

Drawing and Climate Change

Zaria Forman interview with Richard Bright (editor of *Interalia Magazine* www.interaliomag.org) for the Jan/Feb 2016 issue 'Drawing Thoughts'.



Zaria Forman (Photo by Dustin Cohen)

Richard Bright: Can we begin by you saying something about your background?

Zaria Forman: I grew up in Piermont, NY, about 30 min north of NYC. I went to Green Meadow Waldorf school from 6th grade through high school - a very small school with an alternative approach to education, in which art is greatly infused. I taught yoga for 10 years. I've been drawing ever since I could hold a crayon, so it's really the years that trained me, but I did major in Studio Art at Skidmore College.

I studied at the Student Art Centers International in Florence, Italy and received a BS in Studio Arts at Skidmore College in New York. My works have been in publications such as Juxtapoz Magazine, National Geographic Magazine, Huffington Post, and the Smithsonian Magazine. I was featured on Good Day New York, Fox News, and interviewed by Lucy Yang on ABC7 Eyewitness News.



Greenland No 63, 50"x 75", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2013. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

RB: Your work documents Climate Change and its effects. What was the inspiration for this interest and approach?

ZF: The inspiration for my drawings began in my early childhood when I traveled with my family throughout several of the world's most remote landscapes, which became the subject of my mother's fine art photography. I developed an appreciation for the beauty and vastness of the ever-changing sky and sea. I loved watching a far-off storm on the western desert plains; the monsoon rains of southern India; and the cold arctic light illuminating Greenland's waters.

I have very fond memories of our family trips and consider them a vital part of my upbringing and education. I feel very fortunate that I had the opportunity to see so much of the world, and to learn first-hand about cultures so vastly different from my own. This myriad of experiences instilled in me a love and need to continue exploring and learning for the rest of my life.



Maldives no.13, 72"x 127.5", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2015. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

Artists play a critical role in communicating climate change, which is arguably the most important challenge we face as a global community. The severity of the climate crisis really hit me when I visited Greenland for the first time in 2006. I felt both the power and the fragility of the landscape there. The sheer size, majesty, and beauty of the icebergs is humbling. The ice fjords are alive with movement and thunderous cracking – reminders of their destructive capabilities. Yet while their threatening potential is evident, so is their vulnerability: I could see the ice melting under the unseasonably warm sun.



Greenland no.69, 50" x 50", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2014. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

The severity of the situation was brought to light even more clearly in conversations I had with locals. Their landscape is transforming so drastically that they are forced to adapt in order to survive. They spoke of vast ice fjords that are not freezing as they once did, challenging the lifestyle of the subsistence hunting communities that dot the coastlines. The fjords are the communities' hunting grounds for seal, walrus, and other animals that provide sustenance, warmth and other crucial items necessary for Arctic survival. Insufficient ice severely limits their hunting grounds. Greenland has no railways, no inland waterways, and virtually no roads between towns. Their major method of transportation is by boat around the coast in summer and by dog sled in winter (which, ten years ago, made up most of the year). Without frozen fjords, their dogs and sleds are rendered useless, and many cannot afford to travel very far by boat. This is just one of enumerable ways the warming Arctic is affecting the Inuit way of life.



Greenland no.52, 45" x 60", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2012. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

RB: How can art facilitate a deeper understanding of Climate Change?

ZF: Studies have shown that art can impact viewers' emotions more effectively than an essay or a doom and gloom newspaper article. Neuroscience tells us that humans take action and make decisions based on emotion above all else. My career is dedicated to translating and illuminating scientists' warnings and statistics into an accessible medium that people can connect with, on a level that might be deeper than scientific facts can penetrate.

My drawings explore moments of transition, turbulence, and tranquility 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. If people can experience the sublimity of these landscapes, perhaps they will be inspired to protect and preserve them.



Deception Island, Antarctica, 72" x 128", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2015. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

RB: Can you say something about the 'Chasing the Light' expedition? What were its aims?

ZF: In August 2012, I led an Arctic expedition up the NW coast of Greenland. Called "Chasing the Light". It was the second expedition the mission of which was to create art inspired by Greenland's dramatic geography. The first, in 1869, was led by the American painter William Bradford. My mother, Rena Bass Forman, had conceived the idea for the voyage, but did not live to see it through. During the months of her illness her dedication to the expedition never wavered and I promised to carry out her final journey.

RB: What role does pre-determination versus spontaneity play in the working process of your drawings?

ZF: 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 re-invent 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.



Waipi'o Valley, Hawaii no. 3, 56" x 85", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2015. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

RB: What do you think your drawings achieved that a photograph cannot?

ZF: As I mentioned a little bit in the answer above, I source from photographs I took as well as draw from the memory of my experience. My framer once said to me: "You are saying that a photograph is not of an instant- it's of a length of time while the light is gathered on the emulsion. In a sense, it's performative to open that time out again in the drawings, and slow it down, and to make something easy to access that was impossible to access." I love the way he put it, and I agree with him. I don't set out to make photorealistic drawings. Rather, I attempt to portray the landscape as I experienced it. I use photographs to achieve this ultimate goal, simply because my memory isn't good enough to retain all the details I see! My personal and emotional experience influences the composition (how can it not?).

RB: What do you hope people will take away from the art you create?

ZF: My biggest hope is that I will inspire change. I, as well as fellow artists [Drew Denny](#) and [Lisa Lebofsky](#), started a project called [Ice to Islands](#) just for that very reason. The "Ice to Islands Project" is intended to bring awareness to polar ice melt, rising sea levels, and the cultural and socio-political implications of these phenomena through art. 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 into an accessible medium that people can connect with, on a level that is perhaps deeper than scientific facts can penetrate.



Svalbard no.33, 60" x 90", Soft Pastel on Paper, 2014. Image courtesy of Zaria Forman.

RB: What are your future aims and plans?

ZF: I just returned from a five week art residency aboard the National Geographic Explorer, led by Lindblad Expeditions in Antarctica. For the foreseeable future I'll be hunkering down in the studio making drawings inspired by this trip.

I'll have two drawings at PULSE Contemporary Art Fair in NYC March 3-6th, at the Winston Wächter Fine Art booth. My next solo exhibition is scheduled for Feb/March 2017 in Seattle. For more info on upcoming exhibitions please visit the [Exhibitions](#) page on my website.

I have a few other exciting projects in the works but not quite ready to announce them!

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