

Climate change and the new polar aesthetics: Artists reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic

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BOOK REVIEW

Climate change and the new polar aesthetics: Artists reimagine the Arctic and Antarctic, by Lisa E. Bloom, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 2022, 304 pp., £33.45 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-4780-2324-1

In this new study, Lisa E. Bloom mounts a capacious inquiry into recent artworks across media – including photography, documentary and experimental film, site-specific installation, works on paper, textile art, and performance – to consider the representational politics of the climate crisis in the geographic poles and circumpolar regions.

In chapters curated according to material and thematic overlaps, Bloom refuses methodological nationalism, engaging with artists from across the polar regions, from Antarctica to Nunavut to Iceland. The scope of Bloom's analyses is extensive, but she does not collapse regional specificities into one another in search of a unitary theory of the titular "new polar aesthetic". Instead, she offers the reader ample historical and social contexts informed by postcolonial theory, refusing the "Arctic's popular image as a sublime wilderness or unspoiled tabula rasa outside of history" (56–57).

Bloom primarily grounds her theoretical interventions in her chosen artworks and their creators, but she also takes sources from cultural anthropology and histories of art and science. In so doing, she asserts lines of continuity from the imperialist "heroic ethos" (5) that undergirded the colonial exploration age to today's "newer imperialism" (82) and reactionary climate politics. The latter, argues Bloom, sees states, scientists, and subjects reasserting control over a changing environment through nostalgic representations of a "pristine" nature and corporate-capitalist techno-fixes. Bloom examines artworks that highlight the agency of non-human actors – including ice, animals, microbes – and gesture towards failed attempts to bring inhospitable nature under human control. She examined this failure of heroic exploration in her previous book, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (1993).

Against representations of spectacular climate catastrophe, Bloom orients her inquiry towards durational engagements with climate change, buttressed by concepts such as Rob Nixon's "slow violence" and Subhankar Banerjee's "long environmentalism". In the third chapter, Bloom submits memory to these temporal and ethical considerations, "challeng[ing] the notion that traumatic experiences of the climate crisis can be adequately represented only through more traditional western avant-garde or modernist aesthetic forms" (86). She does so by focusing on three films that document Indigenous endurance in the face of extractivism and economies of dispossession. Throughout, Bloom is particularly interested in issues of scale that call attention to altered modes of perception under conditions of ecological decline, from the microscopic pteropods in Judit Hersko's *Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer* (2008–17) and Ursula Biemann's close-ups of microbes, to Isaac Julien's multiscreen, multichannel audiovisual installation *True North* (2004–08) and Roni Horn's immersive installation *Vatnasafn/Library of Water* in Iceland.


Bloom's critical capacities are at their best when deployed for institutional critiques of positivist science and the art world. Bloom gathers together works that feature explicit Indigenous critiques of western science or subvert hegemonic scientific practices – particularly in Part IV, "Archives of Knowledge and Loss", which is co-written with Elena Glasberg – to complicate what is considered proper evidence or data of ecological change. In taking as

her objects of study works from the past two decades, Bloom remains cognizant of the art world's "entanglement within the very processes of damage and degradation[that] it so often pretends to be above, or even to repair" (148). Particularly poignant critiques emerge in her reading of the Smithsonian's censorship of Banerjee's photographs in 2003; her elegiac account of the work and exploitation of the late Inuit artist Annie Pootoogook: "In celebrating her transgressive depictions of Indigenous life, the art market seemed in some way to endorse the colonial trauma she lived" (126); and in the final chapter on activist agitprop theatre and guerrilla performances that take aim at museums' complicity with Big Oil and extraction industries.

In presenting polar regions not merely as the presumed "ground zero of catastrophic climate change" (57) but as inhabited, vibrant sites intimately entangled with the rest of the globe, *Climate Change and the New Polar Aesthetics* marks an important intervention in aesthetic and environmental criticism. The book contributes to a growing body of scholarship that engages with climate change not merely as an ethical injunction but as an unavoidable facet of contemporary life.

References

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