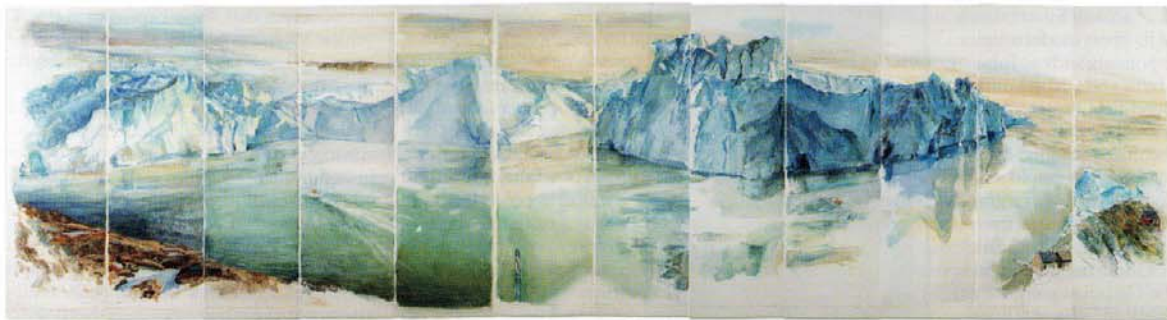


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## Marcia Clark: Making a Melting World Immutable



"Edge of the Icefiord Ilulissat, 2009"

Although they are, admittedly, very different types of artists, I always tend to think of Marcia Clark in the same breath as Rockwell Kent, whose Arctic memoir, "N by E," purchased secondhand at an antiques sale upstate the month we lost our son Holden to AIDS, provided intermittent distraction, if not escape, from my raw grief. For something about the unforgiving vastness of the Arctic, at least as I imagine it, has always given me cold comfort: a sense of the ineffable forces of nature and fate that rule our destinies and mock our puny human sentiments.

This profound pitilessness is what strikes one most powerfully about the massive, implacable edifice of ice dominating Marcia Clark's "Edge of Icefiord, Ilulissat, 2009," a panoramic oil on twelve frosted Mylar panels affixed to a six by twenty-two foot folding screen. A synthesis of observation and memory, Clark's magnificent composition confronts the uninitiated with a crystalline mountain range of ice as forbidding as it is beautiful. But with the extra-human empathy of the artist/naturalist Clark is drawn to the vulnerability of the hugely looming polar ice monsters that she paints, saying, "Icebergs can appear permanent as mountains, yet one turns for a moment and forms may shift, collapse, or vanish. There would be a poignancy even if Arctic melt were just a cyclic occurrence."

But apparently it is not. Like Rockwell Kent, Clark has written eloquently about her travels in arctic areas of Alaska, Canada, Greenland, and Svalbard. And she reports that on an earlier visit to Ilulissat, in Northwest Greenland, a local museum director assured her that a warming trend had been common knowledge for almost a decade.

"In Greenland (2007)," Clark wrote, "I watched vistas of Arctic atmosphere, and huge chunks of ice carried by the current, with a new, poignant awareness of movement and change. I can't help but be aware that I'm observing a threatened landscape. Trying to understand my place in this changing panorama, I find myself like

the naturalist John Muir and many others today, traveling to the ends of the earth, and I bear witness as an artist."

And it truly is *as an artist* that Clark bears witness in vistas that combine factual documentation with emotional immediacy and aesthetic appeal. Especially striking in "Edge of the Icefiord, Ilulissat, 2009" is what can only be called the "natural cubism" that she finds and highlights in the shifting planes and luminous reflections on the craggy surface of the ice, as well as the gestural animation, redolent of abstract expressionism, that her vigorous brushstrokes impart to the surrounding watery flow.

Altogether peculiar to Clark's Arctic landscapes, however, is a sense of vertiginousness that can only occur in a place where, because the ice is always melting, the very horizon line is up for grabs, creating the feeling that one could slide right off its slippery slopes of ice and



"Harbor Ilulissat #2, 2011"

hardened snow as if off the curve of the globe itself. Thus it seems especially apt that in another painting on frosted Mylar, "City Center Intersection, Reykjavik," a map detail is at the center of the composition and map fragments of Iceland are mounted behind the painting, creating a "palimpsest" in the sense that Gore Vidal meant when

he used that word for partially erased fragments of handwriting as the title of a memoir.

For Clark, too, endeavors to include what she refers to as "the element of time" in this and other constructs of observation and memory in which maps or fragments of them figure prominently.

Such layered allusions also enliven "Old Harbor Intersection, Reykjavik," comprised of five drawn, painted, and collaged images arranged in a cruciform format.

The sensation of vertiginousness that enlivens some of Clark's compositions emanates, here, not from the ever shifting lay of the "land," so to speak, but from a cinematic sense of being visually wheeled, as in a fast vehicle, around the picturesque harbor, catching topsy turvy glimpses of the gateway to the ice-world.

By contrast, in the oil on aluminum, "Harbor Ilulissat, #2," the clustered dwellings, smokestacks, and muddy hills

of the hamlet are blocked in on the picture plane as solidly as the elements in a Cezanne. Yet hints of "process," such as traces of pencil-line pecking like pentimento through the pigment in places and the artist's characteristically vivacious brushwork imbues even this relatively serene composition with its own sense of immediacy.

Bravura brushwork also enlivens "Ilulissat Icefiord, 2008," a vibrantly glowing oil of the majestic ice edifice painted over a map of the region transfer-printed onto the canvas, creating a metaphysical synthesis that splendidly realizes Clark's stated aim of creating a tension "between the measure of a place and the immediacy of the painted view." Nor could inveterate creatures of concrete like myself, who have never experienced anything more Arctic than the record snowfalls that blanketed New York City this past January, have wished for a more appropriate work to preserve our great adventure than "Riverside Drive, Winter 2011."

For no less than her series of muscular oil sketches of icebergs in Greenland on aluminum, this large oil on collaged Mylar of snowed-in cars lining the slippery slope alongside the park and bare trees clawing a frigid white sky evokes the terrible beauty of winter as only Marcia Clark can.

— Ed McCormack