

## TOUCHING THE VOID

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MEDFORD - Diane **Burko's** a landscape artist. If that conjures genteel images of ladies in sun hats dappling watercolors on paper, think again.

**Burko** has been called an extreme landscape painter for the way she flies and hikes to remote places to capture her prey: the awesome, frightening aspects of nature. Her paintings and photographs are up at the Tufts University Art Gallery in a show called "Diane **Burko: Flow.**" Aerial views of open-mouthed volcanoes, hissing and glowing with lava, threaten to erupt in your face. Whirling, frothing seas could reach up and drag you into a riptide. These aren't about looking at the landscape. They're about being in it, and being dwarfed by its size, violence, and beauty.

"With Diane, the sites are sublime, remote, extreme," notes Amy Ingrid Schlegel, the gallery's director and curator of the show. "They're not pastoral. They're not about our harmonious relationship with the land."

At 60 years old and probably no more than 5 feet tall, **Burko** is unassuming enough. Born and raised in Brooklyn, and with the accent to prove it, she says she'd never have guessed that she'd grow up to be a daredevil painter, winging over hot volcanoes.

"Girls from Brooklyn don't know from volcanoes," says **Burko**, who was in town from Philadelphia (where she's lived for decades) for the College Art Association conference last month. Funny thing: It was a CAA conference in Los Angeles in the 1970s that first got her in the air.

**Burko** was already painting aerial landscapes, basing them on aerial photos she'd dug up at the US Department of Agriculture. She loved the abstract patterns she saw in farmland.

In Los Angeles she met legendary light artist James Turrell at a party, and since he was from Arizona, she mentioned that she had a show coming up at Arizona State University.

"I said, 'They're going to take me to the Grand Canyon,' " **Burko** recounts. "He said, 'You need to fly in. If you want, I'll fly you in.' "

Within weeks, **Burko** was airborne, with Turrell as her pilot. "We flew all around the Painted Desert and Lake Powell. We flew under bridges, and he made me hold the wheel," **Burko** says with a delighted shiver.

Since then, she's mostly painted from her own photographs although even in this show, there are seething lava images based on US Geographical Survey shots. This is the first exhibition of her work that also features her photos, high-quality digital reproductions called Iris prints, which she rigorously puts through Photoshop.

"There's a similar level of abstraction in the Iris prints and the paintings," says Schlegel. "Both create light and dark contrasts and accentuate forms. Diane doesn't see a distinction between abstraction and representation. Everything for her is rooted in a bodily experience, whether she is leaning out a Cessna or standing by a waterfall."

**Burko** laughs at the idea of being an "extreme" artist.

"I don't snowboard," she says. "It's always a Cessna 172. You need the wings above the window" to photograph below. But **Burko** and her husband, landscape architect Richard Ryan, also took pontoon planes in Alaska. "That was fun," she says. "We landed for lunch in a virgin lake in the Valley of 10,000 Smokes."

Then there was the chopper in Hawaii. "I got a helicopter guy from the volcano observatory," **Burko** recalls. He took the door off so she could lean out.

"You don't want to put your camera too far outside," she notes. "The wind will pull it away."

Not all her works take an aerial view. "When I'm not flying over landscape, I'm in it," the artist says. "I flew in Iceland, and I walked and climbed."

She and Ryan went there anticipating glacial lakes. Then they heard about the waterfalls and went looking for one.

"It was on the map, but nobody really knew where it was," she says. "We took the car to a dead end. There was a farm, but no waterfall. We found another road, and hailed a guy on a motorcycle, a German guy with a big map. 'I was just there,' he said. He told us we had to open a gate. . . . We still saw absolutely nothing.

"Then," she says, "suddenly, there it was."

And here it is: "Aldeyjarfoss #2," a rock that seems itself to be fluid, cut through by white, plummeting rapids. It's representational, but there's also a balance of forms, a harmony of brushwork that evidences an abstract painter at work.

"Everywhere you look, there's an abstract painting," **Burko** marvels.

Some of **Burko's** travels have been more cosmopolitan. She once spent six months in Giverny, painting in Monet's garden.

"It was like dying and going to artist's heaven," **Burko** recalls. Well, so to speak. It turns out Monet is not **Burko's** favorite painter.

"I didn't love Monet, but I learned to really respect him," she says. "He was smart about where he went to paint. Look at his paintings of Belle Isle on the Brittany coast."

In these paintings, the sea sparkles, couched between rocky outcrops. They have that Impressionist quality of light and choppy brushwork that characterizes Monet. They also have an earthy, elemental feeling that resonates with **Burko**.

"For me, that's it," **Burko** concludes. "That's the total experience."

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