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Painting a Message of Melting

Class of '69 | "I've finally been able to connect my politics with my painting," says Diane Burko GFA'69. "I mean, I was always a feminist, but I didn't want to mimic Judy Chicago and paint vaginas."

Burko can, however, paint the dramatic effects of global warming on glaciers to make a visual rather than a written statement. "The Politics of Snow" (which opened at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia last month and will be on view until March 13) represents a dramatic departure for Burko. Her usual M.O. involves flying around the world in a small plane, shooting aerial views of topography to project onto canvas for reference. For this project she relied on small archival photographs to show the inexorable melting of glaciers in the United States and Peru.



Going, Going: Diane Burko's Diptych - Portage Glacier, #1, #2 2009, oil on canvas.

"I want to seduce viewers with my painting of the landscape and then subtly engage them in contemplating its survival," explains Burko. "Beauty and desolation, life and death all seem to be converging for me at this time as the concept of mortality—personally and globally—dominates my creative impulse."

She hopes the show will travel to Washington, where "something nonverbal" might stir lawmakers out of their political stupor on this issue.

"Climate change has been taken over by politics," agrees Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, who writes in the exhibition catalogue: "We are awash in talking points, briefing papers, and scientific studies. Diane's paintings remind us that all these words can often obscure, or even obstruct, our view of what is truly happening in the world today. Diane's work connects us to the enormity of what is happening and the amazing speed with which these changes are taking place."

Burko's own career took off with relative speed. During her graduate years at Penn she was introduced to Marian Locks, who was studying art history and launching a gallery to show the work of young artists.

"Marian visited my studio periodically after I graduated, included me in a group show in '71, and began selling my work," Burko recalls, noting that in 1976 Locks "officially put me in her 'stable.'"

Burko also remarks that Locks often "said I was like a motorcycle breezing in," and that she "tried to tame me in terms of modulating my voice and insisting I speak more slowly." Over the years they traveled together to places like New Mexico and Italy, where Burko did a residency at Bellagio. (She had previously won a residency at Giverny, Monet's house and garden outside Paris, where she painted her popular Reflets pond series.) On a road trip to Flagstaff, they "flew in James Turrell's plane over the

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Grand Canyon, where I shot photos of the Roden crater.”

“Looking down on the landscape has always been my preferred perspective,” says Burko. “Flying is exhilarating. The most dramatic experience I ever had was in a small helicopter flying over [Hawaii’s] Big Island. Strapped in but with the door removed, I was right there hovering over molten lava spilling into the sea, with clouds of steam rising up from Kilauea. Some of my Iris prints capture that flight.”

She also took a “breathtaking” three-hour flight over Iceland, whose “vast empty plains of lava and glacial ice were mind-boggling,” she says. “I enjoy the materiality of the paint as well as the materiality of the water, lava, rock, and mist.”

Over the past decade, Burko concentrated on geological phenomena such as volcanoes, waterfalls, and glaciers, with solo shows at the Locks Gallery, the James A. Michener Art Museum in Bucks County, and the Aidekman Center for Art at Tufts University.

Perhaps the pinnacle of her career is “The Politics of Snow.” As Amy Schlegel, director of the galleries and collections at Tufts, notes: “the serial nature of Diane’s investigations into the changing appearance of specific glaciers offers a compelling subject matter. Regardless of what one believes is the cause of climate change, Diane’s work provides compelling visual evidence that is both startling and beautiful.”

“My practice has finally embraced a duality that I used to reject,” says Burko. “I was never comfortable using visual language to express my political beliefs. But when I looked at my 1976 painting of Grandes Jorasses at the Michener in the 2006 show, I had an epiphany. That painting was done 30 years ago and I knew it was no longer the same, that I was no longer the same.”

Deciding to “confront the urgency of the present,” she began reading Elizabeth Kolbert’s *Field Notes From a Catastrophe* and Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth*, as well as a good deal of material on the Internet. At that point she “began collaborating with a broad group of international glacial geologists, scientists, and photographers, who, like me, were joined in trying to make a difference.”

When Burko first began her life as an artist she was influenced by Gustave Courbet, Pierre Bonnard, Winslow Homer, and Charles Burchfield. “Being an artist in the 21st century is quite different from the 19th, when artists were confronting vistas, such as Edwin Church looking at Cotapoxi for the first time—and without seeing previews in *National Geographic* or on the *Discovery Channel*,” she says. “When I arrived at Penn after graduating from Skidmore College, I was accepted on the strength of my abstract work. I credit my teacher, [the late] Neil Welliver, for developing my strong affinity for the landscape. He made me draw and paint en plein air.”

“The contest between representation and abstraction has been a source of struggle and fascination for Diane ever since I’ve known her,” says Burko’s close friend Lenore Malen G’72, professor of graduate studies at Parsons University. “And she herself—part journalist and part diarist—is poised between her complete absorption and fascination with the natural world outside the studio and her love for big abstract paintings. Diane is a woman with enormous, palpable energy. If you know her you can almost feel her own bodily awareness of the forces that she seeks to mediate and tame through the act of painting them.”

Burko is far from finished with what may be her defining life’s work. “‘The Politics of Snow’ is going to be an ongoing project,” she says. “It is work that embraces my social agenda while challenging my imagination and my skills as an artist. I am going to continue looking for landscapes that take my breath away—landscapes that demand to be painted.”

—Jane Biberman CW’65