

Observatory

# Nikki Lindt

The artist celebrates a world that is slipping away

By Oliver Roeder

**N**ikki Lindt sits in her paint-splattered studio in an old warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, on a sweltering September day. She is surrounded by her work: large acrylics and watercolours that depict the thaw of permafrost in the Arctic. In one, trees in a drunken forest splay worryingly. In another, a thermokarst, a monstrous hollow beneath the surface, spreads its jaws.

These are pictures of a destabilised world, and at their centre is loss. Lindt sits amid them, in a T-shirt and sandals, and recalls with some sadness a life filled with nature. She was born in the Netherlands and raised in rural Pennsylvania. “I was very connected to the outdoors,” she says. “That’s where I spent all my time.” Lindt is now trying to reclaim that time.

Her motivation is “solastalgia”, a term coined in the 2000s by the philosopher Glenn Albrecht to describe reactions to climate change. Like nostalgia (*nóstos* meaning homecoming; *-algia*, pain), solastalgia (from *sōlācium* meaning comfort) is “the specific form of melancholia connected to lack of solace and intense desolation”. Drought, fire and flood can cause solastalgia, Albrecht wrote, “as can war, terrorism, land clearing, mining, rapid institutional change and the gentrification of older parts of cities”.

Lindt’s paintings, which have been exhibited widely and won her grants and residencies, aren’t maudlin. They’re bright and colourful, like neon Cézannes, and celebrate the world that is slipping away. She describes capturing “the intense vitality” of plants. And despite Albrecht’s coinage, gaps remain in our language. We struggle to express the depths of this problem – poetically, emotionally and politically. “Important gaps,” Lindt says. “Art is really good at getting in those nooks, those uncomfortable places and helping digest that.”

In aid of this artistic patching project, Lindt’s newest work captures the language, the *speech*

of the planet. She has been travelling the world, recording sound, underground.

From a corner of the studio, Lindt pulls out a stack of microphones. There’s the geophone, with an extruding probe, which is often used for seismology, and the hydrophone, a silvery bulb for underwater recording. Then there’s a custom job: a piezoelectric pick-up, like ones used on a musical instrument, threaded through with a long screw. It converts subterranean vibration to voltage.

Lindt aims to use the captured sound to coin new language, to give voice to the Earth. And she believes that the medium may catalyse empathy, consensus and stewardship. “If you have a friend, and you find out something new about this friend, you might feel closer after that,” she says.

The Arctic north had always held great appeal for Lindt. She contacted Arctic research organisations; a painter cold-calling scientists. Lindt became artist-in-residence at Abisko Scientific Research Station in Sweden in 2022, and at the Toolik Field Station in northern Alaska in 2023. There she flew to thermokarsts in a helicopter, armed with recording equipment and bear spray.

“It was a world of wonder – I couldn’t stop listening to these sounds,” she says of her first experiences listening underground. “I had for years this experience of feeling things dripping between my fingers, this feeling of loss, the places that I knew as a kid were developed, they were gone, things were changing, the weather was changing, all these things that you feel are subtraction.”

I ask Lindt to describe what she heard there. “Stillness,” she says. “Stillness filled with sound.”

The scientists embraced the work. “Art is a unique ‘way of knowing’ nature and engaging with the most complex sustainability challenges of our time,” says Lindsay Campbell, a social scientist with the US Forest Service who worked alongside Lindt. Artists “use modes and methods for sensing the landscape (such as sounds) that connect to emotion and embodiment”.

For Jason Dobkowski, an Arctic researcher at the University of Michigan who listened with Lindt to permafrost, “Getting the chance to hear the shifting ice and flowing water underneath your feet immerses you in a world that may otherwise just be a trendline on a graph.”

For Lindt, sound is about *time*. Audio persists and changes in a way paintings do not. If a painting is a megadose, sound is timed release. “They were beautiful, calming, the sounds I was hearing inside,” she says. “And they just didn’t stop.”

Lindt plays some of the files. One recording from Alaska begins with a familiar, above-ground noise – the fresh rustles and gusts of the outdoors. The audio then moves below the surface.

“Very, like, yeah, very deep,” I say from beneath my headphones. “Sort of, um, a heart – sorry if I’m talking very loud – the sort of, like, heartbeat, really interior kind of, and there’s this sort of like a fast kind of repetition, what is that, do you know?”

“It’s the hitting of tonnes of water drops,” Lindt says. It was the planet melting.

Next, in a recording from Sweden, I hear the seltzer-can buzz of methane evaporating from the permafrost, detailed and bright. It is accompanied by a prehistoric hum and a rumbling howl of, perhaps, a cold bog wind. These are the ultra-sounds of a planet in crisis.

The following week we head into the field to listen live. The field, in this case, is further south, a ravine in the north woods of Central Park, in Manhattan. Armed with a bundle of cords, a recorder and a pair of headphones, we enter the wilderness from the bustle of 103rd Street.

Lindt climbs down some rocks and wades into a pool beneath a waterfall. She dangles two hydrophones into the water by their wires and connects the other ends to the recorder. She dons the headphones, testing for the right spot. We draw many curious looks. Yes, that’s right, ma’am, we’re here to listen to the park.

To the naked ear, the falling water creates a washed-out roar. But within it, the hydrophones reveal subtle structure in the pool and character in the liquid. Eddies swirl between the headphone channels and individual bubbles become players in an aural drama. I listen, speechless.

Lindt climbs out. “There’s a willow over there that I’ve listened to before,” she says.

Carefully into the trunk go the geophone and the piezo screw. Through these wires, Lindt has heard the flow of sap in trees, the scuttle of unseen insects, the wind in the willow.

I hear the tree. I picture the workings of its trunk, its structure drawn in waveform. It acquires an insideness that it didn’t have before, as the thermokarsts had for Lindt in Alaska. I also hear a helicopter, a siren, the footfalls of tourists, my own hand rustling grass.

Amplified audio heightens one’s awareness. The previously unconsidered gains prominence and urgency and even intimacy. This is redoubled by the fact that audio can be layered in a way that images or words cannot. We look at one thing at a time while we hear everything. The result is music.

“So many people see plants as objects and treat them that way,” Lindt says. “Listening is a gateway to realising they’re alive. The sound is in these rocks, in these soils. Everything is affecting everything, it’s this whole mechanism of structure.”

We take off our headphones. The world goes quieter. We pack up the gear, climb underground, get on the subway and rumble home. 

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