Diane Burko: Flow
Amy Ingrid Schlegel

Landscape artist Diane Burko travels to places most people would regard as once-in-a-lifetime vacations or eco-tourist destinations in order to get physically close to the topographical and geological environments she believes will inspire her artistic practice and stoke her imagination. She is not so much an intrepid “discoverer” of places and views unfamiliar to armchair enthusiasts of nature and art, but a maker of paintings, who for the past 15 years has focused primarily on spectacular and panoramic “extreme landscapes” of volcanoes, craters, waterfalls, and glaciers from Alaska, Costa Rica, Iceland, Italy, Hawaii, Sicily, and Washington State depicted from disembodied and aerial vantage points. “I am looking for a visual surprise, a view that takes my breath away,” she says, “a landscape that needs to be painted and challenges my imagination and skills. I enjoy [studying] geology, the history of the earth, exploring the unknown . . . For me, the views as well as the quest stimulate and drive me.” Burko’s panoramic images conjure a sense of grandeur and awe characteristic of the Sublime tradition of landscape painting but are motivated by an experiential rather than religious conviction of what “the spiritual” is and where it resides.

These sequential exhibitions at the Tufts University Art Gallery and the James A. Michener Art Museum focus on the motif of “flow” in a selection of Burko’s paintings and photographs that explore the constant, if not always visible, natural processes and states of lava, as well as water’s transformation among solid, liquid, and ether. Her dovetailed subjects now are the very notion of spatial and temporal natural transformation and an investigation of the fluid boundary between representation and abstraction. To capture her encounters with landscapes near to and far from home, and to aid her studio painting practice, Burko began photographing in 1979, during her first visit to the Grand Canyon, flying with artist Jim Turrell. Her uses of photography are varied: her paintings at times have been scaled up from appropriated photographs (as in her early, monumental photographic realist paintings of remote Alpine peaks in winter or a spectacular, historic volcanic eruption); they have been loosely based on her own embodied photographs in situ (as in her placid, more gestural series of Philadelphia’s Wissahickon Creek images and current work-in-progress from Bucks County, PA, where she is a part-time resident); and they have incorporated elements of both appropriated and her own aerial views of dangerous landscapes inaccessible by foot. By 2001, Burko began to exploit the potential of medium format and digital photography as much more than source material. Her practice today befittingly challenges both the supposed objectivity of photography and the inherent subjectivity of painting (hence the two mediums are juxtaposed as equivalents in the gallery). Instead of inventing landscapes as a reflection of interior states of mind—a much more common practice nowadays in the art world—Diane Burko is an uncommon artist-explorer of the majesty of the land and its psychological and spiritual effects on us.