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## *Seeing Glacial Time: Climate Change in the Arctic*

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Exhibition schedule: [Tufts University Art Gallery](#), Medford, MA, January 30–May 18, 2014



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*Seeing Glacial Time: Climate Change in the Arctic*. Installation view. Image courtesy Tufts University Photography; Alonso Nichols..

Curated by Amy Ingrid Schlegel, director of galleries and collections at Tufts University, *Seeing Glacial Time: Climate Change in the Arctic* asks the question: “how can something as gradual and imperceptible as climate change . . . be narrated or visualized to tell a story?”<sup>1</sup> The exhibition purports to provide one answer: “through artistic representations, rather than scientific visualizations, created with the aid of imaging technologies.” Participating artists Subhankar Banerjee, Olaf Otto Becker, Resa Blatman, Diane Burko, Caleb Cain Marcus, Gilles Mingasson, Joan Perlman, and Camille Seaman have produced new work for the exhibition or are showing Arctic-based work in the Boston area for the first time. There is an informative, free electronic publication, including images of the exhibited works, curatorial texts, and installation views, available at <http://issuu.com/tuftsartgallery/docs/seeingglacialtime>.

Technological advances have increased physical and visual access to some of the most remote regions on the planet, providing both experts and lay people with astonishing views of expansive and untouched natural landscapes, as well as data for studying the effects of climate change. Seven of the eight artists represented in *Seeing Glacial Time* traveled to the Arctic where they employed varied approaches to photography (and video, in one case), “using the camera as a tool of both communication and expression.” Because photography is the primary medium for most of the artists, but for others serves as a visual foundation for work in other forms, the exhibition leaves viewers with a somewhat schizophrenic understanding of photography: is it a vehicle for artistic expression or a source of inspiration? This confusion is introduced at the entrance of the first gallery where an oil-on-canvas

rendition of an iceberg welcomes visitors. However, once I saw the rest of the work by its maker, Diane Burko, I understood the connection, and the small painting provided a meaningful addition to my experience of the exhibition.

Photographs by Seaman and Marcus are displayed in the initial gallery, which contains the exhibition's title wall painted a rich marine blue. (The rest of the gallery walls remain white; overall, the installation is elegant, but not particularly inspired.) Seaman's images of icebergs and glaciers in Greenland are beautiful and dramatic in a National Geographic kind of way, but effective and rewarding. As Schlegel compellingly writes in the accompanying label, the crystal-like forms consisting of ancient ice "evoke a primordial presence" for Seaman, who "analogizes icebergs to a species undergoing extinction." *Breaching Iceberg—Greenland, August 8, 2008* depicts a milky turquoise mass, an anthropomorphized form that brings to mind the wrinkled skin of a breaching sperm whale, against a foreboding gray sky. In another image, an iceberg with an unexpected red mark made by seal blood introduces an invisible human presence into an otherwise pristine natural setting.

Marcus has a more conceptual approach to the representation of ice that pairs well with Seaman's work. His *Portraits of Ice* series (2010–11) consists of abstracted landscapes of terrain transformed by ice, snow, and swirling clouds. According to Marcus, "A photograph can try to express what is not immediately visible to the viewer, moving beyond the exterior surface of the subject and peering into its inner vibration" (artist's website). Schlegel describes the artist as "blurring the line between traditions of landscape photography and painting." Using a consistently low horizon so that the sky dominates the composition, he plays with contrast to atmospheric effect in works such as *Sólheimajökull, Iceland, Plate III* (2010).

The main gallery opens with photographs and paintings by Burko. She has been making aerial photographs since the 1970s, and the selection of close-up fragments of Kronbeen Glacier is from a recent expedition to the high Arctic. Burko uses her photographs, as well as photographic documentation produced by scientists, as source material for her paintings. In the large and intriguing oil-on-canvas *Petermann Heading South (After NASA, 2010–11)* (2012), green landmasses are engulfed in blue sky and obscured by clouds. Unfortunately, when placed next to Burko's painterly interpretations of the Arctic landscape, her photographs look like studies rather than stand-alone works of art.

Mingasson's series *End of Shishmaref*, which documents the endangered way of life of the inhabitants of an island in the western Alaskan Arctic that is succumbing to global warming, feels somewhat formulaic. (A nitpicky observation—the prints are displayed in a grid, but not all the frames are the same size and depth.) The project dates to 2008, and given that the island is predicted to disappear by 2017, a more recent body of work or an update on the inhabitants' current situation would have been more effective at raising the alarm. Becker's work captures the gradual changes in the Icelandic landscape by pairing images made of the same locations and from the same vantage points over time. The passage of time they convey is the most literal representation of the exhibition's title, *Seeing Glacial Time*. Several of the landscapes have been dramatically transformed while others reveal more subtle changes.

The most powerful work in the show is Banerjee's large-scale color photographs. Two aerial views from the series *Oil and the Caribou* (2001–present), taken in the Alaska Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, document the impact of climate change on migratory wildlife. In *Brant with Snow Geese and Chicks* from 2006, the birds' brown-and-white bodies speckle the water, echoing the surrounding terrain in both form and color. Ant-sized caribou following trails in the snow seem to float above a sea of ice in *Caribou Migration I* (2002). A mesmerizing image of corralled reindeer is from the series *Even and the Climate* (2007–present). In the Verkhoyansk Range of Siberia where the photograph was taken, these seemingly mythic creatures are raised to provide sustenance for the indigenous communities. An advocate for Arctic conservation and indigenous human rights, Banerjee holds masters degrees in both physics and computer science, which is somewhat ironic given that his work is the most aesthetically interesting. The e-publication that accompanies the exhibition includes extensive notes by the photographer that informatively and thoughtfully address the effects of climate change in the regions he covers.

Schlegel describes Perlman's video installation *What Remains* (2011) as "a visual elegy to the melancholic beauty of melting ice." She compresses "glacial time" into several segments, including a piece of an iceberg bobbing in the surf and glacial fragments slowly circulating in water. The range of natural colors and exchange of opacity and translucency in the water and ice forms is striking. Perlman first created abstract paintings based on Iceland's geography, and her video work is an extension of her practice of using photographs as source material. Along with the sounds of water in motion, there is music, which feels partially disassociated from the imagery, included as if a soundtrack was required. The ten-minute piece is beautiful and meditative, but seems unresolved as an independent work.

Blatman's relief constructions from her series *Changing Environment* (2013–present) are informed and inspired by montages of appropriated images of natural forms, including icebergs and trees. Because her primary medium is oil paint, her work is the farthest

removed from photography, and feels anomalous here. Schlegel describes the pieces as “apocalyptic,” but the bright colors and glitter that are incorporated into the wall sculptures seem to counter this interpretation.

Schlegel eloquently observes that the artists in *Seeing Glacial Time* “create works suggestive of a melancholic Sublime— affective lamentations on the changing polar environment.” Yet, while there is strong work in the exhibition, much of it does not fully live up to the expectations evoked by the somewhat lofty term Sublime (with a capital “S”), which refers to an aesthetic or spiritual response to overwhelming, usually natural, phenomena so intense that our ability to perceive or comprehend them is temporarily disabled. But if we cannot personally be in the presence of the Arctic environment, the artistic responses on view at least bring us closer to that experience.

For obvious reasons, climate change is a timely and critical topic with particular relevance for a university setting where interdisciplinary voices can coalesce to discuss its consequences. Despite the inconsistency of the work (one of the challenges of a theme-based exhibition), *Seeing Glacial Time* provides a vehicle for art and culture to participate in this global dialogue and expands opportunities for learning about related issues through artistic expression.

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<sup>1</sup> This quote and all that follow are from the exhibition’s introduction and wall labels. The texts are also published in the accompanying online exhibition catalogue: Amy Ingrid Schlegel, *Seeing Glacial Time: Climate Change in the Arctic* (Medford, MA: Tufts University Art Gallery, 2014).

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