



Still images from "Like Shishmaref," a 16-minute video that juxtaposes scenes of a remote barrier island north of the Bering Straits in Alaska and the Outer Banks of North Carolina.



ICE SAGE

Marek Ranis explores complexity of climate change through art

BY MEG WHALEN

During the week of July 10, a trillion-ton iceberg the size of the state of Delaware broke off from the Larsen C ice shelf in Antarctica. For the next few weeks, media outlets from The New York Times and CNN to Scientific American and Rolling Stone speculated on the ice shelf's fate and its consequences.

This was not the first time the Larsen ice shelf was front-page news. In 2002, the Larsen B shelf dramatically collapsed during a mere 35-day period after having existed for more than 10,000 years. Earlier that same year, Marek Ranis read "Ice Memory," an article in The New Yorker magazine by Elizabeth Kolbert, and would later say he, "started

thinking seriously about climate change.”

In the intervening 15 years, Ranis, associate professor of art at UNC Charlotte, has become something of an expert on the Earth’s rapidly changing frozen landscapes. He has had multiple research residencies in Alaska, Iceland, Greenland and northern Norway. He has presented research at the Arctic Circle Assembly, the largest international conference addressing challenges facing the Arctic. When the U.S. Department of State published “Our Arctic Nation,” a collection of 50 essays with one from each state, Ranis was asked to represent North Carolina.

Beginning just months after the collapse of the Larsen B with paintings based on satellite images of glaciers, Ranis has created a vast body of artistic work that has been exhibited in solo and group exhibitions locally and across the globe — cities such as Anchorage, Alaska; Upernavik, Greenland; Sochi, Russia; Harstad, Norway; Marknesse, Netherlands; and his hometown of Wrocław, Poland.

“Marek is not a resident of the North, but he’s not an outsider,” said Julie Decker, director of the Anchorage Museum. “He’s taken a lot of personal risks to get to know people and place. We’ve come to really respect his approach to his research and work.”

Ranis first traveled to Alaska in 2005 and then in 2013 spent two months as an artist-in-

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residence at the Anchorage Museum. His work has appeared in multiple exhibitions there, and Decker has invited him to co-curate a show in 2019 tentatively titled “Representation of the North: Evolution of the Anthropocene.”

Building Relationships

“What we see here often is artists who come for a short time and then leave,” said Decker. “Marek’s work is a continuing conversation — a dedication to research and reflection and relationship building. That continuum is critical.”

Ranis is the sculpture area coordinator

in the College of Arts + Architecture’s Department of Art & Art History, but his own work spans the full gamut of artistic mediums. The “Albedo” project that began with paintings of glaciers like the Larsen B expanded over the years to include carpets, photography, video, site-specific installations and performance art. (“Albedo is a scientific term that refers to the extent to which the light reflects off a surface,” Ranis explained in his “Our Arctic Nation” essay for the State Department. “Ice, like that found at the poles, has a high albedo, reflecting the sun’s rays.”)

Likewise, another long-term project, “Arctic Utopia,” included mixed-media sculptures, videos and interactive installations.

“I strongly believe that the boundaries between disciplines is artificial,” Ranis said in an interview between trips to Alaska and Norway. “Being an artist is like being a constant student: I am always learning. That is freedom — finding new languages, new tools to say what you want to say.”

Begun during his 2013 residency at the Anchorage Museum, “Arctic Utopia” was presented in 2014 as a solo exhibition at the McColl Center for Art + Innovation in celebration of the center’s 15th anniversary. Ranis was one of the first McColl affiliate artists, and it was the McColl Center that nominated him for the Rasmuson Foundation fellowship that provided for his residency at the Anchorage Museum.

“We are proud to nurture Marek’s creative evolution and journey,” said Suzanne Fetscher, founding president and CEO emerita of the McColl Center. “He manifests this new kind of artist that is intellectually engaged in issues and will explore all kinds of mediums to really get to the content, concepts and expression of those issues and best represent their complexity.”

‘Arctic Paradox’

It is the complexity of climate change in the Arctic region that intrigues Ranis most. During his residency in Greenland in 2009, he became aware of the “Arctic paradox.” The melting of ice in places like Greenland and Alaska will bring new opportunities: access to resources like oil and gas, the opening of the Northwest Passage, population growth and greater economic independence. But those advantages come at a cost, not only to those regions, but even to lands much farther south.



“Arctic Utopia 3” is one of a series of large digital prints on acrylic mirrors inspired by the prospect of new oil exploration in the Arctic and its environmental effects. In it, a person in a traditional parka faces industrial development on Alaska’s North Slope.



"Larsen B," an acrylic painting on linen, is from Marek Ranis's "Albedo" series (2004-2007), based on satellite images of Antarctic and Arctic polar landscapes and seascapes.

In 2016, Ranis completed what Decker has called "one of his most powerful projects," the 16-minute film "Like Shishmaref." The work juxtaposes video of the eroded coasts of the Alaskan Inupiaq village of Shishmaref and the North Carolina Outer Banks.

"Thousands of miles apart, both geographically and culturally, these two places share the same destiny — rising seawater levels jeopardizing the lives of both communities, already struggling on very low-lying sea coasts," Ranis wrote in his "Our Arctic Nation" essay. "This connection between one of the most distant communities in North America and one close to home is for me very representative of

what many coastal communities in the United States and in the world are now facing."

As is often the case in Ranis's art, people are mostly absent from "Like Shishmaref." The landscapes are abandoned; no one talks to the camera. But people are at the center of his research. For each project, Ranis records hours of interviews with locals — community leaders, politicians, activists, artists — and their thoughts and experiences and concerns become the foundation of his work. Most recently, he spent weeks interviewing taxi drivers in Anchorage for a card game he is creating for the museum there, then traveled to northern Norway to spend time with a

Sami (or Lapp) artist and mapmaker, the subject of his next video project.

"As artists, we have an obligation to be engaged," Ranis said, reflecting on his work before leaving for Norway. He carries that obligation into the classroom, encouraging his students to read newspapers and develop interests beyond their immediate lives. "They have to understand that there are intellectual, even ethical obligations to engage. Art-making is not just gazing at your own belly." ●

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