



# Blending Beauty Into the Icebergs: An Interview with environmentalist painter Zaria Forman

Words by Leah Abraham

Cierva Cove, Antarctica no.2

There is something starkly mythical encased in the clandestine landscapes of the Arctic. For many of us, it's a barren territory of snow; conceivable, though farthest away from our reach. Many of us could go through our entire lives not having an inkling of what's out there in the vast white area at the bottom of the world map. But for some, remote landscapes are a revered source of inspiration.

Brooklyn-based artist and educator, Zaria Forman may be known to some as the iceberg impressionist. Capturing the eyes and hearts of many with alluring studies of glaciers and the frosty landscapes of Greenland and the Arctic. Forman isn't simply a fine artist, but a devoted documentarian of ice: "Artists play a critical role in communicating climate change, which is arguably the most important challenge we face as a global community. I have dedicated my career to translating and illuminating scientists' warnings and statistics

through an accessible medium – one that moves us in a way that statistics may not."

Finding ways to address the impact of climate change on our environment is a topic that has as many layers, as the sheets of ice themselves. Yet there is a remarkable traction to Forman's drawings that call to our immediate attention. As a vehement form of activism, Forman's drawings function as visual artefacts that transport viewers right to the core of the plight of melting ice caps: "If people can experience the sublimity of these landscapes, perhaps they will be inspired to protect and preserve them."

Using merely paper, soft pastels and charcoal, her agile hands, and exceptional memory, Forman is able to conjure up life-like drawings of distant icebergs, as if she were a sculptor – smudging

and blending pastel pigment with her steady unflinching precision. Depicting their marvellous grandeur, rather than their melting decline, is what she graciously considers her artistic duty, and life's mission: "Drawing is my tool for progressive change. My art works in tandem with other tools, like NASA's scientific data or your publication, in order to reach a large audience. Together we send a unified message."

For Forman, her drawings are not limited to exhibition walls in gallery spaces; her rich and dazzling compositions make for an equally wondrous viewing in digital formats, having garnered a global wealth of fans and followers on platforms such as Instagram and Vimeo. She has been lucky enough to join NASA on several expeditions to Greenland and Antarctica, capturing magnificent ice landscapes through multiple photographs to refer back to when drawing in the

studio. In 2015 Forman completed a 4 week residency aboard the National Geographic explorer, which enabled her to complete a photo series and video installation for her recent solo exhibition, Antarctica.

Additionally, Forman has been featured at Harvard University and in Banksy's Dismaland, her works have appeared in the Wall Street Journal and The Huffington Post, and they have even been used as set design for the Netflix TV series House of Cards. As a devout traveller and impassioned climate change educator, Forman remains resolute in her ability to create images that transcend geographic borders and place us in intimate proximity to the North and South poles; "My drawings explore moments of transition, turbulence and tranquillity in the landscape, allowing viewers to emotionally connect with a place they may never have the chance to visit. I choose to convey the beauty as opposed to the devastation of threatened places."





Greenland no.72

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#### On Forman's Artistic Process

“When I travel, I take thousands of photographs. I often make a few small sketches on-site to get a feel for the landscape. Once I return to the studio, I draw from my memory of the experience, as well as from the photographs, to create large-scale compositions. Occasionally I will reinvent the water or sky, alter the shape of the ice, or mix and match a few different images to create the composition I envision. I begin with a very simple pencil sketch so I have a few major lines to follow, and then I add layers of pigment onto the paper, smudging everything with my palms and fingers and breaking the pastel into sharp shards to render finer details.”

“The process of drawing with pastels is simple and straightforward: cut the paper, make the marks. The material demands a minimalistic approach, as there isn't much room for error or re-working, the paper's tooth can hold only a few thin layers of pigment. I rarely use an eraser – I prefer to work with my 'mistakes,' enjoying the challenge of resolving them with limited marks. I love the simplicity of the process, as it has taught me a great deal about letting go. I become easily lost in tiny details and if the pastel and paper did not provide limitations, I fear I would never know when to stop, or when a composition was complete.”

“In August of 2012 I led an Arctic expedition up the north-west coast of Greenland, which changed my art and my

life. It was a trip my mother and I designed based on the 1869 expedition of American painter, William Bradford: the very first Arctic art expedition.”

#### On Forman's greatest Inspirations

“My mother is one of my greatest influences. Her photography and ability to focus on the positive rather than the negative have shaped my art in innumerable ways. She taught me the importance of loving what you do, and carrying out projects full force, no matter what obstacles lie in the way. Above all though, her dedication, passion, and perseverance continue to inspire me. She would spend hours on an icy cliff edge, waiting for the sunlight to illuminate the frame through her camera lens that she had chosen, smiling happily, long after the rest of the family's toes had gone numb. We would whine and complain, urging her to call it a day so we could return indoors and have a warm meal, yet she wouldn't budge until she knew she had captured what she wanted.

She was diagnosed with brain cancer on Mother's Day in 2011 and passed away six months later. During the months of her illness, her dedication to the expedition never wavered and I promised to carry out her final journey. In Greenland I was compelled to address the concept of saying goodbye on scales both global and personal, as I scattered my mother's ashes amidst the melting ice. During my most recent trip to Greenland this past April, I was able to visit that same place in honour of my mother. It is a very special place to me.”



Ererra Channel, Antarctica no.1



Whale Bay no. 4

“Bays that enclose grounded icebergs like these are called ‘iceberg graveyards,’ a gloomy, yet fitting title that expresses the reverence, silence, and sacredness of this landscape.”

#### On Whale Bay no.4

“Whale Bay no. 4 is a particularly special drawing for me. It is large (7 feet by 12 feet) and is based on a beautiful place on the Western side of the Antarctic peninsula called Whale Bay. A glacier near the bay carves icebergs into the sea—as all glaciers eventually do—and the wind and water currents carry these icebergs directly into Whale Bay.”

I once had the opportunity to explore Whale Bay for two hours in a small boat, riding around massive, majestic, ice structures. I sat in total awe for every moment. A purple-grey sky loomed above and the winds were calm, creating a tranquillity that allowed for perfect reflections of the ice and sky on the water's surface. Our little boat circled around the most astonishing, intricately sculpted, glowing blue icebergs I have ever seen. I had no idea there were so many shades of bright sapphire blues! I shot hundreds of photographs, at times having to force my camera into my lap so I could relax and simply experience the breathtaking beauty.

Bays that enclose grounded icebergs like these are called “iceberg graveyards” – a gloomy, yet fitting title that expresses the reverence, silence, and sanctity of this landscape. Throughout the icebergs' lifespans in the bay, the wind and waves sculpt them into unimaginable shapes. Earth's elements become artist's hands, transforming graveyards into sculpture gardens.” THE EARTH ISSUE

