

ArtView

A person wearing a red jacket and a purple hat is shown in profile, looking out over a vast, snowy, and mountainous landscape. The person is holding a clipboard or book. The background is a soft-focus view of snow-covered mountains under a pale sky.

Books
**Rebecca
Lim**

Sculpture
**Elyssa
Sykes-Smith**

High
Impact
Andy Trieu

Poetry
Crystal Davis

Danielle
Hatherley
**Scenes
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Novels
**A New
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Publishing
**Mikhail
Strogoff**

Danielle Eubank
Arctic Visions

Abstract Arctic

Danielle Eubank



Prussian blue waters, ice pillows, frozen earth, and an omnipresent moon. I have just returned from an expedition to the High Arctic as part of my plan 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 northernmost 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.

One of my great passions is exploring the 'line' between abstraction and representation in visual art. I turn representational subject matter (notably water) into abstract, formal paintings. Now I am painting the most *abstract* waterscape I have ever seen.

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



Arctic Sketchbook: Floating ice (Oil on paper 7x10 inches)

this series I am 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.

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 crackling 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 that have probably not been revealed in thousands of years).

The entire Arctic world 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





Arctic mountains

do at the poles. For a start, the sun doesn't rise above the horizon starting the third 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 14 – January 29 there is no light at all.

Not only does the sun 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.

I filled up an entire sketchbook with ideas and impressions. Each day was spent on land, hiking, sketching, and taking photos. Like any tourist in an unfamiliar land, my sketches are first impressions and will stay in the sketchbook. I will use the sketches as launching points for ideas and memories of how the scenery affected me. 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 and 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



Our boat in a fjord





Arctic mountains

have created 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, 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 lived there for millions of years: the polar bears, reindeer, arctic foxes, seals, walruses 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 walruses – 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



Pyramiden

are bobbing heads with big brown eyes and asymmetrical broken tusks. Deft swimmers, they are also efficient eaters – walruses 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.

The mounds of walruses form a curious organic brown shape beneath the severe, pointed rock and ice formations that poke angularly 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.

Danielle Eubank is a painter interested in exploring the relationship between abstraction and realism. She is a recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant 2014-15.

In addition to her studio practice, Ms. Eubank is an expedition artist. She sailed aboard the barquentine tall ship, *The Antigua*, on an expedition to the High Arctic in Autumn 2014. She was an Expedition Artist on the *Phoenicia*, a replica 600 B.C. Phoenician vessel that circumnavigated Africa and was the Expedition Artist on the Borobudur Ship, a replica of an 8th century Indonesian boat that sailed around the African continent.

She has painted the Henley Royal Regatta since 2011. A short documentary film about her work premiered at the Newport Beach Film Festival in 2012.

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Arctic mountains

