

THREE CONCEPTUAL VISUAL MOTIFS

SUBHANKAR BANERJEE ARCTIC PHOTOGRAPHY (2000-PRESENT)

My Arctic photography started with a trip to the Canadian sub-Arctic in late 2000. The following year, I spent seven months in the Alaskan Arctic. I photographed everything I could point my lens to. At the end of the year, I realized the idea to document the Arctic is a futile one – the land is very vast, the biodiversity too broad, and the indigenous communities numerous. I had to simplify. I realized I needed a handful of motifs that I could comprehend and follow through slowly over time. The primary motif became COLOR – I wanted to present the Arctic with white, blue, gray, brown, green. Can I make a photograph with only brown and blue? brown and white? green and blue? white, blue and brown? are the kind of questions I started asking. The idea to present the Arctic with such a color framework was a political choice – in the popular conception of the Arctic around the world that part of our planet is primarily thought to be a land of “snow and ice” and “ice and snow”; and in the words of pro-development United States members of Congress and Cabinet the Alaskan Arctic has variously been described as, “flat white nothingness”, “frozen wasteland of snow and ice”, “barren wasteland” and in the US media in prominent TV programs like 60 Minutes, Arctic has been described as “hostile wasteland”. Color I thought would be a wonderful visual language to help us unlearn some of these intolerances.

The next two motifs dealt with aesthetic ideas for natural and cultural ecologies and ethics. As the project progressed the scope became narrower and intensions deeper. Instead of focusing on all kinds of wildlife, I have been focusing on only four things – BIRDS, CARIBOU, WHALES, and FISH. My main interest lies in the ideas of local, regional, and global interconnectedness. This was a political choice as well, as Arctic is thought to be a land remote and disconnected from our lives. On the contrary, hundreds of millions of birds migrate to the Arctic each spring from every corner of the Earth for nesting and rearing their young, a planetary celebration of epic scale of global interconnectedness. On the other hand, caribou, whales, and fish migrate hundreds and sometimes thousands of miles connecting up numerous indigenous communities through subsistence food harvest – local and regional connectedness. I am not interested in individual of a species, but communities of species. In my natural ecology photographs we begin to see the Arctic as a calving, nesting, and denning place for numerous species – the birthing ground.

In my cultural ecology photographs, I am primarily interested in the subsistence harvest practices as it is that which the indigenous communities feel is threatened by the dominant culture. I have chosen the BENT POSTURE as my primary aesthetic, another political choice. In a post-domestic society that we live in, the bent posture, a symbol of labor has mostly disappeared from our visual consciousness. We primarily sit down – we sit in the morning drink tea/coffee, we sit down and drive or take public transport to get to our work place, we sit down in the office, we return home and sit down to eat or watch TV and we go to sleep. The disappearance of the bent posture from our visual consciousness may have led to various forms of intolerances. I use both near and far in my aesthetic. I am deeply influenced by paintings of Jean-François Millet, Pieter Brueghel, and John Constable.

These three aesthetic strategies continue to guide my Arctic photography.