

Quarterly Report IV: Maria Coryell-Martin

Ties to the Land: Exploring Remote Regions through Art

Here in Greenland I have been accepted and supported as an artist, working with a range of people from diamond hunters, to scientists, school teachers, and other artists. I have sketched at diamond prospectors' camps tucked away in the mountains, Summit Camp in the middle of the icecap at over 10,000 ft, worked as artist-in-residence with the Upernavik Museum, visited remote settlements, and travelled the west coast by boat. My Greenland experience has been incredibly rich and varied and I am leaving the country with a greater understanding of Greenland, both the opportunities available here and the challenges posed by its arctic environment.

The transition from Mali to Denmark and on to Greenland was challenging and much helped by my friend Kristin Laidre, senior scientist with the Greenland Institute of Natural Resources. She had brought me a duffle of winter gear and art supplies to Copenhagen from Seattle and I stayed with her for five days, resting, recouping, and sorting out my desert and Arctic gear. When I left Copenhagen for Kangerlussuaq in early April, I had only a vague idea of where I would be in the coming months. Kristin had invited me to visit Arctic Station on Disko Island in May, but I had no concrete plans otherwise except to stay with the Kangerlussuaq International Science Support (KISS) station, the manager of which would meet me at the airport.

Possibilities immediately arose. A friendly Danish gentleman was sitting next to me on the airplane. He had travelled extensively within Greenland and after learning that I am an artist, enthusiastically described Retreat Upernavik to me, an artist-in-residence opportunity made by the Upernavik Museum. It was my dream: to work and live as an artist in a small northern community. I would apply immediately.

I settled into KISS and began to explore. I wanted to make some friends. Walking around the first floor of the building, I poked my head into some offices and said hello, introducing myself. I slowly developed a sense of the place and the projects being supported. VECO Polar Resources coordinating logistics and supporting the icecap camps, and two independent teams of diamond hunters prospecting sites south of the Kangerlussuaq. There were all types of people: scientists, electricians, carpenters preparing to work at the icecap, drillers, a lab tech, nurse, cook, and a Venezuelan helicopter pilot.

People were curious about me and my work. As I had sent home my Africa portfolios, I worked quickly to develop some Greenland pieces to share, forging out into the freezing weather with my Tibetan hat, gloves, and sketchbooks in hand. People were encouraging and supportive. Both diamond teams invited me out to their camps, granting me the great opportunity to travel south of town into the mountains by helicopter, and to learn about Greenland's geology, wealth of natural resources, and diamond prospecting. Examining drills and core samples, cruising over musk-ox, hiking in the areas, and enjoying the quiet of several nights out at one camp were welcome changes from the former US airbase/still airport town of Kangerlussuaq.

While at KISS, I met Robin Abbott, the Greenland logistics manager for VECO Polar Resources. Robin mused on how and when I could visit Summit Camp and suggested I submit a proposal to NSF. Alaskan artist David Rosenthal worked at Summit for a season this winter as a science tech and artist, and Robin feels that NSF is interested in supporting more Arctic artists. (I was first in touch with David Rosenthal three years ago, seeking advice for field sketching in cold environments before going to the Juneau Icefield in SE Alaska, and have long admired his work.) NSF has an active Antarctic artist program, but no

structure exists for the northern polar regions. I soon received permission to visit Summit Camp, located above the 72nd parallel at an altitude of 3,200m, in the middle of the icecap.

Before I left, I was lent double-layer insulated Carhartt overalls, big boots, and a sleeping bag to be well prepared for the cold. The journey to Summit Camp is about 2 hours in a C-130 Hercules, operated here by the 109th division of the New York Airguard. It was my first time in a big, non-civilian aircraft. A ring was around the sun (a sun dog) the day I arrived and walking out onto the ice I met a mixture of familiar faces from the previous week in Kangerlussuaq and others new to me, all with open smiles. Isolated science oriented communities resonate with me. The energy of the people was invigorating and the quality of the light wonderful- the air literally shimmering with ice crystals.

I learned about the daily details up there: where energy, water, and food come from, as well as the range of projects in process – both scientific and practical. The buildings need to be raised this season as they have been buried in the snow. A clean air sector is respected for scientific projects and thus if the north wind blows, all non-essential motors are shut down for the day. Radio contact and communications must be maintained, a smooth runway during flight weeks, and for general camp moral, a cozy mess room along with a wonderful cook. In the summer, a work out tent is set up and the ice can be great for Frisbee.

It was a marvellous visit. I was sorry to leave so soon, but grateful for the opportunity and the enthusiasm that everybody showed towards me. My dream to work as an expeditionary artist includes working with stations such as Summit Camp, and my time there was stimulating and invaluable.

The next day, I was back on a Hercules that shook and roared as we left the ice, using rocket-assisted take off. Back at the KISS station, a friend strode up to me and said, "Now you understand why we all get these goofy, big grins on our faces when we talk about the icecap. And why we can't wait to get back up there."

The Upernavik Museum had accepted my application to work in their Refugium and I was invited to come any time until June 2, when another artist was due to arrive. Soon after my trip to Summit, I flew to the coastal town of Sisimiut and began my voyage up north in early May. From Sisimiut, I took a passenger ferry for a 24 hour sail to the town of Ilulissat, situated near the Sermeq Kujalleq glacier, one of the world's fastest (19 m per day) and most active glaciers and now a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The ride through Disko bay into town was magical, the sun low on the horizon, hues of pink, orange, and red glowing and scattered and reflected in the icy water. It was breathtaking. The next day, in spite of damp and foggy weather, I took a hike to look up the fjord, where the glacier was actively calving. I was reduced to tears by the sight of perhaps the most raw, sublime environment I have ever seen, overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude, scale, power, and beauty of the ice. After a few nights in Ilulissat, hiking and sketching in spite of damp weather, I was ready to be in Upernavik, settle into the Refugium, and work.

Flying into Upernavik, I recognized the little house perched out on a small peninsula near the water as mine. I was picked up at the airport, shown around town, and soon left to my own devices in what was to be my home for nearly seven weeks. I completely unpacked, stowing my unnecessary gear in a corner, and sat in the studio, enchanted by the view outside of the windows. I looked out onto a small bay in front of the house, still icy, and the open ocean. With no other houses in sight, I could watch the sun slowly make its way from the south to the north. I began to paint.

The space in Upernavik proved to be inspiring, productive, and contemplative for me. I witnessed and documented the transition from late winter to spring, and finally summer. The ice broke up, melted, and drifted away while the land thawed, wet and muddy, until finally the rich green tones of summer

vegetation coupled with the red and grey tones of rock. Tiny flowers soon decorated the slopes with pinpoints of color.

I found my own productive patterns, nurturing myself while seeking to process my many experiences from the past months. I had time to sketch and reflect while delighting in the environment around me. Developing an interest in birds, I spent some of my most lovely afternoons outside, painting the ice and watching the birds through binoculars, immersing myself in their details- movement in fleeting forms, quibbling and quabbling over blubber.

My perception of time and scale was changed as I walked on large, carved mountains among old graves marked by boulders in a pile, examined the lichen, moss, and tiny flowers, and drank ice water, breathing gases released after tens of thousands of years trapped in ice. I was humbled.

My internal clock was skewed by the 24 hours light, and in spite of my efforts to maintain a schedule, I often kept irregular hours. When 3am feels like 3pm and the sun's strong light bears down for days, it can feel like an unyielding, relentless master. "Activity!" the light seems to demand. I have grown to appreciate fog after days of brilliant light. Wrapping around the islands in delicate wisps and tendrils, or lying heavy on the water, the fog's beauty lies in muted tones and subtle variation. It feels like a gentle massage for my mind and eyes and I am comforted by its embrace.

Someday I will be back for the dark.

Making some friends, I began to understand the region. I was tutored in Greenlandic, invited the town over after my first two weeks for a 'kaffemik' to meet me, and later a group of school children. A friend called me out one evening down the harbour where her friends had brought in two seals. We watched the skinning and helped clean the intestines. I ate some of the freshest liver I have ever tasted.

I enjoyed a change of scenery away from Upernavik when I stayed with Greenlandic artist Mathias Løvstrøm and his wife Bente on an island inhabited only by them, next to the settlement Aappilotoq. Mathias spoke of growing up in the area with a mother who sewed all of his clothes and his father hunting with sledge dogs and kayak. After 30 years away from Upernavik, Mathias and his wife came back eight years ago. "There were islands I didn't recognize," Mathias told me. "Places I had never seen, revealed by the retreating ice. Culture shock..."

Later I travelled to Kullorsuaq, the northernmost settlement of the Upernavik region, an hour's helicopter ride up the coast, and lived in the house of a Danish schoolteacher who had returned home for the summer. There was still ice and the supply boat had not yet arrived, reflected in the bare grocery store shelves. Seal, whale, and bear meat are essential to people's diets. I spent National Day (the summer solstice) in Kullorsuaq and that evening boats shuttled people to the other side of the island for a picnic. Games were played, people hiked, and seal and polar bear meat was cooked on outdoor "ovens": large, flat pieces of stone, placed on smaller rocks with shrubs burning hot beneath. The smoke was thick and sweet. I was able to sit, chat, and connect with people of all ages, my small Greenlandic vocabulary and their English giving us the means to explain a little, while the rest we could do with my sketchbook.

It was bittersweet leaving the north. I took down my exhibition from the Upernavik museum, packed up my bags, and boarded the passenger ferry boat to begin a journey of 52 hours south to Sisimiut. I sat outside, bundled up, and watched a stately procession of icebergs pass by.

I feel fortunate to have experienced and learned so much in just over three months. Painting has been my job in Greenland, and here I have focused, grown, and have been more prolific than ever before. I feel deeply rooted in my work here, both through my own family history of science, research, and art, and the rich artistic tradition that has persisted here through various cultures and perspectives. Often I remind myself of a few sayings: "Vision is always ahead of execution, knowledge of materials is your contact with reality, and uncertainty is a virtue" (from book Art and Fear). "Trust in Process," and "Have a little faith." There is strength in patience, faith, and perseverance.

The words of my Japanese brush-maker friend also come to mind, reminding me that before I can even think of being a master, I must make at least 10,000 pieces. There is so much ahead of me and still much to learn, but I have a love of art, a love for the environment, and a curiosity for how we all adapt to the range of rhythms that compose our earth. I look to the future with hope.