Broken Compass:

Visions of a Shifting Arctic

Cast aside your compass; the North Pole is moving. In January 2019, scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration realized they would have to recalibrate their navigation models due to sudden and dramatic shifts in the location of magnetic north.[1] Pulled by liquid iron deep underground, the place where compasses point has always wandered a bit, but not this far and fast.[2] From 1900 to 1980, for instance, magnetic north barely moved at all. But the pole's shift has suddenly accelerated, now sliding about 50 kilometers a year away from Canada and towards Siberia, threatening large errors in travel to and through the Arctic. New science suggests that global warming is to blame for this quickening polar wander.[3]

While the magnetic shift won't much affect the GPS on your phone, it does spin a fitting parable for the twenty-first century Arctic. As climate careens beyond norms and projections, there's less and less about the region we can point to with confidence. Polar melting constantly smashes predictions. Environmental catastrophes now appear "locked in." Flags at the North Pole--chauvinist stabs that symbolized Robert Peary and Frederick Cook's blustery race to reach it in 1909--don't mean what they used to now that true north slides from one place to another.

And yet, as the North Pole plies its disorienting path, the Arctic retains a powerful attraction. *A Magnetic North,* an exhibition of artwork from the 2016 Arctic Circle Summer Residency, depicts the ongoing pull of this landscape as it changes before our eyes. Curated by artist Kate Collyer, these works seduce, they disorient, they mourn, they celebrate. They deal in four kinds of artistic media: paintings, photographs, sculptures, and words, broadly writ. They all draw inspiration from the same experience, a two-week journey sailing a tall ship high into the Arctic Circle around the Svalbard archipelago.

Svalbard comprises two landforms, Spitsbergen and Nordauslandet, now both protected by Norway. In 1596, Dutch explorer Willem Barents dubbed this strange landscape "Spitsbergen," a name referring to the "sharp mountains" that run like radiating spines to the sea from interior glaciers. Svalbard's largest settlement, Longyearbyen, shelters around 1,000 people between such ridges. In addition to harboring the Global Seed Vault--an encyclopedia of suspended vegetal life that represents humanity's last hope against agricultural apocalypse--Longyearbyen also serves as the port of the departure for many Arctic expeditions, as it does for the Arctic Circle Residency. The artists met there in June 2016, and then boarded the 150-foot ship Antigua to sail north.

These islands are not strangers to artists, of course. For instance, in *Dutch Whalers in Spitsbergen* (1690), the painter Abraham Storck depicted the bloody industry that really put the place on the map. French painter François Biard later cast Svalbard in softer light, rendering visions of the Aurora Borealis that captivated viewers at the 1841 Paris Salon. For these historical artists, the challenge was to balance shocking truth and enticing fiction for this place on the world's frayed edge.

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[1] *Nature,* doi: 10.1038/d41586-019-00007-1
[2] *Nature,* doi:10.1038/nature.2015.18072
[3] *Nature,* doi:10.1038/nature.2013.12994

Paintings in *A Magnetic North* interpret Arctic light in even more otherworldly ways. With works from his *IcebergX* series, Adam Fung renders classical landscape paintings with a truculent twist. Naturalistic views of Arctic sea and sky in square and tondo format are crossed over by strident X's across the canvas. The works suggest that we may imagine the Arctic landscape in idealized, pristine ways, but their ruin may be a foregone conclusion. Rather than marking the spot for a flag, the X's stake out a grave.

Richard Barlow gives us views that are both grander and more delicate. With a large wall drawings based on projected photographs, his site-specific work offers a unique view of the Arctic that comes closest to conveying how small humans feel in a massive landscape. But the drawings' most salient trait is their transience. At the end of the show, the wall will be repainted, the artwork destroyed. This temporary nature provides fitting analogue for the ephemerality of Arctic ice: Now you see it, now you don't.

Annie Ewaskio's paintings, once seen, are difficult to forget. Built from layers of paint and reduced through scratching and sanding, *Ginnungagap* is a work in oil and wax of almost hallucinatory color. The title comes from an Old Norse word meaning "the abyss at the world's end," part of the artist's larger exploration of "Thule," the term ancient geographers gave to the extreme North. Their hypothesis: beyond the ice, a world of unparalleled tropical splendor. Ewaskio's beaming colors nod to this theory, which attempted to balance global portions of cold and heat in the premodern mind. Remarkably, her hues seem less of a stretch when returning to the photographic record of the expedition; Arctic colors can reach unspeakable intensity. Ewaskio just decides to combine the tones of disparate frozen hours and objects in the same frame.

That photographic record of the expedition holds its own depths. In two pendant photographs, Stephan Jahanshahi uses different exposures to show the full spectrum of light that falls from the midnight sun. In one, sea and sky dissolve into the same gauzy white plane. In the other, a searing orb blasts through the darkness that spreads below. The diptych, as he describes it, shows "two sides of the same moment." The Arctic is a land of extremes, after all, and the endless sun blinds just as easily as it guides the way.

Visual artist Julie Forgues frames her photographs within larger triangulations of experience. Posing circular images beneath taught threads, she traces the perimeters established by the guides who protected the artists from polar bears as they explored Svalbard's landscape. Showing figures from behind, the images evoke the *Rückenfigur* of nineteenth-century painter Caspar David Friedrich, human figures whose outward gaze allows viewers to gain a nearly metaphysical separation from the landscapes they look upon. Forgues' works continue this tradition in a modern light, asserting that human activity and the power of intent can transform raw space into meaningful, memorable places.

Greg Lock also creates space but in cheekier ways. Stitching together bundles of high resolution photographs, he creates artificial worlds in which to distort (or contradict) the laws of physics. In *Digital Glacier (Hot Coil)*, Lock combines photographs into a digital rendering of a rocky Arctic shoreline defrosted by a heating coil. On its face, the object's placement is absurd. But on second thought, the image may be on the nose. It's a metaphor for the effects of anthropogenic warming on polar regions. Lock reminds us that the world is only as absurd as our consumptive habits make it.

Lock's photographic constructions could fit just as well among the sculptures in *A Magnetic North*. Fritz Horstman, for his part, builds composite sculptures that are both unlikely and precise. In *Materials with U-Shaped Valley*, a packing strap squeezes together a variety of materials cut into square slabs. Plywood, plastic, zebra print pillows, a suitcase: slices of myriad things press together like pages in an unintelligible book. Their physical differences are plain to see in this configuration, and yet Horstman unites them by carving a widening cone of negative space into their shared top plane. This u-shaped trough is precisely the profile that glaciers carve into rock as they grind from mountains to the sea. A work that continues Horstman's aim of addressing the seam between nature and culture, *Materials* takes a conventional model of glacial landscapes and recycles it with an assortment of humanity's creations.

A similar but more delicate vertical rhythm defines Kate Collyer's piece in the exhibition. *Division I, II, and III* are composite sculptures that stand worn scales of glass on their edges in a grooved wooden base. Alternating blue and white colors, the pieces creates different effects for different lines of sight. From the front, one sees through and over these ice-like ridges, as if it were a minimalist deconstruction of a glacier. From the side, the pieces are more like specimens propped up for display. They feel like artifacts of extinct behemoths, at home in museums of art and natural history alike. Though lovely commemorations of glacial ice, Collyer's sculptures also suggest that making art about the Arctic is an effort to salvage artifacts that may soon be gone.

While such evocative works often feel mournful, others delight in raising the dead. Combining historical research and photographic media, the artistic duo of Aly Ogasian and Claudia O'Steen explore the legacy of Salomon August Andrée in their installation. A Swedish engineer and explorer, Andrée attempted to reach the North Pole by hot air balloon several times in the late 1890s. Ogasian and O'Steen explore the aftermath of his final failure in 1897, when Andrée and his two associates died after landing and trudging across the ice. Their piece *Örnen* (the title is the name of Andrée's doomed balloon) features a tangled lump of rope. Sitting on the pile is a screen showing a fluttering kite that the artists sent it into the air on Danskøya, the small island at Svalbard's northeastern point where Andrée's balloon lost its guide ropes. The work amounts to a restaging of epic failure, commemorating the crazy lengths human have gone to reach the elusive North Pole.

Helena Wadsley also interrogates the history of Arctic exploration, but by redressing its conspicuous lack of women. In fact, there are many female Arctic explorers whose stories have been swept away. Wadsley makes them visible in the landscape through undergarments. Posing textiles as symbolic objects, the artist created underwear corresponding to the historical period in which these women explorers lived, ranging from eighteenth-century Russia to twentieth-century America. This kind of sartorial statuary also alludes to the constraints that women like Geraldine Moodie, née Fitzgibbon (1854-1945) had to overcome. A pioneering female photographer of early Canada, Geraldine accompanied her husband John Moodie to the country's rural north for his job with the national mounted police. While raising six children, Moodie also became the first person to photograph many native Canadian Inuit peoples, like the Innu of Hudson Bay. Wadsley represents Moodie's groundbreaking work with a Victorian-era styled bra. The garment shown in the exhibition was also installed on a Svalbard glacier, paying homage to overlooked presence of women in Arctic history.

Works like Wadsley's use visual means to tell histories that are written but unsung. The Arctic also inspires writers, poets and singers to create new narratives for our current age as well. The poet Clare Mulley, for instance, writes on behalf of an unspeaking thing: the polar bear, the signature icon of Arctic life. She creates an ursine portrait of an animal who, even as the specter of climate change pushes him to the brink, remains a vital force. Mulley's verse conjures a roiling natural world with the bear patrolling its edges, reminding us that we remain the interlopers on the Arctic horizon.

Summarizing poetry is a fool's errand, but then again, so is writing about the Arctic. It's a place that works more like a vessel than a page; you don't so much write it down as fill it up with the thoughts, descriptions and feelings you experience while there. In this regard, the songwriter Kate Schutt provides a poignant coda to this essay. Her efforts during the residency were spent writing *The Death Album,* a 20-song cycle that chronicled the slow end of her mother's life as cancer took its fateful toll. 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.

Losing a parent is, of course, one of life's most disorienting experiences. In the wake of that loss, your internal compass is a wreck, retracing years of memories, searching for the path forward. Maybe this feeling is another aspect of the Arctic's magnetism; it's a place where we all can embrace the sense of feeling lost, of searching for something we may never find. "This is an elegy for our Arctic landscapes," writes Kate Collyer in the exhibition description. The works in the show are like different verses in that elegy, some grieving what is lost, others reflecting on the beauties that could never have lasted anyway. Talented artists not considered in this essay--Ana Carvalho, Sarah Schalk, Ester Vonplon, Ryo Yamauchi, Anders Zanichkowsky--have made striking works that further enhance the color and depth of the exhibition. As an ensemble, these artworks are certainly elegiac, but they are also a source of strength. They show us a different way to navigate, one that depends on the power of our eyes, minds and morals. They show the changes we are making to the landscape, but also inspire us to mitigate those changes to the greatest extent we can. Cast aside your compass; the North Pole is moving, and it has the power to move us, too.

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