

## Diane Burko: Politics of Snow at Locks Gallery

BY EMILY WARNER



Diane Burko Nunatak Glacier 1938, after Bradford Washburn; Nunatak Glacier 2005, after David Arnold 2010. Oil on canvas, 60 x 134 inches. cover MARCH 2010: Disappearing Series 2A, 2B, 2007. Oil on canvas, diptych, 48 x 24 inches. Courtesy Locks Gallery

Diane Burko's canvases in "Politics of Snow" open up onto expansive vistas, snowy landscapes of craggy mountain ridges and glacier peaks. Painting can reach up to twelve feet across, an effect of scale enhanced by her frequent use of diptychs and multiple panels. Her titles name not only sites and source materials (Burko has long worked from her own and others' photographs), but often, tellingly, dates: the 2010 diptych Nunatak Glacier 1938, after Bradford Washburn; Nunatak Glacier 2005, after David Arnold shows the same snowy glacier bed in two adjacent canvases, and the changes that the intervening years have wrought. Whites and grays in 1938 give way to warmer mauves and browns in 2005, and frothy squiggles, limning river rapids or ice floes, are flattened into the even surface of a dried-out riverbed. Burko has long dealt with the question of time and its traces in the geologic landscape. But in the current exhibition, time is more explicit, more human, and more urgent. Executed against the backdrop of global warming, the paintings present themselves as witnesses, painted snapshots of an accelerating and unnatural transformation.

Burko's facility as a painter is remarkable, and inevitably compromised in reproduction. Photographs of the paintings in "Snow" miss their magnificent twinning of economy and lushness. In Boulder Glacier 1932, after T. J. Tileman, a few spare gray squiggles across a white ground manage to instantiate the weighty presence of a mountain side; directly beside it, in Boulder Glacier 2005, after Greg Pederson, that same mountain face explodes into streaks of purple and periwinkle-blue, leaving stuttered pockets of white between the skin-like folds. Burko, in fact, is a master at white, both in its painted and non-painted versions. Whole passages of snowy ground are figured by bare white canvas left empty, or with a few stranded licks of white paint gleaming almost invisibly against the white weft of the fabric. The material here—geologic and painterly—suggests a process of continual freeze and thaw, the congealment of water and ice and tectonic thrust into more permanent structures, and their dissolution back again.

These states of frozen transience, of course, gain a decidedly political dimension with the specter of global warming that lurks in the background. For someone like Burko, who has long painted from

the natural world, the effects of climate change are a logical subject to turn to: the familiar themes of landscape—flux, melt, flow, loss—have sped up, and are imbued with an evident ethical immediacy. Yet for all the legitimacy of these concerns, and the powerful didactic message the canvases can convey, there’s something ill-fitting in the way their testimony works. The claim to documentary specificity—watching this place, over this elapsed time—sits awkwardly with the simultaneous emphasis on artifice and conceit. We feel this in a persistent unease, for example, as to our own spatial and temporal relationship to these views. From where do we examine the scene? When and how do we watch it? Is this the scientific eye of the survey, in other words, reporting what it sees, or a grander prospect, one that assumes authorial omniscience and makes the landscape over in its own image?

Visually and technically, these are some of the most interesting works that Burko has done yet, and their swaths of white ground—along with blurred reflections and foggy curls of mist—hint seductively at the limits of what we can see. These landscapes are riddled with blind spots. But such preoccupations with sight and its breakdowns make the problem noted above all the more glaring. Sumptuous and spare to look at, thrilling in their knitting together of precision and ambiguity, these paintings in the end cannot escape a vagueness of method and meaning at their core.

