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1. Judit Hersko, *Clione antarctica*, 2009, digital photograph.  
Courtesy of the artist

# JUDIT HERSKO'S POLAR ART

## *Anthropogenic Climate Change in Antarctic Oceanscapes*

BY LISA E. BLOOM

In what ways can art portray “the violence of delayed effects”? (Nixon 2011: 2-3) a phrase used by Rob Nixon in his book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor?* (Nixon 2011: 2-3) How might it do so in a way that goes beyond the socio-political phenomena in question to address the emotional disturbance of living amidst these delayed effects? In what ways can environmental and climate change that still can't be seen or felt introduce an age of dread and change our perceptual habits much as, say, Marshall McLuhan felt that new technology such as the telegraph did in an earlier era?

This article focuses on environmental work by an artist that attempts to visually address new forms of art, seeing, feeling and sociality that are coming into being in the age of the Anthropocene. In what follows, I bring together issues in

“critical climate change” scholarship to examine aspects of feminist and environmentalist art in the work of Judit Hersko.

Scientists agree that climate change in the polar regions is taking place at two to three times the rate of elsewhere on the globe. This is especially important in 2014 when we saw both the western and now in 2015 the eastern fringes of Antarctica “pass a crucial tipping point, condemning to collapse – either melting, or sliding in the ocean, leading in the future to massive coastal flooding” (*Science and Research News*, 2014). The word “collapse” implies a sudden process, since in human terms ice sheets usually disappear slowly, but the pace in parts of the Antarctic is accelerating. Understanding such a story might also be about comprehending how it is rapid in geological terms but not fast enough to continuously capture news headlines.

Compared to the scientific communities, artists' communities tolerate and even encourage eccentric practices and even aesthetic extremism in the name of innovation. Though the art world has not engaged fully with these critical global issues, some artists around the world are working on these problematics that are so critical to our times of how to represent the delayed effects of these environmental disasters that are at once intimate, yet far-off in time and far-away in distance. Judit Hersko creates aesthetically rich and provocative art installations and performance works that focus on anthropogenic climate change and crises concerning our marine life in Antarctica, focusing on two transparent planktonic snails: *Clione antarctica* (sea angel) and the microscopic *Limacina helicina* (sea butterfly) (figure 1). These writings on her art and performance piece “Pages from

2. Herbert C. Ponting, *Barne Glacier*, December 2, 1911, photograph.  
Courtesy of Scott Polar Research Institute,  
University of Cambridge



the *Book of the Unknown Explorer*” (2008-2012) are taken from my book project, tentatively titled “Contemporary Art and Climate Change of the Polar Regions: Gender After Ice.” The artworks discussed here and in my book project suggest how visions of the polar regions and elsewhere present us with new understandings of a world now under threat from climate change. These show not just variables related to the weather but also basic transformations of culture and the sense of loss and uncertainty that is connected with that.

This article also builds on research from *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Bloom, 1993); a special issue of *The Scholar*

*and the Feminist*, co-edited with Elena Glasberg and Laura Kay (Bloom and Glasberg, 2008); and “Disappearing Ice and Missing Data: Visual Culture of the Polar Regions and Global Warming” (Bloom and Glasberg, 2012). *Gender on Ice* invited us to consider how conventional polar narratives about science, travel, gender, and race, as well as concepts of nationhood, attitudes towards nature, technology, and the wilderness were being reimagined during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Springboarding from the earlier study, the new book project draws on a range of representations within contemporary art production to rethink these narratives as the polar regions have shifted from the last space of

heroic exploration to the first place of global decline. In the earlier era, the polar regions had been overrun by heroic bodies and narratives. Now it has been overrun by the harshest effects of a warming planet.

In an age that celebrates instant spectacles, the slow-paced and open-ended side of anthropogenic climate change, except in catastrophes of spectacular destruction like hurricanes, typhoons, and cyclones, creates representational obstacles that can hinder efforts to mobilize citizens when our evidence does not have the desired closure that the media seeks. Thus one of the tasks of my book project and this article is to elucidate these complex images of global warming that are neither spec-

tacular nor instantaneous but rather incremental.

The majority of these new kinds of images contrast with the older heroic and melodramatic tropes of polar-exploration photographs made by the celebrated “Heroic Age” photographers Herbert G. Ponting (1870-1935) and Frank Hurley (1885-1962). In Hurley’s “A Blizzard at Winter Quarters,” (1911-1914), silhouetted figures struggling against the wind and cold are superimposed onto a windy Antarctic landscape near the Mawson base to illustrate the narrative of heroic life and death struggle—one of the more common narrative tropes of Antarctic exploration narratives and photographs. Ponting’s image of the Barne Glacier (*figure 2*) emphasizes the magnitude of this uninhabitable landscape. The epic scale of the glacier dominates Ponting’s photograph to such an extent that the figure is dwarfed. In many ways this image provides an ideal example of sublime wilderness since it shows the inhospitable male space of the Antarctic as a testing ground in which isolation and physical danger combine with overwhelming beauty.

As the world grows steadily more unpredictable with climate change, I use the term “anthropogenic landscapes” to also rethink our notion of landscapes that have changed due to human-induced greenhouse-gas emissions. The terms “anthropogenic landscapes” or “human-transformed landscapes” signal how human-induced climate change is irrevocably altering our relationship towards the wilderness and disrupting our ordinary ways of knowing and seeing.

(Bampton, 1999) The shift in perception I am suggesting follows environmentalist’s Bill McKibben’s thinking when he renamed Hurricane Sandy a “Frankenstorm” because of its hybrid nature and some “spooky combination of the natural and the unnatural” (McKibben, 2012) The term “anthropogenic landscapes” displaces the question of a simple mastery over nature (or vice versa) that is often associated with the conventional landscape tradition and notions of the natural sublime. It also makes us radically question the ways in which we understand and interact with what used to be known as “nature.” These ideas are gaining momentum in the arts, humanities, and social sciences as evidenced by ongoing conferences on the Anthropocene around the world even as the geologic time scale of the term itself is still contested by the Royal Geological Society. The Anthropocene thesis announces a paradigm shift in its claim that humankind is the driving power behind planetary transformation, an idea popularized by Nobel laureate and chemist Paul Crutzen. Crutzen is saying that the human being has become something much larger than a simple biological agent. As historian Dipesh Chakrabarty puts it, “Humans now wield a geological force to have an impact on the planet itself. To call human beings geological agents is to scale up our imagination of the human.” The consequences of this are enormous according to Chakrabarty “since it shifts the temporal parameters away from the expectation of continuity to contemplate the idea of extinction, that is to say, a future

without ‘us’” (Chakrabarty, 2009).

In the anthropogenic landscape, the polar regions may still be places of fascinating and forbidden beauty, but the awe once reserved for Ponting’s or Hurley’s photographs of untrammelled nature, now stems from the uncertainties resulting from the gradual human destruction of nature transformed—the Anthropocene. By refusing to approach the idea of a wilderness or sublime landscape as separate from the human or the animal, some of the artwork here makes us more aware of how the earth and human systems are intimately entwined. The threat this process evokes yields a different kind of horror as these places undergo accelerated warming.

By focusing on the work of Judit Hersko, a woman artist who traveled to Antarctica, this article turns a feminist lens on what is still often seen as a very masculinist heroic geographical site and questions the claim that these heroic concepts were left behind in the last century.<sup>1</sup> This is not to beg the essentialist question but to ask how her work has changed our ways of seeing this region as a primary site of the contemporary experience of the sublime and climate change (Morley, 2010). This article investigates the new stories and images that are produced by women artists to re-visualize the Antarctic and examines the impact that the older aesthetic traditions of the sublime—as well as the genres of literary fiction, science fiction, and horror—have had on their work. It calls attention to the shift in the

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1. See Barczewski (2007), Collis (2008), Rosner (2008 and 2009), and Dodds (2009).

scales of terror in these women's artwork. In the images of these artists we are no longer dealing with an inhuman scale. Unlike the photographs of Ponting and Hurley, these landscapes do not overwhelm our categories of understanding.

## In and out of place

### Judit Hersko's "Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer"

One representative artist of this project who deals directly with many of the key issues around gender, art and climate change is Judit Hersko. A Professor at California State University San Marcos, Hersko traveled to Antarctica on a National Science Foundation Artist's and Writer's Grant in 2008. Her "Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer" (2008-2015) undoes the current revival of interest in polar narratives from earlier eras and the older images by Hurley and Ponting that mythologized the enterprising male explorer of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Driven as she is with questions of time, perception, and shifting notions of nature, Hersko creates an alternate photographic and cinematic history of exploration and climate science in Antarctica. To do so, she rethinks the landscape of Antarctica that is on the verge of disappearing due to anthropogenic pollution through a unique rewriting of a Jewish woman's presence in Antarctic history.

With one hundred and twenty images, Hersko presents her recent work as a lecture—part fantasy and

part history—that incorporates photographic and cinematic documentation as well as artwork about Anna Schwartz, a fictional Jewish female explorer, photographer, and Antarctic biologist from the 1930s (figure 3). In Hersko's narrative, Anna appears on Admiral Byrd's 1939 expedition and, while passing as a white man, becomes the only woman at that time to work as a biologist and photographer in Antarctica.<sup>2</sup> Schwartz' trip to Antarctica by its very choice of dates evokes the 1939 invasion of Poland when Eastern European Jews, such as Schwartz, were loaded into boxcars and sent to concentration camps in Europe. In this respect, the juxtaposition of Antarctica in the late 1930s with the contemporary debates around climate change today raises questions later in Hersko's narrative about how she connects the present to the past through a vision of traumatic catastrophe (Bloom, 2006).

For her narrative, Hersko draws on both a rich artistic and literary tradition, the literary including Ursula Le Guin's short story "Sur" (1982), a utopian feminist fictional account in which a party of South American women reach the South Pole in 1909, two years before the official arrival of Amundsen and Scott.<sup>3</sup> Hersko's work is influenced by the women characters in Le Guin's fantasy who do not feel compelled to leave any record, or proof,

2. See Judit Hersko's website: <http://www.judithersko.com/> for images and a full description of her Antarctic, work-in-progress art project, "From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer." Also see Hersko (2009 and 2012).

3. See Le Guin, (1982), Glasberg (2012) and Leane (2009).

of their presence at the South Pole, as evidenced by one of the characters' activities of fashioning sculptures from ice. Like the disappearing ice sculptures in Le Guin's short story, Hersko's artwork and narrative can be preserved only in Hersko's ephemeral art, not in monuments that celebrate male narratives and imagery of the Heroic Age.

Hersko draws her aesthetic from an earlier historical moment of surrealist photography by using photocollages, transparent sculptures (figures 4 and 5), and cinematic projections to emphasize the shadow, light, and transparency of images and place. To do this, she draws on forms and styles rarely if ever used in relation to Antarctica. Inspired by the surrealist albums of Victorian women, who invented a method of photocollage later adopted by avant-garde artists, Hersko borrows this aesthetic style to visually render the placement of people in circumstances they could ordinarily not inhabit. To reveal how visually out of place Schwartz might have been on these expeditions, Hersko creates compelling photomontages that place the fictional explorer, into already existing photographs of Antarctic exploration (figure 5). These images of the "Unknown Explorer" depart from the images of the traditional sublime and its heroic masculinity and are much more in keeping with her interest in making visible threats from global warming that take time to wreak havoc. She highlights what otherwise might be difficult to see—two transparent planktonic snails the *Clione antarctica* (sea angel) and the microscopic

*Limacina helicina* (sea butterfly)  
(figure 1)<sup>4</sup>

These snails (figure 4) were plentiful in the days of the unknown explorer. Because of ocean acidification, their shells are now dissolving. The danger that interests Hersko is less spectacular and less familiar to the public than are dramatic popular images of the contemporary sublime and of apocalyptic climate change. But Hersko's invented narrative highlight aspects of global warming that escape notice because they happen at microscopic levels and rates so slow that transformation is too gradual to note. In some ways her work addresses the failure of perception and cognition, the result of which is our inability to deal with critical changes facing us over extended time.

Hersko's art explores representations of these microscopic creatures at a moment when they are disappearing, thereby creating a melancholic aesthetic that engages with the photographic materials from the past but gives them a new value that is different from the period from when they were made. The melancholia of her work has parallels to Walter Benjamin's conception of surrealist allegory, as she engages us to think of these planktonic snails as having ceased to exist while we are presented with a fictional narrative and images about the first time they were documented in the 1930s by Schwartz (Benjamin, 1999). As her work aesthetically activates these lost images, they begin to signify

4. Hersko has been working with biological oceanographer Victoria Fabry, and her artwork on climate change and planktonic snails is an outgrowth of that collaboration.



from both moments in time, almost simultaneously. In the place of the heroic portraits of Byrd and his men, the minimal scale of Hersko's portrait of the "Unknown Explorer" emphasizes the contingent nature of Schwartz' heroism as well as the surprising obsession and motivation from another time for her clandestine expedition to Antarctica—the seemingly insignificant documentation of microscopic creatures. These

3. Judit Hersko, *Portrait of Anna Schwartz*, 2008, cast silicone. Courtesy of the artist

details enforce the illusion of factuality that the story seeks to create and set up a creative engagement between the unknown explorer and her otherwise ordinary microscopic pteropods that are slowly perishing in the present. We never learn whether the unknown explorer's reasons to escape is connected to the Holocaust, but the evocation of





this possibility seems to foreshadow further catastrophe for her pteropods (figure 4). The persistence of this past in her narrative evokes the future. Significantly, Hersko's reference to this history is tempered by her own personal relationship to the Holocaust and how her own parents survived Nazi persecution.

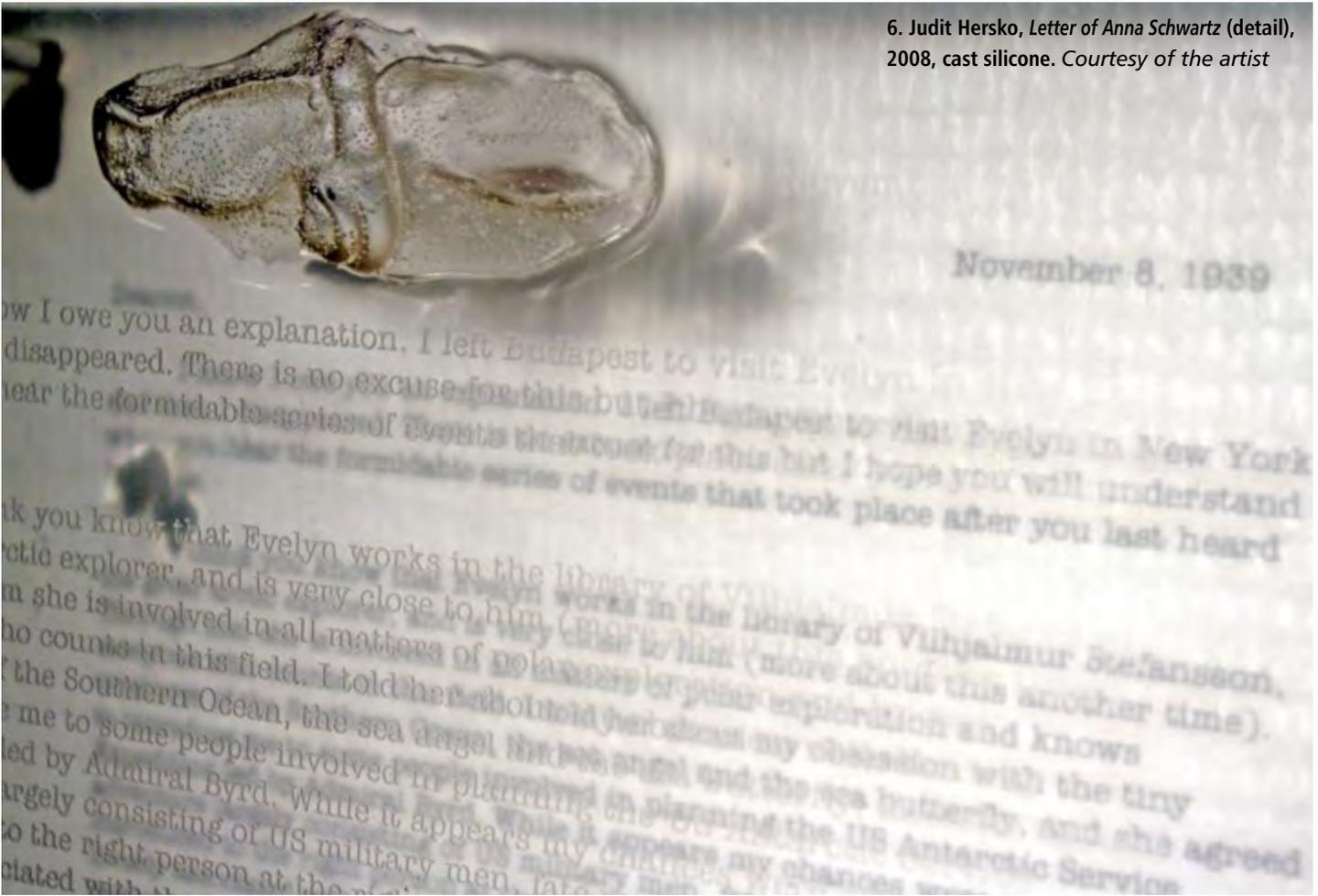
Hersko's narrative and archive are symbolic since they imagine what Jewish women's contribution to science, polar exploration, and art history might have been in Antarctica's early history if women's relationship to Antarctica were not merely speculative during Schwartz' era. For this reason, Hersko's fictional narrative insists that one must take into account the imaginative histories that run alongside actual polar histories. Her archive of images on Antarctica is suitably dreamlike and

includes projected cinematic images, etched photographic images on glass and silicone (figures 3, 4, and 6), and photomontages that deliberately draw on photographic tropes from the period to give the pictures a "reality effect" (figure 5). At the same time, her work disorients us since she puts people and organisms in an order and place they would not normally inhabit such as the unlikely inclusion of Schwartz at the time that Jews in Europe were fleeing the Nazis. Namely, by shifting the history of Antarctic exploration even slightly, Hersko alters our perception of the present and helps us understand how the rhetoric of both Antarctic exploration narratives and polar climate change bears the imprint of gender and Jewishness.

However, her goal is not to obtain mastery over trauma by render-

5. Judit Hersko, *With Scott at the Pole* (collage by Anna Schwartz), 2011, digital collage. Courtesy of the artist

ing it in terms of existing cultural codes but to foreground and make connections between the affective consequences of the Holocaust and climate change. In its drive to obtain mastery over trauma by rendering it legible in terms of existing cultural codes, her performance piece appears to disregard what Cathy Caruth calls "the event's essential incomprehensibility, the force of its affront to understanding" (Caruth, 1995, p. 154). Yet, for all its investment in a surrealist aesthetic, the work remains haunted by a traumatic history that exceeds and breaks down accustomed habits of thought, narration, and visualization.



6. Judit Hersko, *Letter of Anna Schwartz (detail)*, 2008, cast silicone. Courtesy of the artist

## conclusion

Recent artworks by Hersko reveal new perspectives from artists who are restaging the politics of gender, Jewishness, and climate change in Antarctica from a feminist perspective to make us think about microscopic life in the deepest realm of the polar oceans. Hersko brings us back to the earlier days of polar explorers and the epic by inserting her unknown Jewish woman explorer in her fantasized re-enactment of the Byrd expedition. She returns to the heroic registers of the early twentieth century to perversely restage a masculinist imperial past within a neo-liberal present to tell stories about an absent subjectivity.

She uses this as an occasion to make a statement on the belatedness of woman's place in polar narratives and a lost or obscured perception.

Hersko is engaging these regions in new ways by searching for alternative narratives and aesthetics in the very dramatic contemporary situation of climate change without falling into the old heroic/melodramatic tropes of the sublime. She does this specifically by drawing comparisons between two holocausts to move us away from the purely visualizable as the basis for knowledge. Consequently, her work does not offer the unimaginable scale that we associate with the sublime. Instead, it plays off the epic quality of these male heroic narratives and images. She does this through a fic-

tional biography of a Jewish woman explorer whose intimate relationship with tiny snails in the 1940s later becomes significant for polar science in the present.

Hersko's viewpoints suggest some important new directions in contemporary art, and in the process, her work makes us think about how feminist perspectives have contributed to making us think critically about the conservative apocalyptic versions of the contemporary sublime and a kind of neo-liberal aesthetics that is at the heart of current discussion in climate change, art history as well as Antarctic discourses. Viewers' aesthetic experience of her work is not just about landscape and the masculinist heroic subjectivity but also subjectivity itself, be it male or

female since her narrative is about rethinking polar oceanscapes where marine life is on the verge of disappearance due to anthropogenic climate change. What she mourns in her work like the holocaust she evokes is the eventual disappearance of species, the loss of certainty, and the disruption of the stable coordinates of time and space.

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