



polar:
photographs
from the ice





Greenland Portrait #1, 2006, Ultrachrome inks on archival paper

introduction

Nobody visits the globe's polar regions on a whim. It's a challenge to get there and a still greater challenge to stay for any length of time. Most of those who go are engaged in scientific study. As a consequence, few of us have any firsthand knowledge of these regions at all. Images we have in our heads are usually photographs, images captured by photographers who were also (or primarily) scientists and explorers. The work of photographers such as Bradford Washburn are published often because they convey the breathtaking sweep of such places, the largeness of the polar regions' beauty. What we don't often experience are images that ground these areas within human scale and lived experience.

Patrick Smith gives us what the other photographers don't. In his work we sense the unnaturalness of human presence and the determination to fly in the face of that and be there anyway. We see the strangeness of marking distance or marking time. There is occasionally an absurdist, comic element,

and at other times a stark commentary on how much these faraway areas matter. There is the suggestion of travel without clear destination. There is human labor and anonymity. The photographs are deeply beautiful; because they are beautiful we gaze longer and absorb their content more fully.

Just as the average nineteenth-century American learned about the country—the West in particular—through the efforts of artists, so we today learn about the polar regions through the work of artists. The age of explorer-artists is by no means over, though it remains the purview of the hardy. Patrick Smith travels among the select few, and it is with a sense of privilege that the Yellowstone Art Museum hosts *Polar: Photographs from the Ice: Antarctica to Greenland*.

Robyn G. Peterson
Executive Director
Yellowstone Art Museum



A Brief Period of Time, 1998-2002, selenium-toned infrared black-and-white silver prints

polar: photographs from the ice

Antarctica to Greenland - Patrick Smith

by Gordon McConnell

Working on the Polar Frontier

The polar regions of the earth are remote and inhospitable, with vast expanses of snow and ice; long intervals of light, dark, or twilight; and temperatures far below zero. Antarctica and the interior of Greenland, an immense glacier covering over 80 percent of the world's largest island, remained unexplored until the early twentieth century. Today, the polar regions are a frontier of scientific exploration. About thirty nations operate research stations in Antarctica, and among them are the United States Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station and McMurdo Station. Summit Station in Greenland, established by the National Science Foundation (NSF) in 1989, is one of two research camps located on the ice sheet. Analysis of the layering and chemical composition of ice cores recovered at Summit Station, to a depth of 1.9 miles and dating back 100,000 years, has revolutionized climatology.

Billings photographer Patrick Smith has worked at all three of these facilities. Since 1986, he has spent nearly eight years, at intervals ranging from a month to a year, working as a power plant operator/mechanic and heavy equipment operator/mechanic responsible for repair and maintenance of heavy equipment, power generators, heating systems, electrical systems, and fuel and water-pumping systems. Smith's work, operating and maintain-

ing power generation and other systems under extremely adverse conditions, is essential to life support and the completion of scientific projects. He is also involved in collecting scientific data.

In 1997-1998, he was among the first four-person team to overwinter at Summit Station, an experiment in yearlong scientific continuity that succeeded and proved the viability of living on the icecap in a small, isolated camp. At an elevation of 10,400 feet, the station is 500 miles from the nearest settlement. Winter lasts from August to April with total darkness lasting for 75 days. Temperatures range from above zero to minus 80 degrees Fahrenheit. In the summer of 2008, he was part of the three-month Greenland Inland Traverse from Thule to Summit Station, pioneering, in a fourteen-hundred-mile round trip, a fuel and cargo resupply route across the glacier. He returned to Thule this summer for a month to help prepare new equipment for next year's traverse.

Making Photographs in “a Cold, Well-Lighted Place”

As stark and hostile as the polar environment is, it is also uniquely beautiful. Smith is amazed by the light and surprising range of colors, the wind-carved snow formations, the dazzling nighttime auroras. It appears unspoiled and pristine. Even in the coldest weather, he tries to go out skiing. “It’s a feeling I can’t get anywhere in the world, just being out,” he told *Billings Gazette* reporter

Donna Healy in 2005. “You ski out five or six miles and look in every direction you can see as far as the horizon lets you, and it’s absolutely beautiful. There’s just nothing there to distract you in any way.”

“Working and photographing during the last 20 years at research stations in Greenland and Antarctica has always been a challenge for me,” Smith says in his most recent artist statement. “The challenge is not the extremes of cold, wind, and isolation. What the environment offers I accept and work with willingly. The contest for me is to find a visual balance of human presence contrasted with the extremes of the icecap. A solitary photograph of the icecap might not be perceived as a very dynamic image. There is the sky, the vast white icecap, and a horizon line dividing the two. That being said, I find these simple attributes elicit ideas that take advantage of this unique environment.”

For Pat Smith, the polar landscape is something of a blank canvas or, to paraphrase Hemingway, “a cold, well-lighted place.” As he told me in an interview in July this year, “The icecap, as seen in many of my images, is stark; there’s nothing there. I feel this is what brings out the style of photography I do because the open space lends itself to creativity—adding sometimes simple objects to space or taking away, or maybe creating a narrative with multiple images pieced together. I leave my room, maybe bringing a selection of my older photographs or found images, or even dragging a sled filled with bamboo poles to define and work with the open space of the icecap. Conditions such as visibility, temperature, and light certainly influence how that day’s photographing goes.”

While some of his photographs are straightforward documents of the people and installations, the ice-scape and sky, much of Smith’s artistic work relies on conceptual and constructive approaches to *making* photographs. Smith often uses simple props like bamboo poles, small

lettered signs, masks, or found photographs. He improvises for the camera, posing and sometimes performing as the self-timer releases the shutter. The influence of performance and earthworks artists, and the photo-documentation of their works, is evident in Smith’s photographs. He also cites conceptual photographers like John Pfahl, Cindy Sherman, and the artist John Baldessari as influences.

The photographs often have an existential dimension, balancing human presence with a hostile but austere beautiful environment. A sense of absurdist humor and fondness for surreal juxtapositions is richly evident, as is a consciousness of the artifice of photography and how meaning can be constructed in photographic terms.

Smith divides his work into cold weather portraits, photos-within-photos, images utilizing signs with statements, and grids. There are no rigid boundaries between these categories, rather, they comprise elements Smith deploys in ingenious ways as he constructs his images.

Cold Weather Portraits

Cold weather portraits are straightforward documents but can be alien in appearance for the clothing used to combat temperatures as low as -80F. — Patrick Smith

When Smith was about thirteen and living with his family on an airbase in Japan, he bought his first camera and began making photographs of people and places in nearby cities, including Tokyo. He learned how to develop and print black-and-white photographs and hand-color them with oil colors. The *Polar Portraits* series, dating to the 1980s, are sets of four delicately hand-colored silver print portraits with the subjects wearing masks, goggles, knitted hats, and hooded parkas. Among the scientists and technicians are explorer/adventurers



Horizon Line, 2007, Ultrachrome inks on archival paper



Fuel Team 3, 1988, oil-colored black-and-white infrared print

Reinhold Messner and Mitsuro Ohba, who both used Smith's photographs in their books on Antarctica.

A later group of portraits taken in Greenland are digital photographs printed in Ultrachrome inks. The subjects wear masks of varying patterns designed to protect the face and still make it possible to breathe in frigid conditions. *Greenland Portraits #1* and *#2* are enlarged by tiling, matting, and framing together nine separate prints. "Tiling" to make an enlargement reinforces the concept that the image is constructed, that technology and artifice are involved, that the *work* of art is not seamless illusion. The scale allows for a detailed study of the interface between the warm micro-climate around a respiring human, and the rime collecting through the mask in the frigid air.

Photos within Photos

Found photographs and photographs I have taken at another time are incorporated into new photographs for the contrast of environments, time differences, or simply because of the way they are perceived within the context of the Icecap. — Patrick Smith

Some of the photographs are appropriated from other artists, notably the strange portraits of children by German photographer Loretta Lux. Others are Smith's photos, for example, an image of penguins or a C-130 transport plane from Antarctica carried to Greenland. Like the 1970s works of photographer Kenneth Josephson, Smith extends a hand into the frame to introduce another photograph, creating a tension between representation, reproduction, and reality.

The human element and portraiture are salient in all of Pat Smith's photography. Loretta Lux's images of children are intriguing, as formally refined and serious in tone as the works of Spanish court painter Diego

Velásquez. The background in the Lux photo is as neutral as the arctic landscape (*A Photograph of a Photograph Titled MARIANNE by Loretta Lux, a Photographer Who Has No Idea That MARIANNE Was Taken to Greenland and Photographed Four Feet above the Icecap in April of 2007*). The grooming, clothing, and posture of the girl are a refined contrast to the soiled work glove that holds the print. Of course, the print is a reproduction, and Smith's re-photography is another layer of reproduction. The aura of the original is displaced by conceptual gamesmanship, the human element still front and center.

In *Emperor Penguins* (1987-2006, Ross Island, Antarctica, and Summit, Greenland) the flightless birds are hand-colored in festive Easter egg colors. The silver print shot in Antarctica is held up against the Greenland horizon. The penguins no more belong to this landscape than Loretta Lux's children do. Holding up a print in front of the camera—it's truly a chicken (or penguin) and egg situation. Conventional artifice breaks down. The photographer turns the window around on itself. Images are portable, while real places are fixed.

Ski-equipped Hercules C-130 cargo planes transport supplies and personnel to research stations in Greenland and Antarctica during the summer—*Hercules C-130 (South Pole, South Pole; Summit, Greenland)*, 1988-2006. The arrival of a transport plane is an important event. Smith's photograph-within-a-photograph-within-a-photograph commemorates the repetitiveness of the plane's comings and goings, occasions that merit the taking of a photograph and that look much the same in either polar region. Obviously, a photograph captures just one dimension of an experience; the art of photography is as much about what is left out as what is shown.

Images Utilizing Signs with Statements and The Bamboo Series

Some solitary images utilize signs with statements that might describe or enforce the strangeness of this surreal landscape. — Patrick Smith

In a series from 2007, *Facts from the Greenland Icecap*, the artist places lettered placards on bamboo poles planted in the snow. Some statements recall surrealist painter René Magritte's painting of a smoking pipe, labeled in French "This Is Not a Pipe." Smith's statements include *This Is Not a Photograph* and *This Is Not the Greenland Icecap* and *This Snow Is Not White in Color*. These statements have aesthetic and satiric value, made as they are in a place where scientific observations predominate. A silver print from 1998, *Empty*, is virtually that—an icy plain, a flat horizon and sky, a sign on a bamboo pole reading "Empty."

Bamboo poles are used on the Greenland Icecap to mark locations, routes, and measure snow accumulations. One of Smith's jobs has been to take baseline measurements at a four-acre bamboo grid site called the "bamboo forest." In *Horizon Line*, 2007, he lines up a string with the horizon, flattening the space and working against the perspectival illusionism of photographers like Jan Dibbets or John Pfahl. Pieces in the *Bamboo Series* are like stills of performance art pieces. In *Bamboo Series #8*, 2006, the artist lies prone on the snow outside a circle of poles; in *Bamboo Series #16*, 2006, the figure in the parka occupies a space in a line of bamboo poles.

Multiple Image Photographs

A grid of photographs can show a passage of time, possibly an element of mystery with an interesting composition of color and design. — Patrick Smith

The grid is a device that Smith deploys to increasingly powerful effect. The images are larger in scale, the narratives more complex, and some investigate abstraction and environmental commentary. Most of the other devices—portraits, pictures-within-pictures, the use of signs and other props—appear in these works.

1-2-3 Traverse across Greenland, 2008, shows the tracks of Smith's snowmobile trailing back to the distant horizon. On the 2008 traverse, he scouted miles ahead of the main party into a landscape far more open and empty than the starkest prairie, desert, or salt flat of the American West. In a way, this is emblematic of his journey in life, from Louisiana Tech, where in 1980 he completed his B.F.A. in photography and moved to the wide open spaces of Montana. Of the polar photographs, this one most resembles the landscapes Smith has made in Montana and Wyoming, some of which have focused on the coal bed methane industry of Wyoming. Instead of reading like frames in a graphic novel, the three panels scan an almost inconceivably vast and lonely place.

In *the Red-Haired Girl in Loretta Lux's Photograph "The Rose Garden" Photographed in Greenland*, 2007, the mysterious masked man in cold weather gear brings the image of the girl in the garden to the camera from out of the cold nowhere, making a narrative performance out of simultaneously holding and appropriating a photograph, exposing it in his gloved hand to the gallery of the frozen north. *A Dialog Describing an Event That Took Place...*, 2007, is a nine-frame fiction showing a figure moving through the snow holding an explanatory title card.

In *Nine Photographs of Snow*, 2007, examples of wind-driven crystalline formations called "sastrugi," the effect of sculptural relief is accentuated. Spatial recession is evident in some panels, while others seem to be shot so that the subject is parallel to the picture plane. This is a zone of photography where the inventory of descriptive



A Photograph of a Photograph Titled MARIANNE by Loretta Lux, a Photographer Who Has No Idea That MARIANNE Was Taken to Greenland and Photographed Four Feet Above the Icecap in April of 2007, 2007, Ultrachrome inks on archival paper



Melting Ice (Warmest Summer on Record, Pituffik, Greenland), 2009, Ultrachrome inks on archival paper

detail results in a kind of abstraction. A nine-panel study of scrap metal at Thule Air Base, *Recycle*, 2009, is an abstraction with a disturbing subtext.

In one of his most powerful compositions, *Melting Ice (Warmest Summer on Record, Pituffik, Greenland)*, 2009, Smith documents his visit to the coast, holding a chunk of melting ice in his bare hand against a backdrop showing a melting glacier, icebergs, and ice fragments on the beach. Smith's work contrasts with the spectacle of James Balog's *Extreme Ice Survey*, which chronicles melting glaciers in time-lapse animations. His *Melting Ice* is more intimate, making global warming into an experience you can hold in your hand.

The NSF sponsors an artist-in-residence program that allows a select few artists to live and work briefly at polar research stations. But Patrick Smith's experience as an artist in these places, now spanning 24 years, is unmatched. His activity as a photographer is no casual diversion, but a passionate artistic inquiry of impressive scope and depth. He continues to work on an aesthetic frontier, bringing an artist's sensibility and insight to a realm of experience few will otherwise know.

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Polar Portraits #4 1989-1998, oil-colored black-and-white infrared print



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Antarctica to Greenland
Patrick Smith

October 7, 2010 - January 9, 2011



ABOVE: *N77 08.33 W61 02.23 Traverse across Greenland*, 2008, Ultrachrome inks on archival paper
COVER: *Nine Photographs of Snow*, 2007, Ultrachrome inks on archival paper