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ANASTASIA SAMOYLOVA, CLIMATE CRISIS, DOC, MIAMI

Miami's climate crisis

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Published on 6 November 2019



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Anastasia Samoylova's photobook *FloodZone* captures the insidious progression of climate change in Florida's southeastern city

Anastasia Samoylova moved to Miami, US, in 2016 during the hottest summer on record. As the photographer settled into her surroundings she observed an unsettling dissonance within them. The city's tropical climate and luxe exteriors disguise a darker, more ominous reality — the gradual but growing impact of the climate crisis on Miami's urban structure. "The land is becoming increasingly unstable. Profound changes are already happening, and there are more to come," says Samoylova, referencing the rising sea levels, hurricanes and major storm surges affecting the area.

Miami attracts affluence. *Forbes Magazine* ranked the city the sixth most popular destination for the super-rich. The flood of wealth and demand for luxury housing has contributed to a burgeoning real estate market — new condominiums are constantly appearing in areas vulnerable to flooding and property prices continue to rise. For now, the effects of extreme weather are tolerable but they are set to intensify. A 2018 report by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration shows that by 2070 the city may flood every day. "Select roads and sidewalks are being raised to keep the businesses operating," observes Samoylova, "but beyond this, it is down to individual efforts to prepare for and retreat from the waters."

"What is it like, mentally, to live at the forefront of climate change? The dread, the anxiety, the worry, the disavowal"

— Anastasia Samoylova

Samoylova observed this contradiction — a disturbing refusal to acknowledge an acute and largely irreversible problem. "The uber-rich think they can escape anything. But climate change is the ultimate leveller," she says, "yes, it will affect the poorest most but nobody will be able to remain in a bubble". Her images, which were taken over the course of three years and are now published as a photobook *FloodZone*, capture the transience and fragility of a city unable to acknowledge its impermanence. In one frame water engulfs an intricate structure with marble floors, in another, a row of palm trees collapse onto a condominium's facade.

David Company considers this reality in the text that accompanies the publication. "Is disaster more easily imaginable than the painful steps that might avert it?" he asks. "Yes, is the horrifying answer. Disaster will come of us doing nothing, while the painful steps would — *will* — have to be taken actively, and by us all." In a sense, Miami is a microcosm of the global climate crisis. A place in which those with wealth and power still refuse to acknowledge the severity of what will come.

Below, Samoylova discusses how the project came to fruition and photography's role in raising awareness about the climate crisis.



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How long did you work on the project and what was your process?

It's taken about three years to bring *FloodZone* to the point where I'm happy to publish a first book of the project. For the first two years, I didn't force any form on it at all. It was simply a growing body of observational images, often made while exploring on foot during road trips, in Florida and around Miami specifically. I then stepped back and started to see what was preoccupying me, and from there I could pursue it much more consciously and emphatically.

Why is the climate crisis such an important subject to explore?

The climate crisis is global but each locality experiences and comprehends it differently. In many places, there is a certain state of denial about the issue. Perhaps it is happening unexpectedly fast, so the first instinct is to reject such reality as a myth and live hoping that it won't affect you. It is telling that the younger generation is at the forefront of the climate change movement: baby boomers and Generation X seem to be barely involved. This shortsightedness has to be addressed.



© Anastasia Samoylova

“Is disaster more easily imaginable than the painful steps that might avert it?”

– David Campany



© Anastasia Samoylova

Is photography an effective medium for raising awareness about environmental issues? Does it possess the power to incite change, and, if so, why and how?

Yes and no. On the one hand, photography makes visible anything it captures, and by that alone, awareness can be raised on some level. Disturbing images may lead to positive action: after seeing what plastic does to marine animals' bodies in widely circulating images from beaches in Florida and elsewhere, I do see an increasing number of places in Miami banning plastic. There are also a lot more people, both

locals and tourists, scouring beaches for harmful rubbish. Once in a while one exceptional photograph can ignite an entire movement, or at least a generational consciousness, as was the case with the famous Earthrise image.

On the other hand, there is the problem of desensitising audiences, creating the reverse effect of people turning away from the issue simply because it becomes white noise. It happens often with the reporting of disasters: repeating motifs so appalling they are hardly relatable. Such images are viewed for the shock value; they are sellable and similar in effect to pornography or fast food for cheap satisfaction.



© Anastasia Samoylova

Environmental photography is associated with a straightforward, documentary approach. David Company writes about how your series is devoid of catastrophic images. Why did you want to capture the slow and insidious progression of climate breakdown? How do you think your approach can affect viewers?

You can think about it in the way we think about 'weather' and 'climate change'. Weather is the big events. Sudden inundations like tornadoes. Climate change is an incremental advance. I'm interested in the incremental and how that registers psychologically. What is it like, mentally, to live at the forefront of climate change?

The dread, the anxiety, the worry, the disavowal. Pictorially that is a challenge, I think, and for me, it meant looking for telling details that are there but often overlooked. The small things that can become symbols, or metaphors of bigger things. It might be mould creeping across a built structure; or the ragged edge of one of those super-slick CGI images that cloak construction sites. Leaves in a swimming pool after a hurricane. Photography is inexact and it is at its most powerful when it accepts that and gives the viewer room to think.

How have people reacted to the series?

The response has been very positive so far because of the need for different ways of thinking about climate change and how to document it. The novelist Jonathan Franzen recently wrote in *The New Yorker* about the necessity of giving up on the fantasy that climate change can be halted and reversed. It can't. It can be slowed, but we are going to have to get used to living with major and ongoing changes. I think this mindset calls for a rethink about how we picture things. I've published a number of portfolios and exhibited small groups of prints. I have some solo shows of the project coming up soon, and the book has around 85 carefully sequenced images. I aim to make images that stand-alone, but I'm fascinated with how they resonate with one another. So I'm very curious to see what the reaction will be to these larger presentations of FloodZone.

FloodZone is published by Steidl. Sameylova will be discussing the project, alongside Massimo Vitali and Roger Ballen, at Paris Photo on Saturday 09 November 2019 at 3:00 pm on Le Balcon d'honneur.





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