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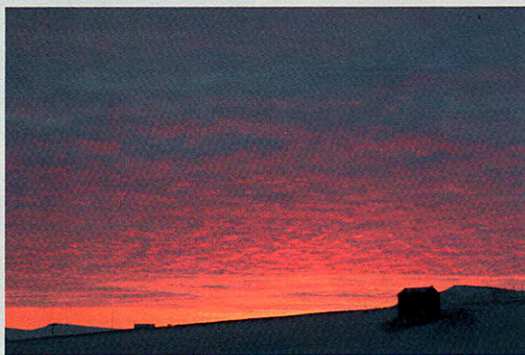
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ArtQuenchMagazine**

Expedition to the High Arctic

By Danielle Eubank



Ship In The Ice credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014



Sunrise at 11 am credit Danielle Eubank Longyearbyen Oct. 2014

I have just returned from an expedition to the High Arctic -- the paint in my sketchbook isn't yet dry. I ventured to the Arctic as part of my goal to paint all of the oceans on the planet. Now I only have one more to go, the Antarctic. I sailed to the Arctic on a 3-masted tall ship with The Arctic Circle, an expeditionary program that puts scientists and artists together to explore the High Arctic. We started in Longyearbyen, which is the northern most settlement on the planet, in the archipelago of Svalbard, an international territory north of Norway. From there we sailed to nearly 80 degrees north, just below the permanent ice that covers the North Pole. September/October is about the only time boats can get that far north. The rest of the year the permanent ice coming from the North Pole covers that part of the Arctic Ocean so boats aren't able to go any further.



Ice In The Fjord credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014



Ice on Arctic Ocean credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014

One of my great passions is exploring the 'line' between abstraction and representation in visual art. I have written about it (see ArtQuench Issue #1) and it is a large focus of my painting. I turn representational subject matter (notably water) into abstract, formal paintings. Now I have the opportunity to paint the most abstract waterscape I have ever seen.



The Brooklyn Bridge II Danielle Eubank Oil on Linen 32 x 42 inches



South Africa Danielle Eubank Oil on linen 48 x 42 inches

For my Arctic Ocean series I am faced with a natural waterscape unlike anything I have witnessed before. Normally, I deconstruct the physical forms found in water to create stacks of abstracted rhythms. In this case, the Arctic Ocean already looks abstract before I've had a chance to deconstruct it. My work is formal, abstract. I paint shapes and patterns inspired by ripples and wavelets on the surface of water. For this series I will be creating large oil on linen paintings, upwards of 7x9 feet, exploring the emotive qualities of the formal shapes of the Arctic Ocean including the ice and fjords.

Expedition to the High Arctic Continued

The color of the Arctic is a steel-Prussian blue this time of year, and every few hours I saw a different type of ice in the water. One hour a fjord could be filled with polygonal pillows of ice dusted with white snow. The next hour thousands of miniature pale blue icebergs would float by, snapping and cracking as the gases inside them burst. At one point we were surrounded by so much ice that I felt like I was floating in a mint julep. At the end of every fjord is a glacier, a miles long wall of turquoise-cerulean ice calving into the sea, carrying with it bits of rock and sand, carving out the mountains in real-time. (The ship's crew told me that the glaciers are a lot smaller than even 5 years ago. We saw islands this time that have probably not been revealed in thousands of years).

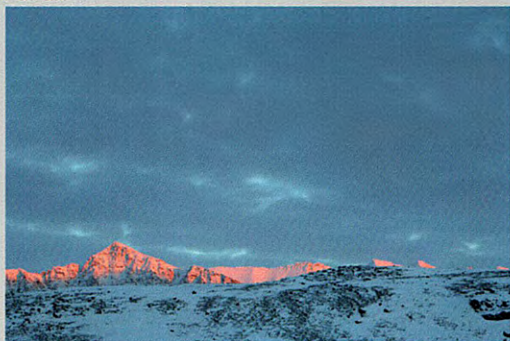


Islands Revealed by Receding Glaciers credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014



Calving Glacier credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014

The entire world there is an exercise in abstraction. It is as if Mother Nature is playing a trick on we 'middle Earthers' by showing us what she can do at the poles. For a start, the sun doesn't rise above the horizon starting about the 3rd week of October. This means that there is daylight, but not daylight as we know it. Instead it's a kind of bluish-grey light, with the tips of the mountains alight with the last pink rays of sun coloring their peaks. From November 14th – January 29th there is no light at all.



Sun on Mountain Peaks credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014



Sunlight credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014

Not only do the sun and water behave strangely, but so does the moon. This time of the year the moon makes an oval around the North Pole so it is nearly always visible. The night sky is increasingly important as the days get shorter by about 20 minutes per day. After several days of sailing we had a clear night and many of us were anxious to see the Northern Lights, the aurora borealis. Ironically, the captain of the boat informed us that we were too far north to see them. They form a ring around the pole and we were well inside the ring. We did finally see them some time later when we worked our way south. We had to look south in order to see them.



Hunters Cabin credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014



Omnipresent Moon credit Danielle Eubank Pyramiden Oct. 2014

Expedition to the High Arctic Continued

Each day was spent on land, hiking, sketching, and taking photos. I filled up an entire sketchbook with ideas and impressions (see images). Like any tourist in an unfamiliar land, my sketches are first impressions only and will stay in the sketchbook. However, I will use the sketches as launching points for ideas and memories of the scenery. A lot of the behavior of the landscape is dictated by the permafrost that is 100-600 meters thick. Because the earth is frozen starting about 1 meter beneath the surface, there is no drainage that means only select plants can grow there. Both of the Earth's poles are deserts and this is fortunate for the plants given the lack of drainage. Some plants, like the Tufted Saxifrage, look similar to what I find in the desert of Southern California. No trees grow in Svalbard. Frost heave and soil creep are conditions of permafrost that push rocks to the surface and make buildings unstable. In Longyearbyen all water, sewer, and electrical ducts have to be above the surface. Stones split due to extreme cold and heat fluctuations over the years have caused some of the loveliest abstract shapes I have seen in nature.



If the landscape isn't strange enough, the history of human exploration, determination and settlement in the hostile environment of the High Arctic is baffling and impressive. (I encourage everyone to read some of the myriad books devoted to the subject where ships get crushed in the ice and people are eaten by polar bears). We were lucky to visit the Russian ghost town of Pyramiden. Because Svalbard is an international territory it isn't owned by any one country, which means several countries have settlements or research facilities there. Pyramiden was a coal mining town, closed and mothballed in 1998. There are 5 people (6 if you count the statue of Vladimir Lenin) that live there year round to keep an eye on the place. It used to be home to 800 people, which would be a giant city on this archipelago. The interiors still have photos of residents, the basketball court displays the final game's score on its board while a lone basketball rests on the floor, the cinema projector is threaded with film, a pommel horse waits in the center of the floor ready for the next young athlete, and dead potted plants line the cafeteria walls. They provide an eerie reflection of the aspirations of all the people that have tried to live there before.

The true residents of Svalbard are the ones that have been there for millions of years: the polar bears, reindeer, arctic foxes, seals, walrus and birds. We were fortunate to see all the large animals except the polar bears who were hopefully on the east side of the archipelago digging maternity dens. Their numbers are decreasing due to shrinking summer sea ice and chemicals (e.g. PCBs and DDT) in the seal meat that they eat. By far the most charming sight was the herds of walrus - animals so odd looking that they must be another trick by Mother Nature. Weighing 900-1500kg (2000-3,300lbs) each, they are awkward moving around on their flippers on land. Their tusks seem too big for their relatively small heads perched so far on top of their bodies that they appear as an afterthought. When in the water all that can be seen are bobbing heads with big brown eyes and asymmetrical broken tusks. Deft swimmers, they are also efficient eaters - walrus suck mollusks out of their shells, turning them inside out with their powerful suction. They can locate and eat a shellfish in about 6 seconds which means they can eat quite a few mollusks in one dive.

Expedition to the High Arctic Continued



Walrus credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct.2014



Walrus credit Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014



Walrus Watching the Crew Danielle Eubank Svalbard Oct. 2014

The mounds of walrus form a curious organic brown shape beneath the severe, pointed rock and ice formations that poke angrily into the sky. Steep, white mountains revealing black outcroppings resemble an inverted Robert Motherwell painting. Already abstracted, it's a rare and imposing sight. I am working on paintings of the water now. Normally I abstract representational subject matter. How do I abstract an already abstracted waterscape? The 'line' between representational and abstract imagery has already been set on the side of abstraction before I begin. I am excited about these aesthetic explorations. I suspect my paintings of the Arctic Ocean will be more abstract than my paintings of the other oceans. But who knows? Maybe they will capture the sense of wonder and surprise I experienced in a land peculiar that is both abstract and a landscape at the same time.

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