





A VOYAGE TO THE REAL DEEP SOUTH

DEFTLY USING DRY PIGMENTS TO DEPICT AQUEOUS ELEMENTS,
ZARIA FORMAN TAKES OFF FOR ANTARCTICA AS AN ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCE
ABOARD THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC EXPLORER

INTERVIEW BY **DAVID MOLESKY** // PORTRAIT BY **BRIAN MARANAN PINEDA**

FOR YEARS, I HAD BEEN MAKING OIL PAINTINGS OF crashing water. When I washed ashore to the West Village of Manhattan in 2013, a friend made an email introduction to Zaria Forman, whose pastel drawings of water and ice were beginning to attract a lot of attention. We met in the candlelit caverns of a local speakeasy and Zaria told me the story about how she came to paint water.

Zaria was born and raised in the metropolis of New York City. She grew up alongside her mother, Rena Bass Forman, also an artist, frequenting gallery openings and museum exhibitions. In 2006, fresh out of college, she and her mother made an expedition to the Arctic to photograph the changing landscapes. During the trip, Zaria made drawings of the horizon and sky but completely avoided ice because she felt technically unprepared to capture its elusive qualities.

Upon returning from the Arctic voyage, Zaria primarily focused on water: ocean waves crashing onto sand, calm ripples in a lake, and sky reflections. She worked from her photos of H₂O in its different states. The Far North is a magical world of ten-hour sunsets slightly obscured by

heavy mist that clings to the horizon. Zaria's dedicated studio practice cleared the fog, revealing something more substantial, an urge and responsibility to talk about climate change. Ice could no longer be omitted from her work. Rena Bass Forman was also passionate about environmental issues, her work contemplating the meditative qualities of fleeting light effects on pristine landscapes. She was in the early stages of planning a second trip to Greenland when she fell seriously ill and died just a few months later. Before she died, Zaria promised to carry out her mother's final journey, transforming her mourning into an inspired quest. The following August, she led a group of artists and scholars up the Northwest Coast of Greenland. Titled *Chasing the Light*, the art expedition mirrored the path that American painter William Bradford made on a steamship called The Panther 143 years ago. Among Zaria's group was the curator of photography for the New Bedford Whaling Museum in Massachusetts, who was preparing an exhibition of The Panther's historic voyage. Amidst the melting land of crackling ice and ancient stone peaks, Zaria scattered her mother's ashes, sealing her immortality in the landscape that inspired her.



Greenland no. 63
Soft pastel on paper
75" x 50"
2013

Since I met her in 2013, Zaria has become so busy that she has even stopped teaching yoga. At one point in early 2014, one of her pastel drawings of an iceberg held the number one position on Reddit. The internet phenomenon triggered a tidal wave of press that has only gained in momentum. Her work is making appearances on TV news programs and was even featured on Claire Underwood's office walls in the HBO drama, *House of Cards*.

This past October, I got to catch up on Zaria's latest art adventures. We met up at her solo exhibition at Winston Wachter Gallery on 25th Street in Chelsea. She had recently returned from the Dismaland exhibition outside of London where her work was installed alongside Banksy and Damien Hirst, and she was gearing up for an eventful end of the year. On November 5th and 6th, Zaria presented at TED Talks Live at the Town Hall Theatre in NYC. The following day, she departed on a five-week-long expedition to Antarctica, as an artist-in-residence aboard the National Geographic Explorer.

David Molesky: How did the trip to Antarctica come about?

Zaria Forman: I had been itching to visit Antarctica and was exploring options for how to make that happen when Todd Murphy (a phenomenal artist and dear friend) and I went to see National Geographic photographer Paul Nicklen speak at a private event uptown. We ended up in the elevator with Sven Lindblad, president of Lindblad Expeditions. I knew they occasionally invite artists aboard, and here was an opportunity to express my interest. Thankfully, Todd "broke the ice" and began talking up my work to Sven. I gave Sven my card and he emailed me a few weeks later, asking to visit my studio and take me out to dinner to discuss his ideas. First and foremost, he invited me to join the National Geographic Explorer for its upcoming Antarctic expeditions. He also suggested commissioning me to create a body of work inspired by the trip that could potentially exhibit at the National Geographic Museum. I, in turn, suggested an *Ice to Islands* exhibit. *Ice to Islands* is a project I've been developing with two of the artists who came to Greenland and the Maldives with me, and it seeks to represent disappearing landscapes, sharing stories of the people most affected by climate change.



Greenland no. 62
Soft pastel on paper
70" x 47"
2013

We have curated an exhibit including several artists whose work addresses ice melt and the subsequent rising seas, and have been looking for the perfect venue to bring it to fruition. At this moment in time, nothing is confirmed, but Sven and I have been working on developing the exhibition and its main purposes, and will be presenting it to the National Geographic museum curators soon. For the time being, Sven is commissioning me to make one piece which we will digitize for limited edition prints that will be gifted to the other passengers traveling to Antarctica.

How are you preparing for the expedition?

I already have most of my gear from previous trips. The Antarctic summer will not be as cold as some of the most frigid places I have visited, like Svalbard, the Norwegian Arctic. I've heard it will be similar to a New York winter but windier. I'll be on the National Geographic Explorer for two trips back-to-back. The first expedition embarks from Ushuaia, the southernmost town in Argentina. First, we head east to the Falkland Islands, then further east to South Georgia, and then south to the Antarctic Peninsula.

From there we head back up through the Drake Passage, known for its extremely rough waters, to Ushuaia. The second trip will return directly to the Antarctic Peninsula, where I decided I would need extra time to collect images and inspiration.

Last year, another friend was traveling with National Geographic and told me that a few of the expedition ships headed for Antarctica sank due to rough conditions.

Yes, the Drake Passage is known to be some of the roughest waters in the world. I've gotten nauseous at sea many times before but never puked. I am generally OK if I lay down—it's being vertical that is difficult for me. I'm sure I'll want to photograph the waves, though, so I'll most certainly be taking some form of sea-sickness drug to try and stay on my feet!

Who are the other passengers on the boat, and what will they be doing?

There will be about 140 passengers on each trip. The crew includes a handful of naturalists, a marine mammal scientist, an ornithologist, a Global Perspectives guest



The Maldives no. 10
Soft pastel on paper
75" x 45"
2014

speaker, an undersea specialist, and National Geographic photographers, just to name a few! National Geographic Innovation Fellow Cory Jaskolski will be exploring virtual reality video captured on board, which I'm very excited about. National Geographic and Lindblad Exhibitions are concerned with the environment and want to teach the passengers about what is happening due to climate change, inspiring people to take action.

Tell me about your mother's photography and inspirations.

My mother dedicated her life to photographing the most remote regions of the earth. The cold and isolated landscape of the Arctic consumed her interest in the last ten years of her life. She had created her own series of journeys, entitled *Chasing the Light*, and was in the early stages of planning a third in the trilogy when she fell victim to a brain tumor. The cancer quickly took over her body and mind, and she passed away six months later. During the months of her illness, her dedication to the expedition never wavered, and so I promised to carry out her final journey.

The trip was meant to mirror an art expedition that took place in 1869, led by the American painter William Bradford aboard a steamship retrofitted with a photo-processing

darkroom in the hull. John L. Dunmore and George Critcherson were two photographers who joined Bradford for this journey. When Bradford returned, he published *The Arctic Regions*, which included his paintings and sketches and photographs made by Dunmore and Critcherson, who played a pivotal role in the documentation of the voyage. My mother's work from the Arctic had often been compared to the photographs from this voyage, which led her to research it incessantly, and ultimately gave her the idea to create a modern interpretation of the trip. She managed to obtain a photocopied edition of *The Arctic Regions*, for which she planned to serve as a guide while following Bradford's historic path.

Some of your images depict Maldives. What is the connection between a tropical island and the arctic ice melt?

Continuing the story of polar melt, a significant contributing factor to rising seas, I followed the melt water from the Arctic to the Equator. I spent September 2013 in the Maldives, the lowest and flattest country in the world, collecting images and inspiration to create a body of work celebrating and representing a nation that could be entirely underwater within this century. Two award-winning artists



who participated in the Greenland expedition, painter Lisa Lebofsky, and director, filmmaker, and actress Drew Denny, joined me in this venture.

During our month on the islands, we shared the concept of our project with children on the islands, inviting them to document their homeland as it transforms throughout their lives. The children can use their creativity to continue spreading awareness while inwardly processing the ecological transformations surrounding them.

I hope my drawings will raise awareness and invite viewers to share the urgency of the Maldivians' predicament in a productive and hopeful way. I believe art can facilitate a deeper understanding of crises, helping us find meaning and optimism amidst shifting landscapes.

How do you go about tackling a beautiful seascape such as the intricate, large-scale pastel titled *Maldives no. 13*? *Maldives no. 13* was inspired by a sunrise I witnessed over a surf break in Male, the capital island of the Maldives. On that particular trip, I woke up at 4:00 a.m. several times to catch the sunrise, as I find a unique quality to the early morning light. I cropped the original photo significantly, focusing on a distant, frothy wave. In all of my drawings, I choose to convey the beauty, as opposed to the devastation of these threatened places. By drawing the viewer in, close to the glowing and tumultuous waves, I attempt to portray the conflicting sense of majesty and peril.

I do my best to depict the scenes I have experienced as honestly as possible, exactly as I remember them, down to every last color and shape. I hope all of this offers the viewer a chance to emotionally connect with a landscape they may never have the chance to visit. If you can experience the

sublimity of these landscapes, perhaps you'll be inspired to protect and preserve them.

Studies have shown that art can impact a viewer's emotions more effectively than a scary news report. Behavioral science tells us that humans take action and make decisions based on emotions above all else. This is why I have dedicated my career to translating and illuminating scientists' warnings and statistics into an accessible medium, one that people can connect with, on a level that might penetrate more deeply than scientific facts.

Tell me about the palette of colors and dry pastel material you used here.

I have been using Unison Colour Soft Pastels exclusively for over ten years now. I was introduced to them in college, and have continued to love their rich colors and soft feel. I developed a relationship with the company in the last two years, after reaching out to see if they might be interested in sponsoring some of my materials. Their pastels are handmade in Northern England, and they have been absolutely lovely to work with. When I started working on *Maldives no. 13*, I struggled to find the right color for the froth in the wave. I mixed several colors on the paper and still couldn't get it just right. I asked the Unison team if they might be up for the challenge, and thus, began a collaboration that continues today. I explain to them what I am looking for, they make some samples, and eventually we perfect it together. After several new colors were created, they decided to put together a new set titled "Ocean Blues inspired by Zaria Forman," and a few free sets were given away to fans of mine.

What kinds of reference materials do you use to guide your process?

above (clockwise from left)
Zaria Forman on-site in Greenland
and The Maldives

following spread
Waipi'o Valley, Hawaii no. 3
Soft pastel on paper
86" x 55"
2015

The Maldives no. 15
Soft pastel on paper
65" x 40"
2015

Greenland no. 72
Soft pastel on paper
60" x 60"









The Maldives no. 14
Soft pastel on paper
90" x 60"
2015

My process begins with visiting the places at the forefront of climate change. I take thousands of photographs on site. Back in the studio, I work from both my memory of the experience and the photographs to create large-scale compositions, sometimes over ten feet wide. Ninety percent of the time, I work from my own photographs, but occasionally I will use my mother's, from our first trip to Greenland together. I am immensely grateful for all of the negatives and contact sheets she left behind, as they allow me a chance to collaborate with her, even after her passing.

This past year, I have also referenced a few of my friend Todd Murphy's photographs. He has been to the Arctic and Antarctica several times, and has generously allowed me to peruse all of his photos, pick and choose, and edit as I wish. I consider the two drawings I have made from his photos of Antarctica as preliminary studies for my upcoming expedition there. It is generally important for me to physically experience the landscape I draw, but every now and then I make exceptions.

How did it come about that you were included in Dismaland? What was your take on the experience?

Banksy contacted me in early June to invite me to participate. It was an enormous honor to be a part of such an exciting spectacle. I thoroughly enjoyed the exhibit and felt it was meticulously and very well curated. It was wonderful to meet some of the other participating artists, who were all equally thrilled and honored to be there, no matter how well-known they were. Banksy was a joy to communicate with, and his crew in Weston Super-mare was not only hard-working and diligent, but also very kind and accommodating, even during the most stressful last hours of hanging the show and prepping it for opening day. The entire experience feels like a dream to me now; certainly one I will never forget!

How do you hope your art will influence the global conversation about climate change? Do you consider your work to be politically charged?

One of the many gifts my mother gave me was the ability to focus on the positive, rather than dwell in the negative. I hope my drawings can serve as records of landscapes in flux, honoring the transition, and inspiring our global community to take action for the future.

I don't like to label myself as a political or environmental artist, but my work obviously addresses a crisis that requires major changes in government policy.

JUX

zariaforman.com

Svalbard no. 33
Soft pastel on paper
90" x 60"
2014



