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GALLERIES | CATE MCQUAID

Climate change as menace — and inspiration



“Starved Glacier.”

By Cate McQuaid GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 18, 2017

Icebergs are melting. The shape of the world is perilously shifting. That’s the message of Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz’s hybrid paintings and photographs at Miller Yezerski Gallery.

In 2013, the painter visited the Arctic, where she photographed icebergs, rocky coastlines, and industry. For the larger works here, she transferred the photos onto plaster that cracks and erodes, revealing natural linen beneath. The smaller ones are on paper. After she transfers the photo, she applies paint and ink, coaxing more from an image.

It’s often hard to discern what’s photograph and what’s pigment in revelatory plaster pieces such as “Starved Glacier.” We associate surface texture with

painting, not photography, but here the plaster cracks in streaming verticals, and it's as if reality is shuddering and breaking apart. The sky, roiling with clouds, decays. The gray-blue water holds a chilly light, but the seams in the plaster above look like heat rising. Ominous black outcroppings, presumably once clad in ice, loom over the scene.

The scene is disastrous; the image is captivating.

Spatz-Rabinowitz has a history of making politically charged paintings with surfaces that crumble, or from which rusty metal protrudes, or that are shaped like rubble (two of the latter are here, throwbacks). They dealt with war and violence. Climate change is a new theme.

And photography is a new medium. These are dramatic, deep-breathing landscapes — until the mirage ruptures.

“Melting From Beneath” tapers at the bottom, accentuating a cathedral of jagged ice at the top, with clustering spires like so many luminous, blue-white fingers rising in prayer. A bottomless canyon opens beneath it, or perhaps it's a stretch of water. Whatever it is, it's abysmal. It buckles; fissures spider downward. As in “Starved Glacier,” the rushing cracks make the scene dire.

Climate change is an ideal theme for Spatz-Rabinowitz's aesthetic of disintegration. Parts of the world are caving in. Her works don't merely picture that. They embody it.

ELAINE SPATZ-RABINOWITZ: ARCTIC ABRASIONS

At Miller Yezerski Gallery, 460 Harrison Ave., through May 23. 617-262-0550, www.milleryezerskigallery.com