

Climate report

Painter captures harsh, changing landscapes of the Arctic Circle

By **TIM KANE**
Special to the Times Union

New Paltz artist Marcia Clark has logged more than 20,000 miles above the Arctic Circle by Cessna, helicopter, icebreaker, foot and kayak to capture the isolated, harsh terrain of icebergs and fjords in surprisingly inviting paintings.

Her oil, Mylar and aluminum canvases are painted *en plein air*, from sketches and from photographs, showing jagged rock, foreboding tundra and miles of deserted shoreline. She paints with searing whites, penetrating blues, deep greens and the grayish browns of terra firma, and has over the years become an accidental witness to climate change.

More than two dozen paintings are a part of "In Search of Ice" at the Albany Institute of History &



MARCIA CLARK'S works include Magdalena Fjord."

Art review

"IN SEARCH OF ICE"

■ **When:** Through March 1; hours: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; noon-5 p.m. Sunday

■ **Where:** Albany Institute of History & Art, 125 Washington Ave., Albany

■ **Cost:** Adults, \$10; seniors and students, \$8; children 6-12, \$6; children younger than 6, free

■ **Contact:** 462-1522; <http://www.albanyinstitute.org>

Art until March 1. Based on sojourns taken since 2001, the works cross realism and abstraction, geology and imagination.

Clark's expressive brush strokes set an ethereal tone, but never stray far from representing vistas in Greenland, Norway, Newfoundland and Alaska.

The strength of the work is Clark's vibrant interpretation of shapes and forms, not solely her role as a chronicler.

A vague outline of a face emerges from a slab of rock in "Waiting for Icebergs, Tellingate." Maps seep through in "Near St. John," while "Uppernavik Panorama #1" is cropped like a snowdrift engulfing the scene as if Clark has shaken a snow globe.

All of these techniques break up the monotony of the austere environment at the edge of the known world, adding a sense of humanity. Few people inhabit this area and Clark's frames, so when she includes small villages set hard against rock, ice, water and survival, you're tempted to knock on a door. Step inside, and you'll find an ongoing conversation about the state of the changing Arctic ecosystem. On her travels, Clark's encountered inhabitants, naturalists and tourists who bemoan the rising temperatures, melting ice and altered lifestyles. Starting with her first trip in 2001, she's gained access to vast areas much earlier in the year than normal.

That meant more time to paint, but it was like painting portraits of a dying subject. A trip to the Svalbard Archipelago in the northernmost reaches of Norway in June 2006 aboard the icebreaker Polar Star yielded an iceless journey for the first time.

"This year, on its first trip of the season, it (the Polar Star) was able to complete the journey," Clark writes in the exhibition's catalogue. "It meant seeing more wildlife,

which included Polar Bears and Reindeer" but "it was a pretty bad sign." The towering chunks of ice in "Svalbard Glacier #1" and "#2" muscularly jut forth, but hint at receding. Without wildlife, the paintings seem to predict the future.

In spring 2007, it snowed every day during May in Greenland, longer than normal, but "no one was fooled," she writes in the catalogue. "How long have you noticed a warming trend?" she asked the director of the art museum in Ilulissat. "We've been aware of it for at least eight years," he responded.

The oil-on-Mylar painting of Greenland's "Magdalena Fjord" is dominated by languid water rather than the ice and snow found in most of her scenes. Melting snow drains down a rising cliff like blood from a patient in need of triage.

The changing climate has also imperiled her journeys. A 2003 trip to Mount McKinley (Denali) in Alaska resulted in her being trapped waist-deep in snow. While staying alone at a remote cabin on Ruth Glacier in August, Clark was making a short trip to the outhouse without gloves and snowshoes when dense fog and snowfall nearly blinded her.

Then her foot slipped through the unexpectedly soft snow. She managed to move her other leg forward to propel her out of the predicament, but "whoops," she recalls, "down went the leg and this time I couldn't pull loose."

Clark tried clawing out with her bare fingers as they got colder and colder, to no avail. Yelling for help was futile. She imagined being discovered frozen in ice. A desperate calmness sunk in. After awhile, Clark realized she needed to dig backward, not forward, to release herself from the snow's icy grip. She safely returned to her cabin.

In other summers, this wouldn't have occurred, but it was "indeed due the rise in temperatures," she wrote in a recent e-mail. When the plane finally arrived after the weather lifted, "I was down to my last crumbs of food. To say I was relieved would be a considerable understatement."

► *Tim Kane is a freelance writer from Albany and a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*

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