

A Mother's Legacy of Art, Icebergs, and Inspiration



ILLUSTRATING THE BEAUTY OF A DISAPPEARING WORLD

BY RACHEL LINK



PUBLISHED JULY 28, 2015 • 11 MIN READ

ADVERTISEMENT

When I first saw [Zaria Forman's](#) work, I thought I was looking at a photograph. Instead I discovered that these incredibly detailed images are actually hyperrealist pastel drawings. They depict places that are profoundly affected by climate change—Antarctica, Greenland, and the Maldives. Her renderings of ice, waves, and water are astonishingly tangible and compelling. I discovered Forman's work in a short film called

"Perspective." It had just the right characteristics that I look for when curating National Geographic's Short Film Showcase.

This film presents a beautiful portrayal of Forman's vision and her relationship to her mother, photographer Rena Bass Forman. The elder Forman photographed the Arctic from 2001 until her untimely death in 2011. I corresponded with the younger Forman over email about her art, the Arctic, and the ways that her work is influenced by her mother's photography.



Greenland #10, Ilulissat, 2007 Photograph by Rena Bass Forman

▶ ×



The #1 Email Marketing & Automation Platform

Get Started



Explore further with a National Geographic subscription

World-renowned stories and exclusive content available in both print & digital access

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Greenland #72 Drawing by Zaria Forman

ZARIA FORMAN: My mother dedicated her life to photographing the most remote regions of the Earth. The cold and isolated landscape of the Arctic consumed her interest from 2001 until her passing in 2011. She always said that she was a polar bear in a past life, and watching her spend endless hours in the frigid winds, patiently and happily waiting for the moment when the light was right, gave me no doubts that this was true!

She taught me the importance of loving what you do and carrying out projects full force, no matter what obstacles lay in the way. She created her own series of journeys entitled “Chasing the Light,” and the Greenlandic expedition would have been the third in the trilogy. Her work from her Arctic trips have been compared to [the work of] 19th-century photographers John L. Dunmore and George Critcherson, who were on

American painter William Bradford's 1869 expedition to Greenland. She was inspired by Bradford's journey and did extensive research, even finding glass plate negatives from the trip by Dunmore and Critcherson.

ADVERTISEMENT



Greenland #1, Ilulissat, 2007 Photograph by Rena Bass Forman



Greenland #71 Drawing by Zaria Forman

ADVERTISEMENT



ZARIA: Her first encounter with icebergs was in Patagonia, Argentina, in 2001. Usually we traveled as a whole family, but during that particular adventure I was in my first year of college and couldn't afford the time off. I believe her obsession with cold, icy landscapes was born on that trip.

RACHEL: Can you talk about the trip you took to Greenland to spread her ashes?

ZARIA: In August of 2012 I led an Arctic expedition up the northwest coast of Greenland. In 1869 William Bradford embarked on the very first Arctic art expedition, and our trip followed his path to find inspiration in the dramatic geography, as he had. We compared exact locations with photographs from Bradford's trip, discovering both similarities and differences in the landscape almost 150 years later.

My mother had conceived the idea for the voyage but did not live to see it through. She was diagnosed with brain cancer on Mother's Day in 2011 and passed away six months later. During the months of her illness her dedication to the expedition never wavered, and I promised to carry out her final journey. In Greenland, I was compelled to address the concept of saying goodbye on scales both global and personal as I scattered my mother's ashes amidst the melting ice.



Svalbard #10, Reindeer, Bjorn Dalen Valley, Svalbard. Svalbard lost 50 percent of its reindeer in 2010. This couple was lucky to survive (2010). Photograph by Rena Bass Forman

ADVERTISEMENT





Maldives #14 Drawing by Zaria Forman

ZARIA: Fulfilling my mother's dream to follow Bradford's voyage in Greenland was one of the most meaningful gifts my mother gave me.

Her sickness and passing was by far the most challenging experience of my life. I had never before faced such a tremendous loss. The mourning process I went through (and continue to go through) shaped and paralleled the concept of the trip to Greenland, which in turn had significant effects on my art. I often thumb through my mother's negatives and contact sheets from the trips we took together, to find inspiration for my drawings.

Above all though, her dedication, passion, and perseverance continue to inspire me. She would spend hours on an icy cliff edge, waiting for the sunlight to illuminate the frame through [the] camera lens that she had chosen, smiling and happy, long after the rest of the family's toes had gone numb. We would whine and complain, urging her to call it a day so we could return indoors and have a warm meal. She wouldn't budge until she knew she had captured what she wanted.

ADVERTISEMENT



Greenland #7, Ilulissat, 2009 Photograph by Rena Bass Forman



Svalbard #33 Drawing by Zaria Forman

ADVERTISEMENT

ZARIA: I have always preferred soft pastels over the myriad materials I have experimented with. The process of drawing with pastels is simple and straightforward: cut the paper, make the marks. The material demands a minimalistic approach, as there isn't much room for error or reworking, since the paper's tooth can hold only a few thin layers of pigment.

I rarely use an eraser—I prefer to work with my “mistakes,” enjoying the challenge of resolving them with limited marks. I love the simplicity of the process, and it has taught me a great deal about letting go. I become easily lost in tiny details, and if the pastel and paper did not provide limitations, I fear I would never know when to stop, or when a composition were complete!

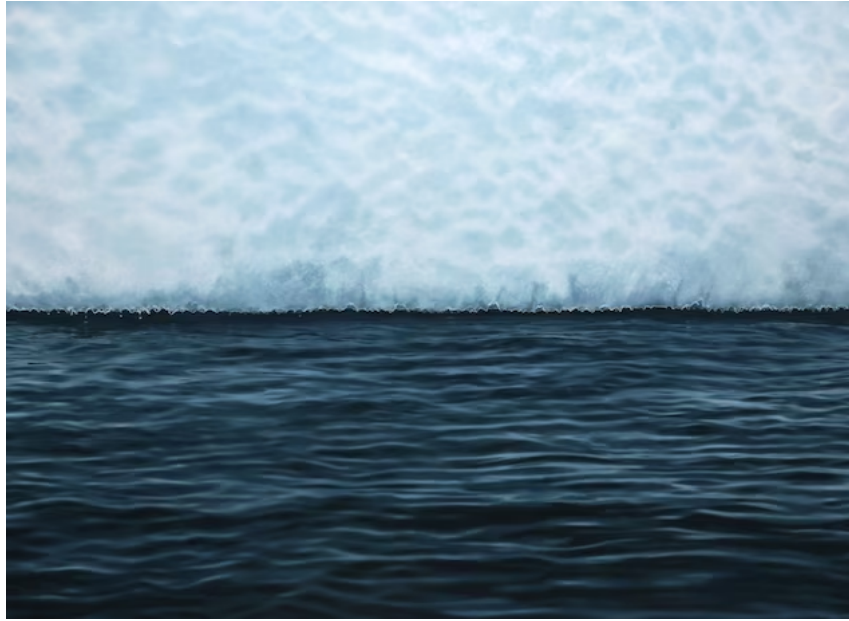
When I travel, I take thousands of photographs. I often make a few small sketches on-site to get a feel for the landscape. Once I return to the studio,

I draw from my memory of the experience, as well as from the photographs, to create large-scale compositions. Occasionally I will reinvent the water or sky, alter the shape of the ice, or mix and match a few different images to create the composition I envision. I begin with a very simple pencil sketch, so I have a few major lines to follow, and then I add layers of pigment onto the paper, smudging everything with my palms and fingers and breaking the pastel into sharp shards to render finer details.



Greenland #8, Ilulissat, 2007 Photograph by Rena Bass Forman

ADVERTISEMENT



Lemaire Channel, Antarctica Drawing by Zaria Forman

ZARIA: Artists play a critical role in communicating climate change, which is, I think, the most important challenge we face as a global community. I have dedicated my career to translating and illuminating scientists' warnings and statistics into an accessible medium that people can connect with, on a level that is perhaps deeper than scientific facts can penetrate. Neuroscience tells us that humans take action and make decisions based on emotion above all else. Studies have shown that art—in particular drawings, paintings, photographs, and film—can impact viewers' emotions more effectively than an essay or newspaper article.

My drawings explore moments of transition, turbulence, and tranquility in the landscape, allowing viewers to emotionally connect with a place they may never have the chance to visit. I choose to convey the beauty, as opposed to the devastation, of threatened places. If people can experience the sublimity of these landscapes, perhaps they will be inspired to protect and preserve them.

ADVERTISEMENT

Winston Wächter gallery

View more of Zaria's work on her [website](#).

 SHARE

 TWEET

 EMAIL

READ THIS NEXT



SCIENCE

Are your hormones unbalanced—and what does that ev...

The beauty of hormones is that they exist to keep the body in balance. Here's what experts say you can do instead if you're feeling off-kilter.



SCIENCE

Is malaria making a comeback in the U.S.?



HISTORY MAGAZINE

How Oppenheimer guarded WWII's biggest secret



ANIMALS

How extreme heat affects our pets—and how to help them

ADVERTISEMENT

GO FURTHER

ANIMALS

WILD CITIES

Why birds are building fortresses from anti-bird spikes

WILDLIFE WATCH

How shark meat became a global phenomenon

Which one of these spiders is a black widow?

This toad can get you high. Poachers have taken notice.

WILDLIFE

Ozempic listed as ...

ENVIRONMENT

ENVIRONMENT

What worries engineers most about U.S. infrastructure

ENVIRONMENT

How soaring ocean temperatures are affecting corals

ENVIRONMENT

What exactly is lab-grown meat? Here's what you need to know.

ENVIRONMENT

How to prepare for heat waves

ENVIRONMENT

How to

HISTORY & CULTURE

HISTORY & CULTURE

Women won the vote with the 19th Amendment, but hurdles remain

HISTORY & CULTURE

How has Texas changed in 20 years? She went home to find out.

HISTORY & CULTURE

These Black transgender activists are fighting to 'simply be'

HISTORY & CULTURE

Illuminating the lives of Mexico's Indigenous people

HISTORY & CULTURE

How Pu past-tr

SCIENCE

SCIENCE

Are your hormones unbalanced—and what does that even mean?

SCIENCE

Was this prehistoric 'killer shrimp' as fierce as it looked?

SCIENCE

A new life-saving test could help diagnose pre-eclampsia

SCIENCE
THE BIG IDEA

Was it a spectacular celestial discovery—or just a fluke?

SCIENCE

Can our 'lunar system'...

TRAVEL

TRAVEL

10 iconic dishes you shouldn't miss in the Southern states

TRAVEL

Derry by bike: a new way to tour Northern Ireland's second city

TRAVEL

Why you should hold your breath and try freediving in Taiwan

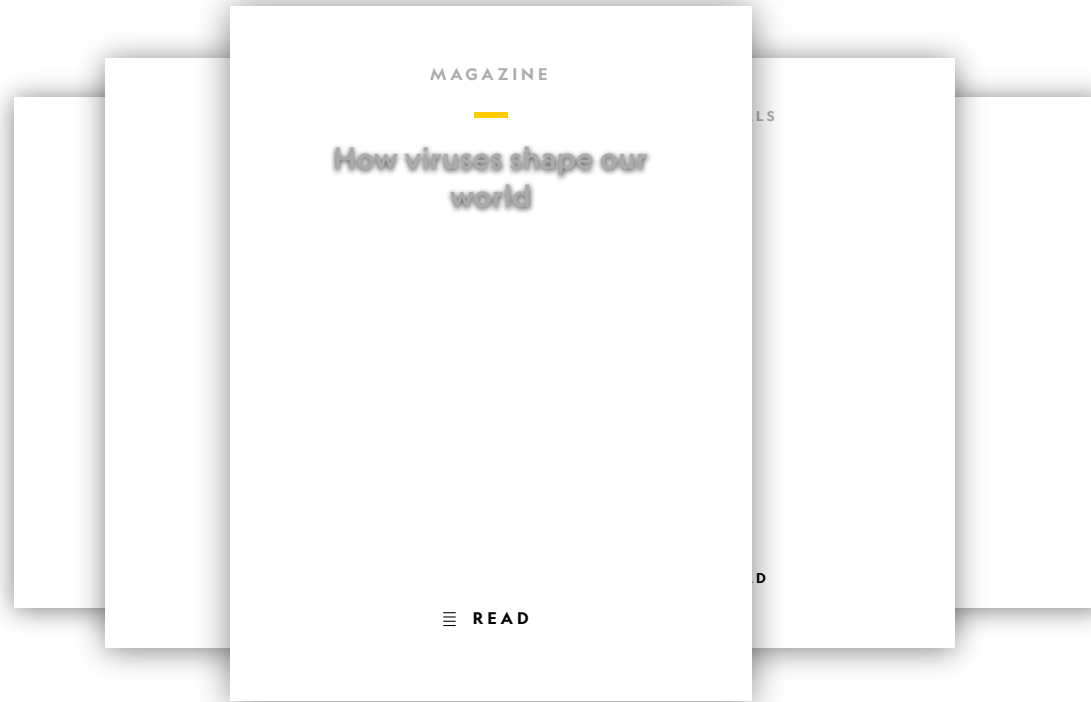
TRAVEL

5 of Europe's best family city breaks for soccer lovers

TRAVEL

Cornwall lives to...

SUBSCRIBER EXCLUSIVE CONTENT



[SEE MORE](#)

THE BEST OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC DELIVERED TO YOUR INBOX

Sign up for more inspiring photos, stories, and special offers from National Geographic.

Email Address

Yes! I would like to receive top content, special offers, and other updates from National Geographic and The Walt Disney Family of Companies. By creating an account, you agree to our [Terms of Use](#) and acknowledge that you have read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [US State Privacy Rights Notice](#).

SIGN UP

LEGAL

- [Terms of Use](#)
- [Privacy Policy](#)
- [Your US State Privacy Rights](#)
- [Children's Online Privacy Policy](#)
- [Interest-Based Ads](#)
- [About Nielsen Measurement](#)
- [Do Not Sell or Share My Personal Information](#)

OUR SITES

- [Nat Geo Home](#)
- [Attend a Live Event](#)
- [Book a Trip](#)
- [Buy Maps](#)
- [Inspire Your Kids](#)
- [Shop Nat Geo](#)
- [Visit the D.C. Museum](#)
- [Watch TV](#)
- [Learn About Our Impact](#)
- [Support Our Mission](#)
- [Nat Geo Partners](#)
- [Masthead](#)
- [Press Room](#)
- [Advertise With Us](#)

JOIN US

- [Subscribe](#)
- [Customer Service](#)
- [Renew Subscription](#)
- [Manage Your Subscription](#)
- [Work at Nat Geo](#)
- [Sign Up for Our Newsletters](#)
- [Contribute to Protect the Planet](#)

FOLLOW US

 [United States \(Change\)](#)



Copyright © 1996-2015 National Geographic Society | Copyright © 2015-2023 National Geographic Partners, LLC. All rights reserved