay, the didactics that were liberally sprinkled about the gallery, and in the selection of work itself.

The message is relentless, from Edward Burtynsky's photograph *Oxford Tire Pile No. 5*, Westley, California (1999) with its tens of thousands of stacked used tires piled into literal dunes of nonbiodegradable material that will still be here when the dinosaurs return, to the—in spite of itself!—scintillating video *Controcorrente* (2005), by the Italian collective group goldiechiar, that shows a rainbow of colorful plastic bottles endlessly roiling about in a river whirlpool from which, like a circle of Dante's Hell, they will never escape: token efforts toward ameliorating the



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environment with recycling, renewables, and the like are dwarfed by the overwhelming scale of human consumption patterns.

While change and mutation are “natural” processes—Uli Westphal’s digital photograph *Mutatoes* (2006) coolly charts in color grid form what seem endlessly malformed vegetables, literal freaks of nature that are actually part of how species experiment—the stupendous hunger for fossil fuels and the like that has marked the modern age is part of a system that, as the curators put it, “has reached a level so pervasive that it is rendering nature incapable of recovery.” Dante Busquets’ photograph of Mexico City at night suggests an electric grid stretched to its limits, and the DIY urine-recycling kit by Britta Riley and Rebecca Bray is a witty send-up of gestures toward sustainability. Is Green the new futility, a therapeutic but ineffectual rearranging of deck chairs on the *Titanic*? Acosta and Godoy seem to think so.