At Tufts, going far north to look at climate change

By Mark Feeney | GLOBE STAFF | FEBRUARY 10, 2014

Camille Seaman’s “Breaching Iceberg — Greenland, August 8, 2008.”

MEDFORD — Perhaps the most insidious aspect of climate change is that it can’t be seen. The effects of poverty, pollution, and pestilence are all too readily apparent. In contrast, the incremental nature of climate change, its global scale, its sweeping duration, render it — for now — invisible.

Except that it isn’t. Climate change can be witnessed, and all too clearly. It’s just that the witnessing is available in one of the remotest and least inhabited regions on the planet, the Arctic. “Seeing Glacial Time: Climate Change in the Arctic” offers work from eight artists who have ventured to the far north and created works that document
global warming and/or draw inspiration from the polar landscape. The show, up through May 18 at the Tufts University Art Gallery, has been curated by the gallery’s director, Amy Ingrid Schlegel.

The artists include a painter, Resa Blatman, a video artist, Joan Perlman, a painter-photographer, Diane Burko, and five photographers: Subhankar Banerjee, Olaf Otto Becker, Caleb Crain Marcus, Gilles Mingasson, and Camille Seaman.

The painters operate at a severe disadvantage. The Arctic is so visually stunning that any imaginative work is hard pressed to do it justice, let alone surpass it. The terrain is almost its own work of art. This comes across most clearly in Marcus’s four very large photographs, taken in Iceland, Alaska, and Norway. They have an inherent painterliness that would have made Caspar David Friedrich’s Romantic soul swoon. Swooning is not uncalled for. These images seem to belong to their own unique medium — in the same way that this terrain and climate belong to their own unique world.

Seaman focuses on a specific element of that world, icebergs. Her sense of engagement with their water-borne immensity — their individuality, too — is startling. The iceberg in one photograph resembles a chemistry experiment gone mad: a vast constellation of crystals. An iceberg in another looks like nothing so much as a breaching whale.

The latter image summons thoughts of Melville’s “whiteness of the whale,” in “Moby-Dick” — only this “whale” has a pronounced bluish tint. That’s one of the fascinating properties of snow and ice, of course, how they can take on the color of sea and sky. Burko, in her paintings and the photographs she derives them from, brings out this interplay of color.
To be sure, snow that’s not there lacks color of any sort. And the most visible evidence of climate change is the absence of snow and retreat of glaciers. Becker’s photographic procedure — shooting the same Icelandic sites a dozen years apart — can bring out the change to startling effect. Two of his pairings, of the Öraefajökull glacier, record a shocking degree of change. These diptychs double as indictments.

Unlike the rest of the show, Mingasson’s 12 photographs of a west Alaskan Inuit village focus on the human element. There’s nothing speculative about climate change for these people, whose livelihood and very lives are being affected.

Banerjee is the best-known artist in “Seeing Glacial Time.” His exacting nature studies have made him a notable figure in the environmental movement. His three photographs here are big in scale, in spirit, in impact. They’re magnificent, really. He concentrates on animal life: reindeer, migratory birds, caribou. The most striking image in a show full of striking images may be his photograph of caribou migrating in the snow. Seen from above, they look like ants atop sugar or cotton. This isn’t a bird’s-eye view. It’s a God’s-eye view. From that perspective, humans look no less insect-like. All are God’s creation, though only some have stewardship.

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