



CULTURE

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Livia Firth and Zaria Forman Discuss Polar Art as a Means to Highlight the Climate Crisis

by LIVIA FIRTH

The climate crisis deserves urgent attention. With her arresting polar imagery, artist Zaria Forman brings a new point of view.



Photo: John Cowan

It is heartening to see that in the midst of even more preposterous fashion partnerships with influencers, some brands get it right and use their power for good. This month, Swiss watchmaker Vacheron Constantin unveiled American artist Zaria Forman as the face of its Overseas collection and the latest member of its “One of Not Many” talent circle – and I tip my hat to the choice. The first time I saw Forman’s work, I immediately thought of *hózhó*, a Navajo word that carries with it an emphasis on states of harmony. I first came across it while reading one of my favorite books, Barry Lopez’s *Embrace Fearlessly the Burning World*: “For the Navajo, beauty is not about perception, is not in the eye of the beholder, but is the outcome of the artist’s relationship to the world ... Art is integral to life, and *hózhó* ... is the goal of art – and life.”

Born in 1982 in Massachusetts and based in New York, Forman has been traveling the planet for more than 15 years, documenting climate change by collecting images and memories that she then reproduces in large-format pastel works exhibited in museums and galleries around the world. The results are breathtaking. “My mother was a fine art landscape photographer, and she was obsessed with finding the most remote places she could possibly get to,” she tells me when we speak. “From an early age, I was instilled with this deep love of landscape. We would take months at a time to explore a place that nobody had ever heard of. When I graduated from college, I was making large-scale works – big skies, tornadoes, hurricanes – talking about the creative power of nature and how that can put things into perspective for our own emotional well-being. And then in 2007, I went to the Arctic for the first time, and everything changed. I started focusing on climate change, because you can’t ignore it when you’re in a place like that.”



Zaria Forman

Forman has also taken part in Banksy's Dismaland and was a *National Geographic* artist-in-residence in Antarctica, where she made the first permanent exhibitions of polar art. I ask if she recognizes herself in Lopez's concept that "the effort to know a place deeply is ultimately an expression of the human desire to belong, to fit somewhere." Her eyes light up. "Yes, for sure. Art taps into our emotions. I try to recreate places I've visited to transport viewers and make them feel like they're there. Because when you experience it, you fall in love. And then it's hard not to feel part of this Earth. If I can get people to feel that I have succeeded – because when we feel, we take action."

The artist is an uncompromising explorer. In 2016, she joined Nasa's scientific missions flying over Antarctica, Greenland, and the Canadian Arctic, to map ice changes at both poles. "It helped me realize that it's critical for people to work together. It's not just collecting the data that is important – we need to translate it into a medium that people can feel emotionally, can understand in their hearts and in their core." I ask her if this is why she chose Vacheron Constantin, a watch brand, to partner with – to amplify the message that time matters if we want to save the planet. "This planet sustains us and if we don't take care of it and treat it with respect and love, it's going to reject us. We'll continue to experience destruction and challenges. Nature is a powerful force and it's remarkable that we've been able to shift it so drastically. Ultimately, we are the ones who will lose because of what we are doing to the planet, unless we change fast."



A one-of-a-kind artwork Fellsfjara, Iceland no.3 was created for Vacheron Constantin based on Forman's work

Art is such a key medium to change the narrative and inspire us to act – as are the people who are the most affected by the climate crisis. I wonder who has touched Forman's heart the most throughout her travels. "In Greenland, I met Angaangaq, a shaman and traditional healer, who leads an organization called IceWisdom," she shares. "His work has taken him to more than 70 countries, including being a keynote speaker about climate change, the environment, and spiritual and indigenous issues. He spoke to me about the importance of listening to the planet, about how the ice cap in the Arctic is melting at an alarming rate, threatening the world with consequences we can barely imagine. And why we have the moral responsibility to heal that. I will never forget when he brought me to the glacier where he grew up, where he first saw the waterfalls that meant it was melting and understood that he needed to tell the world what was going on."

If our goal in life is to live with *hózhó*, we can't do that without, in Angaangaq's words, "allowing the ice to melt in our hearts and reconnecting with one another so that we will survive." I am so grateful that artists like Forman exist to help us put this together, making sense of the only way our journey can go ahead.

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