

# Marcia Clark: The Artist as Arctic Adventurer

That Marcia Clark is challenged aesthetically by a beauty too vast and desolate to be embraced or conquered lends her paintings a tremendous sense of tension. While Willem de Kooning was speaking figuratively when he declared “Art is not a situation of comfort for me,” Clark seems to seek out places that, for all their awesome visual beauty, are literally uncomfortable—and sometimes dangerous as well. Her art seems to thrive in uninviting climates that less venturesome souls might find far too daunting for prolonged habitation.

Once, in Alaska, Clark stayed in a small cabin built on a bit of rock jutting up out of a glacier for several days, making drawings and oil sketches of the surrounding mountains and ice formations. On a trip to the outhouse, a few yards away from the cabin, she sank to her hips in snow and ice, her right foot locking into a hole below. The more she struggled to release herself, the faster the ice seemed to melt and refreeze, locking her even more firmly in place.

“I was getting very cold and frightened,” Clark recalls. “So far as I knew no one was around for miles. I imagined being discovered frozen solid in place, just feet from the outhouse and just a little further from the cabin. Somehow I thought of Lot’s wife turned into a pillar of salt, because she looked back as they were escaping the sulfurous conflagration of Sodom. Realizing that yelling was futile and there was only myself to rely on, I became seriously calm, and a little more incisive in my thinking. It then occurred to me then that I was going about this the wrong way: instead of digging forward, in front of the foot, I needed to dig behind it. And viola, I was able to slide the foot back and out of the hole.”

Still, Clark was not yet out of danger. Snow continued to fall relentlessly day after day. The small planes couldn’t land, and she was stranded up there on the glacier four days longer than planned. When the planes

finally arrived she was down to her last crumbs of food.

Clark, whose latest solo show “In Search of Ice: Recent Paintings from Travels in the Arctic,” was seen at Blue Mountain Gallery, 530 West 25th Street, in Chelsea, may be the last serious descendent of the artist-as-explorer tradition that Andrew Wilcox and Tim Barringer extol in their landmark volume “American Sublime: Landscape Painting in the United States 1820-1880.” Although she now has to travel further and search harder to find vistas of wilderness comparable to those painted by Thomas Cole and Frederick Edwin Church, she feels a deep and abiding affinity with the landscape painters of the Hudson River School. Thus, awhile back, she retraced Cole’s travels in an article for the *Smithsonian*

website of Polar Artists Group, an organization with which she is associated. “My paintings are not political statements, but they do come out of my personal experience. They are from my own vantage point and express my values and feelings for places, and I bear witness as an artist.”

The witness that she bears is eloquent indeed, and differs significantly from the work of distinguished predecessors such as Church and Rockwell Kent (one of the most sublime and constant observers of the Arctic scene) for her innovative extension of the pictorial space beyond the traditional rectangular canvas, in order to capture the panoramic vastness of the vistas that she encounters in her travels to places she refers to as being at “the ends of the earth.” She accomplishes this by splicing together several of the large sheets of frosted Mylar that she often substitutes for canvas



“Briksdalsbreen, 2008”

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*Magazine* and was guest curator for an exhibition of contemporary panoramas at the Hudson River Museum.

Reading the journals of the naturalist John Muir and seeing Frederick Church’s sketches of icebergs at the Smithsonian eventually led Clark to begin her ongoing polar journey with an initial visit to Glacier Bay, Alaska, discovered by Muir in the 1800s. On one of the subsequent trips to polar regions that she has made over the past few years, she joined an expedition cruise to Norway’s Svalbard Archipelago and visited Iceland and Greenland, sponsored by an artist residency at the Upernavik Museum. During a visit to Newfoundland, one of Church’s destinations, she was appalled to discover that “the almost continuous parade of icebergs” that had once collected in its harbor was sadly diminished.

“I’m concerned about the changes I see, evidence of global warming, and I’m concerned about man’s part in this,” Clark states on the

in her oil paintings to form sprawling, irregularly shaped formats, such as the elongated scroll of the exhibition’s approximately seven-by-eleven-foot centerpiece “Briksdalsbreen, 2008.”

Here, luminous aquamarine ice formations, suggesting a frozen waterfall, spill down over earth-colored rocks that peter out toward the bottom of the composition, becoming faint calligraphic ecriture with an abstract expressionist gestural vitality. Since the Arctic itself is a work in progress, never completed, and Clark’s stated focus in the series is on “the forever fluctuating, mutating, and transforming nature of the polar ice,” it seems only appropriate that the paintings should show traces of process.

Clark’s painterly vigor is no less apparent in “Drifts, Island, Distant Iceberg, 2007,” a plein air oil sketch on aluminum, small enough to hold in one’s hands yet possessed of a similar sense of spatial expansiveness,

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*"Upernavik Panorama #2"*

with bold, swift strokes breezily evoking mounds of snow and ice gliding over water like mountains taking flight. And a dynamic vertiginousness, akin to some of Wayne Thiebaud's odd twists on landscape perspective, enlivens other compositions, such as "Upernavik Panorama #2," an oil on canvas depicting an overcast day in northwest Greenland. In this work, the "ends of the earth" feeling is enhanced by the way the horizon-line slants, suggesting the actual curve of the globe.

By contrast, in other paintings such as the oil on Mylar "Glacier, Svalbard, 2007" monolithic walls of ice lie flat on the two-dimensional picture plane, the light and shadow on their chunky reflective surfaces creating natural cubist planes.

Relatively new to Clark's oeuvre are a series of collages and photo collages, such as "Pouch Cove #2, 2005," in which an oil sketch on Denril (a material similar to Mylar, but lighter) of a landscape dotted with small white houses is superimposed over a map of Newfoundland, with the Gulf of St. Lawrence serving as the pale blue sky and the cream-colored islands morphing into clouds rising up from behind the verdant painted hills. In contrast to the wild



*"Svalbard Glacier #2"*

magnificence of her vast vistas of ice and snow, this relatively domesticated depiction of a hamlet by the shoreline suggested a much welcome respite for the intrepid painter / adventurer.

I was mightily impressed by the rugged power and panoramic sweep of Marcia Clark's paintings the first time I encountered them in a 2003 exhibition at The Painting Center, featuring women artists who had been awarded residencies at Cape Cornwell, a remote area of the Scottish Highlands known for its untamed landscape, unearthly light, and severe weather conditions. The locales that inspired the works in her recent show at Blue Mountain Gallery present Clark with even less forgiving landscapes, against which to pit her gritty skills all the more impressively.

—Ed McCormack