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NORTH SHORE OUTLOOK

The cow on the iceberg

By Kelly McManus - North Shore Outlook

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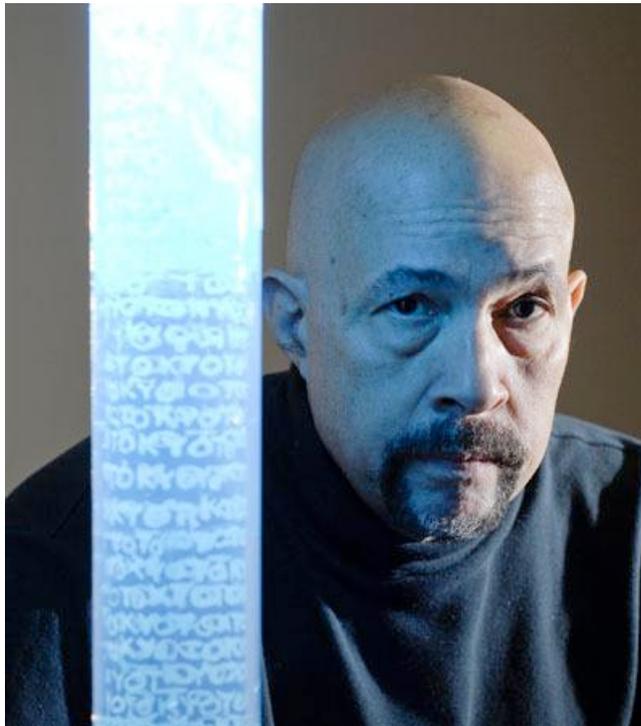
It is one thing to talk about global warming, melting ice caps, shrinking sea ice. It's quite another to talk about how the icebergs and the polar regions make a person feel. Artist K.A. Colorado starts the conversation with the image of himself in a little wooden fishing boat, bobbing in the waters off what is often called the southern most city in the world, Punta Arenas.

The skies were low, moody, the mountains at the shore even darker. But the icebergs looked like blue paper on the horizon.

To his astonishment, he watched a massive, shaggy cow float by, perched on an ice shelf. It was like seeing a ghost.

"Oh," a local shrugged later, "that cow's from the ranches."

Hundreds of years ago, cattle brought in by Spanish settlers turned feral, roaming the glaciers of Southern Patagonia. The story goes that some learned how to look for new turf in the wild fiords



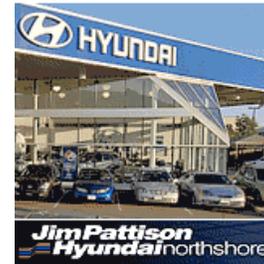
K.A. Colorado shares stories of his travels to the world's polar regions to create art inspired by icebergs.

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LOOK FOR NEW art in the wild igloos that line the coast: Occasionally, they board the ice flows that come aground and wash back out to sea.

Those ice-bound cows figure in Colorado's exhibit at the West Van library, one per portrait, hulking blue icebergs on the horizon.

Dogs, polar bears, muskox and people figure in similar sketches.

Colorado says the oil sketches are a departure from his more theoretical work that includes embedding scientific text in replicas of ice core samples.

"It's a little fanciful," Colorado says of his oil sketches. "It's nice to get off this serious work I usually do."

But don't be fooled by Colorado's modesty. There's nothing surface about the sketches or this thoughtful artist who strives to connect his audiences with polar regions.

"To do a body of work takes 15 years of quietly understanding what you're working with," he explains later, choosing his words carefully. "It's a lonely kind of thing."

The sculptor and painter divides his time between Vancouver, Oregon, Russia, Argentina and the poles. He has worked with ice, snow and alpine rock for decades. In the 1980s, he became the leader of the U.S. snow-sculpting team. Later, he became a key organizer at one of the world's biggest snow sculpting festivals in Perm, Russia. In the 1990s, Colorado says, he and other sculptors around the world began to notice changes in the snow.

Techniques that once worked in sculpting weren't possible, he says, because the snow was weaker and warmer.

He began talking with scientists around the world – as someone who works so closely with the snow, Colorado had firsthand accounts of the effects of climate change.

But the debate over climate change is a sticky one with policy and research often mired in rhetoric of blame or denial. With the Copenhagen climate talks last fall, leaders announced that it will take longer to reach a binding global agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and while sea ice shrinks and weather patterns change, nuances in the debate are often bogged down in oversimplified "Yes" or "No" battles.

"I'm not an advocate one way or another," explains Colorado of that rhetoric. "My intention is to record how we talk about and visualize what these climate changes mean."

In that way his ice core sculptures are lighting rods for conversation.

This is art that you can touch, simulated polar ice embedded with artifacts, portraying ice as a medium for living things, an imperative extreme in our planet and a dire counterbalance in an ecosystem that could come unhinged if we lose it.

"I think deep cold is a biological imperative and a directional influence. It guides us," explains Colorado. "If we loose that deep cold we really are going to have a marginalized idea of what we are all about."

ART YOU CAN TOUCH

Icebergs don't melt. They bloom, Colorado explains. "It's like a rose. It's opening up," he says. "If I hit them (icebergs) with a chisel, they want to crack open."

The artist began hitching rides on little fishing boats years ago. Off the coasts of Newfoundland, Alaska, Antarctica or Southern Patagonia, Colorado carved icebergs, leaving his creations to float off with the current.

Later, he teamed up with scientists at an arctic

scientific research library in Tierra del Fuego. They invited him to look through their archives for inspiration in his sculptures and he was fascinated by the breadth of polar research, ice core samples that looked for living things in the snow, gases in the atmosphere, dust from meteorites going back tens of thousands of years.

Colorado's sculptures on display at the West Van library make similar references to living things, traces of creatures in the snow.

Once, an Argentine climbing team embedded one of Colorado's ice cores in the side of a volcano and brought him volcanic ash to pulverize and encapsulate in another of his sculptures.

"I see art and science coming together more than they ever have," says Colorado, who is also working with people at the Vancouver Maritime Museum Society, NASA and other groups around the world to

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conceptualize scientific issues through art.

"I will say this. People get the cores," he explains. "People simply grab on to it."

COLORADO'S COWS

Glacial ice can turn blue as it ages. The crystals condense under the weight of snow and ice that piles up over thousands of years. Ronnie Smith – a colonel at the American Scott Air Force Base and former commander of Operation Deep Freeze in Antarctica – writes about this in a series of poems about living near the pole.

"When I'm in an environment like that (polar regions) it shouts to me of its spiritual foundations – of whatever our term for mother nature might be (or) for God," Smith explains, "the many voices drawing my attention to the beauty or the unfathomability of what I am experiencing."

Colorado has embedded Smith's poetry in ice core and glass sculptures and both men will speak in a lecture at West Van's library today. Smith will show photos of his time in polar regions.

Plus, they will try to go past those abstract discussions about climate change debates to a more personal, emotional, even spiritual account of what it's like to watch a glacier calve icebergs into the sea.

The artists hope the effect of their talk is to bring the poles closer to home through the arts.

Some scientists say that summer sea ice has decreased by more than half a million square miles over the last quarter century.

As Colorado sees it, in those conversations about the future of our planet, our society sits at the threshold of questioning what we're all about. The artist's role is to act as a guidepost, "a thermal device."

"The artist is involved with light, visibility, no matter what medium he works in," explains Colorado. "It's a very easy jump to incorporate some aspects of light or climate, clarity or unclarity."

Those bergs drifting at the edge of the world like blue paper, if we lose them we may lose our connection to more than climate balance.

There's an emotional and spiritual component to that imperative, Colorado says, one he contemplates from the zodiak, bobbing in Antarctic seas, taking in the icebergs, gorgeous and extreme.

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K.A. Colorado gives a lecture today at the West Vancouver Memorial Library, at 7 p.m. Also speaking is poet and aviator Ronnie Smith, former commander of Operation Deep Freeze in Antarctica. Smith will also show photos from his 12 years in Antarctica.

Colorado's exhibit, "Animals on Polar Ice" can be seen at the West Vancouver Memorial Library (1950 Marine Dr., West Vancouver) until April 29. Info: 604-925-7400 or westvanlibrary.ca.

Colorado also curated the upcoming Troutdale Earth Show 2010 May 7-16, featuring 15 artists working

in a variety of media, showing in Troutdale, Oregon.

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What a delightful article. When I first started to read about "the cow on the iceberg", I thought that K.A. Colorado had a wonderful imagination. When I actually read that Patagonian cows sometimes take a little trip aboard icebergs, it proves once again that truth can be stranger than fiction. Those shaggy cows aren't that dumb, after all.

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