

Broad Street Review

A change of temperature, on canvas

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One morning last December, while the Copenhagen climate talks were in session, I reached for the New York Times pushed through my mail slot and stood shivering as I scanned the front page. There, above the fold, was a stunning photo of a reservoir in Bolivia that all but dried up when the country's glaciers disappeared. What a graphic description—here was one single image that communicated the urgency of the Copenhagen meeting.



'Grinnell Mt. Gould' triptych (1938, 1998, 2006): Where are the snows of yesteryear?

Compared to other visual arts, documentary photography stirs our indignation and our sense of injustice with a force that's nearly unmatched. I say "nearly" because painting occasionally shares that power and, in some instances, exceeds it.

As I studied that New York Times picture, I thought about global warming, and also about the paintings I'd seen in my friend Diane Burko's studio— paintings she was preparing for her show, "The Politics of Snow," currently on view at the Locks Gallery. Although Burko has never depicted humans in her landscapes, in this show she suggests the intervention of humans, who wittingly or unwittingly collude with nature to accelerate the galloping pace of global warming.

From the Himalayas to Normandy

Mountains, sky, water and rocks have captivated Burko throughout her 40-year career. The perception, memory and experience of the landscape, and how paint articulates light and form, are among her abiding concerns. In the 1970s and '80s she worked from photographs—her own and those of others— to paint grandiose panoramas of the Himalayas, the Grand Canyon, the cliffs of Northern California, and then the cliffs of Brittany and Normandy.

During the '90s, she gradually relinquished the camera's distant view (and its immediate focus) for longer periods of observation and en plein air studies of the landscape. Back in her studio, she would create large scale canvases based on these studies.

Back where she started

Burko's current series of diptychs, triptychs and polyptychs (the art world term for paintings in multiple sections) of the landscape derive their force from her extraordinary artistry with paint, and also from the way she used her source material: namely, pre-existing photographs of glaciers. In the cyclical way that artists sometimes work— when they arrive where they started— Burko's return to photo-

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graphic sources is distinct from her earlier practice. Now each one of a painting's component parts is based on a separate photo of the motif, and each photo steps us forward in time.

Burko uses documentary evidence shot by various glacial geologists and photographers at different times in the last and current century. She culled these from a variety of publications, including the on-line databases of the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Ice and Snow Center. Some of the originals were in color, others in black and white.

In all cases, they became jumping-off points for her palette, providing opportunities for subjective interpretations. The artist regularizes the disparate scales of these sources, requiring them to conform to her chosen formats.

Monet's lesson

We're well accustomed to seriality in contemporary art. Monet, one of Burko's spiritual mentors, helped set us on the path of looking at the same motif in varying light. When examined closely, Burko's polyptychs reveal her differing methods of paint application; unpainted canvas surfaces are variously visible in each section. In some areas she slathers on her colors; in others she is more economic in her use of paint, using fewer and fewer pigments to bring the image to life.

My eyes enjoy going back and forth between the pieces, noting their commonalities and their differences in paint handling and in the degree to which melting has laid bare the underlying landscape. As Susan Stewart famously showed, a collection of similar images or things gives viewers a set of pleasures distinct from those gained when images are displayed singly.

Depicting time's passage

To astonishing effect, Burko arranges her painted units in the chronological sequence of her sources. The passage of time is a theme not often addressed in modern art. Examples range from updated memento mori images such as Ivan Albright's seemingly putrefying flesh in *Into the World There Came a Soul Called Ida* (at the Art Institute of Chicago); to On Karawa, who literally painted hundreds of dates, each small canvas completed on that one day; to Andy Warhol's witty dance diagrams with arrows that show the unfolding sequence of steps, and his "before and after" views of a nose job.

Burko's image sequences encode time differently. Her painted sequences of the same vista incrementally pace us through the accelerating changes created by rising temperatures, as she charts the gradual disappearance of ice and snow. And it is here that her work differs from that of other artists who use the collection as a visual strategy. To my horror, I found myself adding my own mental image to each sequence, extrapolating from what she shows, thereby envisioning the next, undepicted step in the warming process— our dystopic future.

When you visit the Locks Gallery to see "Politics of Snow" on the second floor, also go to the third floor to see a separate installation of Burko's work, this latter, in conjunction with the Philagrafika print festival. There Burko is showing two handsome suites of her own digital photographs— archival pigment prints in square format, one shot in the Badlands of South Dakota and the other in Bucks County. Each set of these intimate, close-up views concerns nature imprinted.