

From afar the Arctic promises the purest kind of nature. Vast, remote, and scoured by the forces of deep time, it often appears as a blank space in our imagination if not on the map, and thus a place to project all manner of fantasies. We think of the Arctic and we dream about discovering the Northwest Passage, or the remains of ships, or oil, or tragedies of climate change, or even ourselves. The view in which these dreams align, it seems, is nothing more than the landscape itself; frozen and forbidding, it challenges us to go beyond known limits of both body and mind.

This is also the most common view of the Arctic, one informed by familiar histories of colonial exploration. Nature is out there, the story goes, for we humans to discover, exploit, protect, and so forth. This view is so common, in fact, that it is invisible to most of us. Yet calling the Arctic “the edge of the world” only repeats what we’ve already been told about it being far, cold, inhospitable. This is hardly the best way to look at things if we hope to break out of the ideology that has led us here, to our steepening environmental decline.

The group of artists featured in the “Beyond Nature” exhibition makes a stab at seeing things differently. This is a deceptively difficult thing to do, given how bound we are to our patterns of thought and intention. As the French anthropologist Philippe Descola argued in his influential book *Beyond Nature and Culture*, we should not view *nature* as independent systems of objects or laws. In fact, the dualism of nature and culture, in which the Arctic and humans play opposing roles, is a relic that we must cast off. In its place, Descola ventures, we should try to see the continuities between ourselves and the places and things around us. For instance, how is the polar bear’s experience like and not like mine? How is a glacier like and unlike my body?

The works of art in this exhibition invite us to ask such uncommon questions of the Arctic. After all, if anything can help us to see things differently, beyond that standard view of nature, works of art can. The works in this show were all made by participants in the Arctic Circle Residency program during the summer of 2016. Aboard the 150-foot barquentine ship *Antigua*, a crew of painters, playwrights, poets, musicians, and scientists sailed along the coast of Svalbard, an archipelago assailed by the sea north of Norway and east of Greenland. The journey began on the island of Spitsbergen in the town of Longyearbyen, home to the famed Svalbard Global Seed Vault and under 1000 year-round residents. It proceeded to Nordauslandet, an island populated only by ice, lichen, stones shattered by the cold, uncountable tons of washed up plastic, and reclusive animal life. And it continued all the way up to the undulating pack ice at 81 degrees north latitude, further north than most of the ship’s crew had ever been. Even with our companions close by, and the winds and waves slapping the ship, a comforting solitude weighed thick like wool over every moment.

A typical day went like this:

The endless sunlight is interrupted at 8am by the breakfast bell. Residents crack the portholes of their slim berths, brightening their rooms enough to slide by their bunk mate and layer up with socks, long underwear, and goretex. They discuss the day’s itinerary with Sarah Gerats (pictured in the grid of portraits by this author), the expedition leader. Boarding small inflatable

zodiac boats, the ship's four crew members ferry the artists through fjords and bays — some placid, others riddled with crackling icebergs — to a landing spot. The artists then ply their trades, taking photographs, staging performances, or slowly drinking in the air and light and ice for future inspiration. After a hearty lunch back aboard the ship, another landing is arranged. It may include hiking up a high glacial ridge, visiting old fur-trapping cabins, or bobbing before the calving face of a glacier as it sloughs off great shards of ice like marble in a quarry. The sun goes on tracing its circle in the sky as the landing ends, and the residents return to ship for dinner, a warming drink, conversation, and sleep. The ship *Antigua* plows on through the sea under the midnight sun, in search of another harbor for the next leg of the two-week journey. While every day resembles the next, each is remarkably different.

The exhibition, curated by Adam Fung, Assistant Professor of Art at Texas Christian University, presents work from three perspectives: storytellers, poets, and explorers. The categories in which works fall, however, are not entirely self-evident—all the better to unsettle assumptions.

Storytellers

The Storytellers take episodes of their Arctic experiences and transform them into unlikely narratives. Stories fulfill some of our most basic human desires. They teach, they form bonds, and they give voices to things that would otherwise remain mute.

Paint peeling inside the buildings of Pyramiden, an abandoned Soviet-era mining facility, was beautiful on its own, a lovely detail amidst ghostly decay. But in the work of Richard Barlow, the mottled surface of peeling walls become unmoored maps of northern islands. Reducing the layers of color to black and white contours, he created another 100 Arctic archipelagos with blank interior lands. Though it may lie in ruins, the built environment of Pyramiden expands into a greater geography in this series. We are left to wonder what, if anything, lives on the jagged coastlines of Barlow's numerous drawings.

If the contours on Barlow's maps are strongly delineated, the printmaker Kate Collyer reminds us that the edges of these landscapes are usually harder to define. She juxtaposes black and white prints with more delicately toned counterparts, showing us that the way we see mountains and glaciers and seas depends entirely upon the angle from which we look. Small window box frames hold lithographs of small stones from those landscapes. Yet each it is cut from its own sheet and left to hover on a plane distinct from its neighbors. Casting shadows upon one another, the prints levitate in front of the wall, overlapping comfortably and randomly as they might on the shore under the midnight sun.

Annie Ewaskio also shows us the effects of light during an Arctic summer, albeit in more vibrant tones. Her paintings in oil and cold wax sing with colors that evoke the Aurora Borealis. With shining, concentric shapes, *Meteorite Vision* suggests a crater lake with an island at center. But it also resembles an eye, wide, gawking, reflecting the emerald and violet of northern skies. The painting thus seems like a fable. As we look at the north, it (or things within it) may also be looking back at us. Those feelings intensify in the other panels in the series, specifically the

cairns, stacks of rocks that serve as beacons for travellers. Ringed with brilliant colors, they become fantastically variegated by Ewaskio's brush, as if each stone insulates hidden powers.

Stories of the Arctic involve strange perspectives like this, including views from inside the boundless ocean. What lies below its icy surface? Sculptor and video-artist Fritz Horstman spent much of the trip fishing for an answer. With a camera at the end of a fishing rod, he cast into the waters, often shallow, at times fathomless. The result is a grid of clouded greens and grays, a spectrum of the subaqueous we nearly always overlook. With the video *Ice Voices*, Horstman also offers a muddier narrative. Imitations of ice sounds, mouthed by various artists on the residency, blend into a crackling chorus. Arctic heteroglossia: the landscape inspires many voices, and has many stories to tell.

Poets

*Round and ever the circling sun
Travels the summer's single day,
The single day that is never done
Till the snow and the frost shall have their way,
And come with their comrade night, to stay.*

The first stanza of Julian Huxley's poem *Spitsbergen Summer* sets the scene for the second group of the exhibition. Whatever definition of poetry you prefer - whether it helps us gain perspective on the world, or whether, through the struggle to understand it, it helps us know ourselves better - the artists in this section offer a more holistic experience of the Arctic than is possible through direct means. Their artworks divert us from the obvious Arctic.

The Uncommon, a three-channel video by Adam Fung, takes us through Svalbard's space in all directions, elevating us above vast glaciers, submerging us amongst brash ice, and panning across the jagged surfaces of the landscape. Over the haunting intervals of the musical score, a voice speaks strange thoughts. "I memorized you before we met," it says at one point. "It was not hard; we were once the same." Self-identification with the ice seems, on its face, a stretch. And yet it describes an experience that many have in polar regions: a feeling of connection or belonging, based on nothing specific, but nonetheless profound.

Another poetic skill might be called reassembling reality, taking the world's physical forms and putting them together ways that are almost real—but not quite. Greg Lock does this with his submissions to the show, digital prints compiled from a web of high-resolution photographs. The result is uncanny. The shell of a glacier's calving face sits suspended in a vitrine like a specimen in a natural history museum. It's a tongue-in-cheek funereal ode. Lock's constructions look into a likely future to pinpoint what is both sad and silly about the way we memorialize nature.

The musician Kate Schutt presents us with a more familiar kind of poetry, if a heart wrenching one. In fact, she confronts the thing we all share, however much we wish we could avoid it: mortality, in all its grace and suffering. Schutt became a high-latitude troubadour on the *Antigua*, strumming a guitar in the brilliant sun and biting cold. During the residency she continued work

on *The Death Album*, a 20-song cycle that chronicled her journey caring for her mother through cancer treatment until her death in October 2015. The song *Bright Nowhere* absorbs the grief of that loss, but also releases it with delicate walks up the guitar and the gentle consonants of her lyrics.

The Arctic air does give uncommon clarity to things. Printmaker Anders Zanichkowsky was able to capture it, or a shade of it, in his cyanotypes made with ice collected from the land and seascape. The compositions are the result of that ice melting under sunlight and washing across sensitized paper. But the images also have the amazing effect of resembling views from above much larger bodies of ice as they float in blue water, trailing their silt behind them. Like good poems, the prints capture small things that resonate on a much larger scale.

Ron Wild provides a way of accounting for these distortions of scale, so prevalent in the immense space of the Arctic, with a work that draws attention to the size of our bodies. His three-dimensional silhouette creates a parallax as you move around it. Shifting your perspective bring the contour - cut to the size of Wild's own silhouette - into focus as you reach a head-on, axial view of it. The result is a the shape of a body that slides away just after it comes into view, like a word on the tip your tongue. By presenting a 1:1 to scale reckoning of body and object, Wild evokes his simple, attentive regard for landscape during the residency: still and fully present.

Other poets, though, capture more than a one-to-one relationship to reality. A photographer by trade, Ester Vonplon's contributions to the exhibition run against the grain of that medium's claims to objectivity. Vonplon often used a large format 4x5 view camera during the residency, exposing negatives she would develop after returning to her studio in Switzerland. But she also used a Mamiya 7 film camera and a polaroid-like instant film to create finished images on site. The result, however, hardly resembles what one might think of as an Arctic landscape. As the exposed film is pulled through rollers, chemicals combine to form an image. In Vonplon's pieces, we see far more artefacts of this process than the views it ostensibly captured. Ink roots down in white streaks on one image, like a chemical forest in which branches flow down to trunks; there are no trees to speak of on Svalbard. Zones of white and black wash over one another in a way that aligns Vonplon more with painters like Pat Steir or even Jackson Pollock than with other photographers. Her most evocative image from this series is also the most austere: a splotch of ink shaped like a spearhead or stele. Divided horizontally by a white top and black bottom, the image clings to the possibility of representing a real landscape with a bright hazy sky and a clay-dark sea. But we cannot know for sure, no more than we can know if it was the damp, bone-gnawing cold that caused the film to stick and smear as it shouldn't. All we can say is that it provides a decidedly more lyrical definition of photography than the one to which we're accustomed.

Explorers

The artists in the Explorers section have an especially fraught task. They fall in the lineage of early Arctic explorers like Sir John Franklin, Henry Hudson, or Willem Barentsz, men whose northern achievements were celebrated by king and country. Today, we recognize their projects

grew from systems of patriarchy and colonization that led to the exploitation of Arctic land and its inhabitants. How to square the accomplishments of those explorers with our current critical positions? This historical challenge is further complicated by the rise of Arctic cruises and ecotours. Are we artists, explorers, or common tourists?

Stephan Jahanshahi takes on these tricky politics with *Terra Nullius*, a installation-performance piece staged during the residency's many landings. Taking its name from the latin phrase meaning "No One's Land," the project involved planting a flag - the signature symbolic gesture of colonization - in Svalbard's landscapes and documenting it with photographs and film. But rather than using a national flag, thus laying geopolitical claims on the land for some far-off country, Jahanshahi's flag depicted kudzu, a climbing plant with blood-colored flowers. Though native to eastern Asia, kudzu has run rampant since being introduced to America, outpacing pesticides and strangling native plants. A parody, then: the flag takes the place of an "invasive species," suggesting that attempts to claim or dominate the land are in themselves absurd. Jahanshahi makes us question the meanings of "native" and "immigrant," blurring who belongs and who doesn't in any given landscape.

Helena Wadsley takes the history of Arctic exploration and peels back its masculinist trappings. She takes the overlooked Arctic experiences of six women - explorers, photographers, wives, mothers, journalists - and makes them visible in the landscape through undergarments. Wadsley, who often uses textiles as symbolic objects in her performances, created underwear corresponding to the historical period in which these women Arctic explorers lived, ranging from eighteenth-century Russia to twentieth-century America. Amounting to a kind of sartorial statuary, these undergarments animate the landscapes in which they were photographed and filmed. At times playful but invariably poignant, they draw attention to the constraints placed upon women throughout history, constraints that women like Ruth Gruber (1911-2016) ignored. Daughter to Russian Jews in Brooklyn, at age 20 Gruber became the youngest person in the world to earn Ph.D. with a dissertation on Virginia Woolf. She would later be the first foreign correspondent to fly into the Soviet Arctic. Her undergarment, as Wadsley's feminist intervention presents it, flaps quickly in the wind, evoking among other things Gruber's pioneering flight over Siberian snow.

Photographer Julie Forgues also explores Arctic space with her images. More specifically, she uses photographs to question what the concepts of space and place actually mean to us. A grid of photographs styles the residency's guides - carrying rifles to scare off curious polar bears - as modern-day *Rückenfiguren*: figures seen from behind in nineteenth-century Romantic paintings like those by Caspar David Friedrich. Backs to us, the figures gaze out at their respective landscapes. Below these images are photographs of the same scene without the figures, a simple juxtaposition that demonstrates how much presence and absence can change our interpretation of a place. When the same landscapes are shown again, now as circular views in black and white, their spatial configurations become both more explicit and abstract. Connected by three lines, the views become points of a thin triangle tilted to the right. Does this arrangement reflect their relative locations on a map? Forgues plays with our perceptions to throw us back into the same scenes more deeply.

If these photographs triangulate our understanding of place, the books by Ana Carvalho bring out the temporal dimension of Arctic exploration. Conceiving her project as three Arctic “moments,” Carvalho created the first even before the residency began. A series of drawings in charcoal, pastel, pencil and chalk show the Arctic in the future tense, as she imagined it, sight unseen. Books presented in the “Beyond Nature” exhibition contain more atmospheric renderings. They are reflections on the residency made after she returned to her native Portugal. One cannot help but note the ominous implications of ARCTICO III; depicting the Arctic in the past tense, from memory, may be what we all have to do if climate change proceeds apace. Just as ink spreads through the paper fibers of these drawings, every new measurement of melting ice augurs a tragic end to the Arctic.

Yet Carvalho’s work, like the work of most of the artists in “Beyond Nature,” do not view the Arctic primarily through the lens of disaster. To the contrary, most frame it as a place to rediscover humankind’s best capacities: creativity, justice, empathy even. If any one of the Arctic Circle Residents could distill these watchwords of ethical exploration, it might be the poet Clare Mulley. With letters tumbling down the page like a snowball gathering girth, an excerpt from one of her poems tells us that beginnings consist in self-making...with other versions of ourselves. In other words, every voyage is an act of creation, in which we have the chance to listen to the many competing voices in our heads and reach a quorum about what we want the world before us to look like.

Mulley’s verse, impossible to summarize here, recalls a duly revered line from Marcel Proust’s masterpiece *Remembrance of Things Past*. “The only true voyage of discovery,” goes the passage from Volume 5 of *Swann’s Way*, “the only Fountain of Youth, would not be to travel to new lands, but to have other eyes, to see the universe through the eyes of another...” This is what the artists of “Beyond Nature” may ultimately achieve: seeing the Arctic through other eyes. It is a simple thing, yes, but it is also the price of admission to a better world.

Of course anyone worried about the fate of the Arctic and our planet on the whole should be compelled to do things - personal sacrifice, collective action, political engagement - that will help to stem the tide of climate change. Yet the best way of pursuing these efforts may not be to fixate on far-away environmental catastrophe, perpetuating the division between nature and culture, but to remind ourselves that they are one and the same. We, too, are part and particle of a greater whole. However productively philosophers have troubled the idea of *nature* in recent years, simply banishing the word from our dictionaries is not a feasible solution. Seeing beyond nature, though, to a point where it is indiscernible from us and the ways we must live in the future, may help us to envision clearer skies in the time ahead.

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