icy shift

Four glass artists—ANNE BRODIE, DAVID RUTH, APRIL SURGENT, and EMMA VARGA—find inspiration in the majesty and vulnerability of the Antarctic landscape.

BY VICTORIA JOSSLIN

In the Age of Enlightenment, European voyages of discovery included artists and naturalists who documented remote and exotic flora, fauna, and people. The staff of Capt. James Cook's first voyage, for example, included two naturalists, two illustrators, and a scientific secretary. Among his instructions on his second voyage was the charge to find *Terra Australis Incognita*, the Unknown Land of the South.

In the last few years, a number of artists, including glass artists, have also been voyaging by ship on journeys of discovery to an exotic locale. But these are a contemporary version of the expeditionary artists, working alongside scientists in Antarctica to document the look, the surface, the experience, and the feel of the land. While sharing in their predecessors' sense of wonder, it is tinged with a note of impending loss, as they also note its impermanence—what might be called today *Terra Australis Mutans*, the Changing Land of the South. While each artist had his or her own interest in working in Antarctica, they were all struck by the visible results of climate change. Two of the artists, Americans April Surgent and David Ruth, worked at Palmer Station, on the western Antarctic Peninsula. Surgent notes that the western Antarctic Peninsula is the site of some of the world's most dramatic ecological changes, as the Antarctic Circumpolar Current pushes warm water and air currents onto its west side. All of the artists profiled for this article dismissed the connection between glass and ice as overly simplistic, preferring more nuanced answers to the relationship between medium and place.

Icebergs in the Melchior Islands, Antarctica.

Emma Varga

Eighteenth-century expeditions were funded by governments (or monarchs) and scientific societies. Similarly, today's artists are often funded by government grants. David Ruth and April Surgent, for example, were supported by the National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artist and Writers program in 2006 and 2013, respectively, which provides grantees the opportunity and support to travel to Antarctica to work at one of the three U.S. research stations, or on board one of the research vessels. In 2006–2007, Anne Brodie spent nearly three months at the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) Rothera Research Station and the refueling depot Sky Blue, sponsored by the BAS and Arts Council England. Emma Varga's 2012 Antarctica visit was supported by a grant from the Australia Council for the Arts.

While little of these artists' work is traditional landscape, all of it is, in one way or another, about the land, or the snow and ice that encase it, and for some their work is about the extreme emptiness, the highly sensitive surface that immediately documents the slightest disruption. The four artists differ widely, not only in how they use their common medium, but in the reasons they were drawn to Antarctica, what they intended to do there, and how they experienced the continent that April Surgent calls "the Ice."

Emma Varga wrote in her artist statement for her September 2013 exhibition at Canberra Glassworks that, since her student days, she has been drawn to "lonely, remote places, untouched by man." Writing in *GLASS* 117, Grace Cochrane traced the link between Varga's sense of place and her art, beginning with the medieval towers of Dubrovnik and continuing with the sky, ocean, and desert of her new home, Australia. Her work in 2007 centered on the disastrous Australian bush fires of 2007, and her work in 2008 was inspired by a trip to New Zealand.

As she learned about the dangers of global warming, Varga became interested in Antarctica, another lonely, remote place, and was determined to raise public awareness of its fragility by making glass art. She wrote in her artist statement that when she arrived, "I was completely mesmerized

Sky and snow on Deception Island, Antarctica.

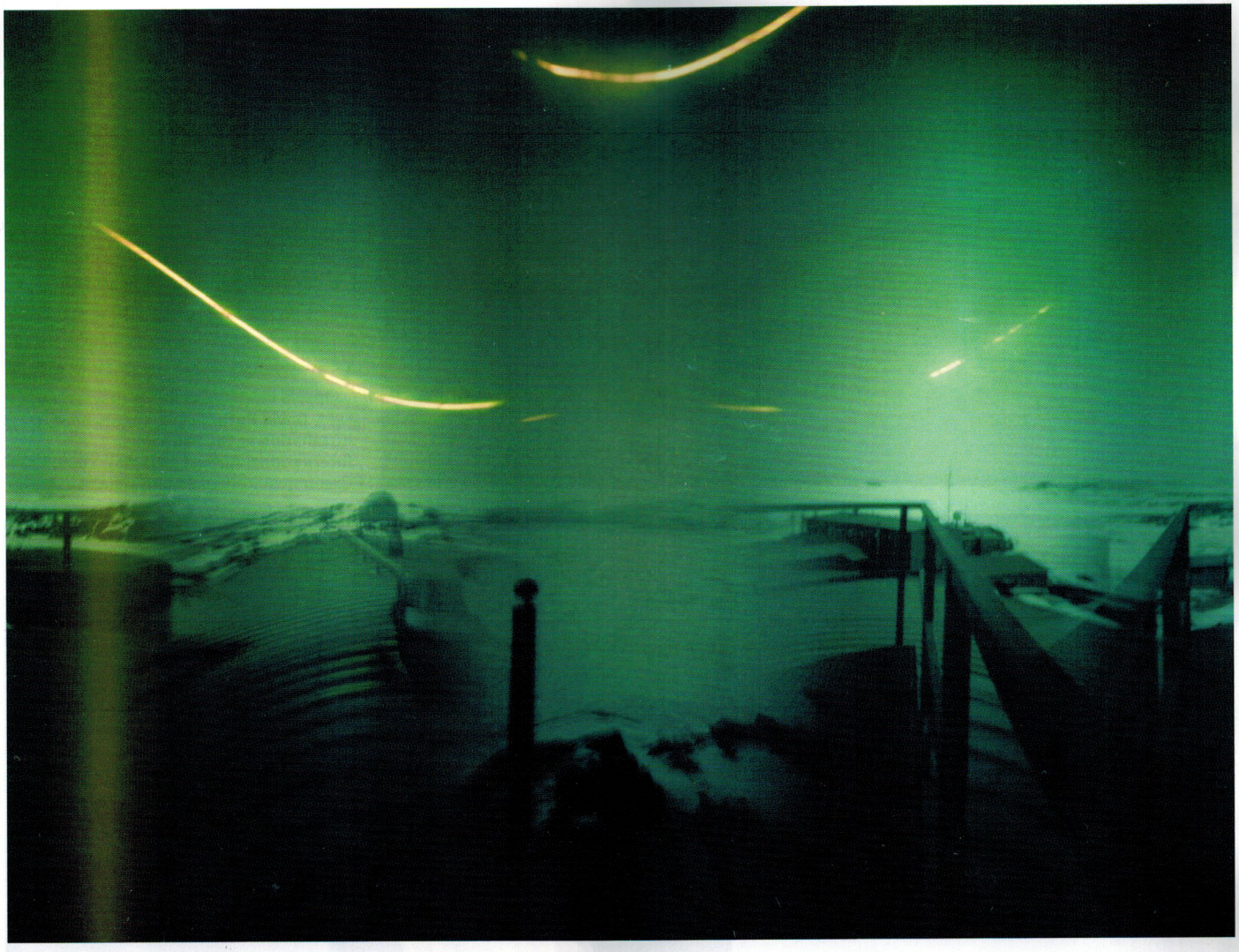
April Surgent

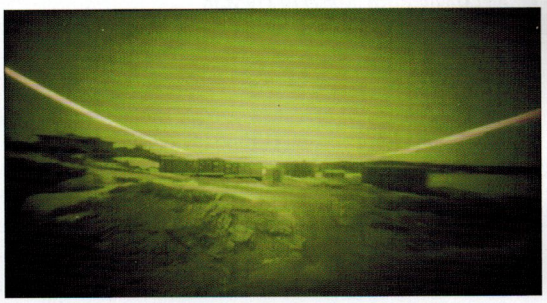
In the early 2000's, artist David Ruth was experimenting with lost-wax castings of roots, driftwood, and forest detritus, and found that when they were cast in cool blue glass, they suggested ice. In other work, such as his experiments with Pyrex, he also found himself creating ice-like shapes. In a timely moment, he came across a listing for the NSF Artists and Writers grant, and in late 2006 he and his assistant, Art Quinn, were in Palmer Station. The plan was to take texture molds off the glacier ice and stone, to be brought back to their studio in Oakland to collage into cast glass sculpture. The molds they took, together with 10,000 photographs and 35 hours of video, continue to provide him with materials and ideas for new work as he develops what he hopes will be an exhibition of cast glass, assembled shapes, photography, and video. The glass, he says, is the hardest.

"I took silicone molds off several pieces of stone at the shore of Palmer Station," he explained in an email, "and many of various ice chunks, mostly fished out of the water as we trolled about in the Zodiacs. Trying to get the silicone around the slippery ice proved to be difficult, but the whole collaging and lost-wax process for large pieces has proved daunting as well." For a change of pace and to overcome the scale limitations of cast glass, Ruth has been developing a parallel approach, building "icebergs" from thin steel frames covered with plastic and glass frit. "I'm actually as excited about these new forms," he writes, "as the cast glass that I am also making at the same time."

Many glass artists describe glass as a liquid; it's just a liquid that freezes at a very high temperature. I wondered if glass artists might be drawn to Antarctica because it is covered with a familiar substance. Anne Brodie says, "Too easy." She considered the point, saw only problems and clichés, and turned her attention to the isolated community working in extreme conditions. April Surgent agrees that glass and ice are "visually similar," but says that she is not using glass to replicate ice. "I am looking at glass as being the 'ultimate' archival material," she writes, "which I suppose is just the opposite of water and ice. By using glass to illustrate the Ice … I will be making an archival record of an ever-changing landscape covered in a highly volatile matter."

David Ruth sees a natural correspondence between ice and glass, but, he adds, "they are fundamentally very different substances" and finds that as he has continued to work on his "Chill Project," the differences become more apparent to him. "Glass as a medium is so ethereal," he writes. "Not only is it often transparent, in a paradoxical way 'not there,' but it is the most man-made of materials. Substances from all over the Earth are combined in a furnace to make this material, literally mixing earths together to create the medium." In contrast, he worked in Antarctica with very specific places, taking molds of stone surfaces from exact locations. "I love that my work, in a totally artificial and human medium, has, for its main purpose, touching the Earth to feel its presence, and perhaps its fragility."





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: **April Surgent,** *Crow's Nest*, **2013. Long-exposure pinhole camera photograph, two-day exposure, four pinholes.**

April Surgent, *Sunrise, Sunset*, **2013. Long-exposure pinhole camera photograph, six-day exposure, one pinhole.**

April Surgent, *Boat House*, **2013. Long-exposure pinhole camera photograph, 10-day exposure, one pinhole.**

Perhaps the most direct response came from Emma Varga, who recorded overwhelming visual impressions: "a vast variety of ice surfaces; turquoise and blue shining from the depth of ice through translucent white surface; clarity of ocean revealing submerged parts of icebergs; a rare appearance of sky crystals ..." Her subsequent work uses glass to create an unmistakable account of those polar visions.

Captain Cook's traveling illustrators also documented indigenous people, from Tierra del Fuego to the Aleutian Islands, people whose lives were changing drastically as they confronted European powers. The glass artists who went to Antarctica were drawn there in part because they wanted to see for themselves the effects of external forces, the power of drastic climate change. They knew that every moment they recorded was a point of transition of which they were a part and in some way complicit.

Varga went specifically to call attention to the dangers of global warming. Surgent, too, has a polemical goal: "It is thought that the changing ecology of the Antarctic could have drastic effects on the well-being of the globe, yet is quite common that people remain grossly misinformed about Antarctica. It is my hope that my work will not only show what it looks like down there, but also address some of these issues."

While Brodie was drawn to Antarctica because she has a long interest in "states of transience," she came to see her experience in there as an inversion of her artistic practice. "My work in the glass studio had been concerned with the pre-object making and Antarctica as the other end, the thumbprint of the result of object making," she said in an interview with an online British arts publication.

David Ruth, who was in Antarctica in 2006, says he has thought about his experience there every day since his return, asking himself "what it means for my art practice and for our society in general as we capture its haunting beauty while melting it." ■

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Surface texture photo study from Melchior Island icebergs.

David Ruth