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## Planetary precarity and feminist environmental art practices in Antarctica

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### ABSTRACT

The article addresses Antarctica exclusively and focuses on three women artists: New Zealander, Anne Noble (Massey University, Wellington), American, Judit Hersko (California State University, San Marcos), and New Zealander Joyce Campbell (University of Auckland/Los Angeles). In the absence of indigenous inhabitants and a human population that excluded all women until the 1960s, these feminist contemporary artists make linkages between the region and issues of climate change to gender, the relation of the human to the non-human, questions of territory, knowledge production, and empire. The intersectional art works of these artists jolt viewers out of routine assumptions about the natural world using the strategies of postmodernism, speculative fiction, the Gothic, and the horror genre. Their provocative aesthetic approaches enable us to understand the powerful webs where cultural and natural aspects are entangled in the context of a modern visual tradition dominated by masculinist imagery of Antarctic wilderness from the Heroic Age of Exploration (1885–1922).

### KEYWORDS

Antarctica; feminist art; feminist ecological art; postcolonial art; polar art; Antarctic art

Unlike the permafrost and ice, myths are less amenable to climate change (Grace 2010, 12).

In this article that addresses Antarctica exclusively, I am interested in the way three women artists – Anne Noble, Judit Hersko, and Joyce Campbell – use contemporary feminist art to address new forms of thought and perception that are coming into being in the age of the Anthropocene, a term that designates our geological era in which human-induced climate change is transforming our world.<sup>1</sup> Drawing from postmodernism (Anne Noble), speculative fiction (Judit Hersko), the Gothic, and the horror genre (Joyce Campbell), their art works engage ecology to jolt viewers out of routine assumptions about the natural world and its future viewpoint. Their work does not present nature simply as existing in a vast uninhabited and empty wilderness to serve either the cause of Antarctic preservation, in keeping with the 1959 Antarctic Treaty, or to further the myths of heroic masculinity from the era of Antarctic exploration (from 1885 to 1922). Rather, these artists complicate the nature/culture divide in an era of planetary precarity and are rethinking gender, sexuality, science, and the relation of the human to

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the non-human. Their work also reintroduces subjectivities which were disallowed during the Heroic Age of Exploration.

In the absence of women and an indigenous human population, the human history of the Antarctic has been one largely narrated through the lens of white male heroic polar and oceanic exploration from the 18th century to the 20th (Dodds and Collis 2017; Maddison 2014). Despite the Southern Continent's lack of indigenous inhabitants to dominate that made it unlike the colonial experiences of the Arctic, it has been uniquely imagined since the 18th century as a colonial frontier space with valuable maritime resources to exploit. Although challenged by its remoteness and harsh conditions, humans capitalized on the Southern Ocean beginning soon after James Cook reported an abundance of fur seal in 1775. Fur seals were exploited to the brink of extinction for their furs, followed by southern elephant seals, Southern Ocean whales, and king penguins taken for their oil (Brooks and Ainley 2017, 423). Adrian Howkins (2013) points out other ways that the US relationship with Antarctica was informed by a frontier imagination, later led by explorers such as Richard Byrd who envisaged a colonializing network of "Little America[s]" in the 1930s (9–30). The Australian historian Tom Griffiths (2011, 7) articulates the same idea of imagining the frontier with reference to the Australian encounter, building on the earlier feminist scholarship of Christy Collis (2010).

This article reprises and extends significant feminist scholarship that I have done over the past three decades starting with my book, *Gender on Ice: American Ideologies of Polar Expeditions* (Bloom 1993) that raised the issue of how the poles were perceived by American and British explorers in the early 20th century as an empty imperial frontier to plunder, "a tabula rasa where people, history, and culture vanish" (2). As such, they were seen as ideal sites for the strategic development of distinctive forms of white manhood, technology, colonialism, and nationalism during the late 19th and early 20th centuries during the so-called Heroic Age of Polar Exploration. The book was the first to bring the Arctic and to a lesser extent Antarctic studies into conversation with critical intersectional scholarship on gender, race, science, colonialism, and nationalism. Much of my feminist and postcolonial writing on the Arctic and Antarctic since then builds on this initial foray, including the special issue of *The Scholar and the Feminist* on gender and the polar regions that I co-edited, and more recent articles that I wrote on feminism, art, and ecology (Bloom, Glasberg, and Kay 2008; Bloom and Glasberg 2012; Bloom 2017), and which are developed further in my forthcoming book *Critical Polar Aesthetics: Art, Feminism and the Climate Crisis in the Arctic and Antarctic*.<sup>2</sup> The book examines aspects of feminist and environmentalist art that conjoins issues routinely kept apart in climate change debates. It brings together debates on science and the environment that take into account the fate of indigenous communities, resurgent nationalisms, and globalizing capitalism as well as questions of gender, race, and persistent postcolonial relations.

Some of the more recent scholarship on gender and colonialism also focuses on how the contemporary peace-and-science era that followed the 1958 Geophysical Year, often seen as distinct, was in many ways informed by the same intertwined ideologies of masculinity, colonialism, and exploration of this earlier period of modernity (O'Reilly 2017; Glasberg 2012; Leane 2009; Rosner 2009; Collis 2009). The exclusionary gender-segregated structures on the ice lasted up until the 1960s and 1970s. According to Elena

Glasberg, “the language of achievement” in this new era “passed from imperial registers to those of science” (2012, xx) that can be seen in the continuing politics and practices of maintaining exclusive claims: the flags planted, the maps drawn, and the bases built by framing their colonization efforts as objectively scientific. Travel writer Sara Wheeler ([1996] 2014) recalled the explanation of one male scientist in her Antarctic memoir: “They [British men] don’t want the complication of women in such a pristine place,’ he said. ‘It’s visceral” (219).

This article turns a critical feminist lens on what is still often seen as a very masculine heroic geographical site. Amelia Jones, a contemporary feminist art historian, argues that one of the most important legacies of feminist art is conditioned through the politics of positionality. By this, Jones means the importance of emphasizing the situatedness of visuality, and of spectatorship. In this context, positionality extends to making linkages between the region and issues of climate change to gender, the relation of the human to the non-human, and questions of territory, knowledge production, and empire (Jones 2006). In the restricted context of Antarctica, devoted mostly to the domain of scientists, some of these women artists who received grants through a visiting artist and writing programme funded through the US National Science Foundation not only occupied a subordinate position to the scientists but were at odds with the idea of nature as an Antarctic “wilderness” and “aesthetic” built into *The Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty*, 1991 (Jackson 2019). William Fox (2012), the director of the Centre for Art + Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art, points out that the treaty created a rationale for engaging artists through the National Science Foundation:

The primary purpose of the visiting artists and writers program [ ... ] remains to provide public outreach – images demonstrating to the American taxpayer that the funds spent on Antarctic research are worth it. Much of the science conducted there is far too abstruse to be of interest to laypeople, but the presentation of a sublime and pristine wilderness establishes an emotional loyalty to the continent that serves the cause. That means there is a strong bias of selecting artists whose work is pictorial, representational and conventional. The aim has been to document the physical form and conditions of the continent, and then make it comprehensible as a sublime landscape suitable for preservation as a stage for scientific inquiry (30).

Some of the artists chosen in more recent years, including Anne Noble and Judit Hersko, were fortunate to have been recipients of the National Science Foundation (NSF) Antarctic Visiting Artists and Writing Program when it was administered by Guy Guthridge who insisted that art in Antarctica should not be at the service of science, and put art, the humanities, and science as intellectual activities of equal value.

For Anne Noble, her photographs exemplify the struggle between what she calls her own lack of belonging as a woman and non-scientist. She looks at the mechanisms of authority that construct the conditionings of the Antarctic imaginary and its images of heroic masculinity within the tourist industry, whether from the remote regions of American bases in Antarctica or in dioramas of Antarctica in entertainment centres in New Zealand, Japan, or elsewhere. Her photographs also question the popular mythic image of Antarctica as an unrepresentable and unspoiled tabula rasa populated only by penguins, dolphins, or sperm whales – one that the tourist industry promotes as a backdrop.

Judit Hersko, by contrast, presents an alternative and unlikely photographic, performative, and cinematic history of exploration and climate science in Antarctica through a pointed, imaginative writing of an alternative history of a Jewish woman's presence in Antarctica. Her purpose is to shift our sensorial and perceptual view of the polar regions from traditional (white male) polar explorers' perspective of remote wilderness and conquest represented in the earlier period to investigations of intimate and hidden layers of this region including microscopic species which were not studied or represented in the Heroic era.

For Judit Hersko, her more intimate encounters with the landscape means bringing in the physical relationships of the human and non-human and the interconnection of natural systems to highlight the sense of dislocation involved in living in such an extreme environment that is on the verge of a slow collapse. She introduces the politics of non-human agential power through attention to microscopic creatures like the sea angel and the sea butterfly. This fascination with microscopic life forms turns away from the traditional essentialist position of woman-as-nature towards one that comes out of more recent feminist writing on new materialism and matter by Karen Barad (2007), Stacy Alaimo (2010), and others (e.g. Bennett 2010). That such small planktonic organisms can have so much power is at odds in a world where our scale of measure prefers large mammals such as polar bears as the icons of anthropogenic climate change.

Joyce Campbell uses the genre of the Gothic in her photographs to reinvigorate the sublime, and thus to create tension between the traditional heroic landscape images and those of the present. There is also an irony in Joyce Campbell's photographs of Antarctica, that while efforts at settler colonialism and science in Antarctica throughout the 20th century have dented its icy surface, fossil fuels, to which we are collectively addicted from afar, have been most invasive and gnawed deeply into the continent's glaciers and pressure ridges. The unintended effect is anti-heroic and grubby, a compromised icescape completely devoid of humans and wildlife but full of individual cracks, crevasses, and pressure ridges which Campbell photographs as isolated signs of stress and potential collapse.

All three artists bring together issues routinely kept apart in climate change debates such as connecting globalizing capitalism to questions of gender, sexuality, science, and persistent postcolonial relations. Their work searches for alternative narratives and aesthetics to make us imagine how climate change and globalization have transformed our affective and aesthetic responses to the continent in ways we otherwise would not have imagined.

### **Anthropogenic landscape practices and the role of the sublime in Anne Noble's photographs**

Anne Noble, a well-known New Zealand photo-based artist and professor at Massey University in Wellington, has been working on Antarctica since 2002 when she first travelled to the continent through the New Zealand Antarctic Program and later on the US National Science Foundation Artists and Writers Program (Noble 2010, 2011; Wedde 2011; Noble et al. 2012).<sup>3</sup> Noble's work also interrogates the role of the sublime in the construction of visual knowledge of anthropogenic landscape practices in Antarctica. She too addresses the historic exclusion of women altogether from the continent until the 1960s and 1970s, and the way the visual tropes of Antarctica, as the last great wilderness on planet earth, contributes to

maintaining the perception that Antarctica is still an all-male continent or a living memorial to this earlier moment when only men could populate the continent.

A case in point is her photographic series, titled *Bitch in Slippers*, of transport vehicles taken on the US base at the South Pole. The title refers to the profane slang expression used by workers to complain about how difficult the vehicles were to manoeuvre over the ice. Her photographs are of the beaten-up machines and trucks with names of absent working-class women like Hazel, Patsy, and Brenda. Such images evoke a strange form of anthropomorphized vehicles whose formidable presence is one that might be more familiar from cartoons or horror films where inanimate objects start talking back to the belligerent men who called them bitches. But such sexist practices of naming vehicles after women is also reminiscent of the naming of bombs, ships, and hurricanes after women in the 20th century. Like the working-class women they are meant to represent, many of the images of the trucks look like they have not been treated well over the years. But they are still functioning, and some have more style than others. *Misty* is an attractive brunette, but her face is badly scratched, *Basket Case* is a tank and doesn't seem to have much humour, and *Hot Lips* (Figure 1) has scratches and red lips but no curves. In this poetic catalogue where the Antarctic vehicles are shown together as a group, Noble is refashioning a lurking fictitious female presence out of the remnants of these vehicles that are part of Antarctica's hidden industrial landscape (Figure 2). One wonders if this is also



Figure 1. Anne Noble, *Hot Lips*, from *Bitch in Slippers* series. 2008. Courtesy of the artist.



Figure 2. Anne Noble, *Antarctic Inventory*, from *Bitch in Slippers* series. 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

a way for her to pay homage to the invisible labour of the maintenance workers of Antarctica, both men and women (though much fewer in number), who have lived and worked there in recent years, but are rarely acknowledged in representations of Antarctica, many of whom more recently are Maori indigenous women workers on the New Zealand and Australian bases.<sup>4</sup>

In order to examine how gender determines her tenuous connection to place, Noble uses irony to parody the commercialization of Antarctica and its landscape by the tourist industry. Substitution and humour are central to Noble's postmodern strategy about Antarctica and contemporary tourism in immersive environments in Imax theatres, and theme-park-type exhibitions both outside and inside Antarctica. In works such as *The Barne Glacier* (2001) (Figure 3), Noble presents two dummies dressed in National Science Foundation standard-issue extreme-weather gear standing before a panoramic photograph of the Barne Glacier in an Antarctic-themed indoor entertainment centre in New Zealand. This image references well-known Heroic Age documents such as Herbert Ponting's photograph of the Barne Glacier (Figure 4) where the vast scale of the glacier dominates to such an extent that the figure in the landscape is tiny by comparison, easily engulfed by the vast icy landscape. Her work also references Frank Hurley's *A Blizzard at Winter Quarters* (Figure 5), in which silhouetted figures struggling against the wind and cold are superimposed into a windy Antarctic landscape to illustrate the terror associated with the power of the forbidding climate. In this way Noble references and comments on these iconic images of sublime wilderness from the Heroic era that show the inhospitable space of the Antarctic as a male testing-ground in which isolation and physical danger combine with overwhelming beauty. Noble's photographs use beauty and space in less conventional ways by reversing Ponting's use of composition. Her images, by contrast to his, are tightly framed and almost claustrophobic, robbing the setting of its epic character. While the photographic beauty of her images is central to the meaning, she is also asking us to rethink the way the sublime can be experienced, as she presents the area as junky, filled with work vehicles. In her image of the Barne Glacier (2001)



Figure 3. Anne Noble, *The Barne Glacier*, Christchurch Antarctic Centre. 2001. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 4.** Herbert Ponting, *Barne Glacier*. 1910.



**Figure 5.** Frank Hurley, *Out in the Blizzard at Cape Denison Adjacent to Winter Quarters*. 1913. Carbon print.

her use of colour and light emphasizes an artificially simulated landscape environment, creating an uncanny commentary about the contradictions between the Antarctica visualized in Hurley's and Ponting's photographs and the kitsch aesthetic of sublime wilderness now produced in indoor settings such as the Antarctic Centre in New Zealand where she took this photo.

Noble's critique of the contemporary representations of early Antarctic exploration is taken even further in *Antarctic Storm, Christchurch, New Zealand* (2002) (Figure 6) where we see another image of tourists at the Antarctic Centre in New Zealand "experiencing" extreme



Figure 6. Anne Noble, *Antarctic Storm*, Christchurch, New Zealand. 2002. Courtesy of the artist.

Antarctica weather inside a diorama. The glaciers and ice appear as crucial props to the scene, as does the very large thermometer in the foreground, which quickly makes us understand that the Antarctic experience of surviving the cold might only last 20 minutes. Whereas Hurley's and Ponting's images emphasize the heroic travails of members of different early expeditions to Antarctica, Noble's work by contrast hyper-aestheticizes these simulations to create a more jarring understanding of Antarctica that disrupts the "experience" of this remote continent that is now made available to everyone through dioramas, videos, and entertainment centres. Photographs such as this one turn the conventions of photographic beauty and weather back at the audience, and in so doing express a more ironic relationship to the way Antarctica's now lost heroic sublime is consumed uncritically by tourists who can afford a ticket to an Antarctica theme-park entertainment centre but not a trip to Antarctica. Though this photograph reorients audiences away from sublime remoteness to visceral proximity, it does not alert them to the immediacy of climate change or how radically different the "weather" is now from during that earlier epoch. Her photograph of a thermometer in one of these dioramas is especially ironic given how Antarctica itself is characterized in the context of climate change by physicist Adriana Gulisano of Argentina's National Antarctic Directorate as a "thermometer that shows how the world is changing" ("Glaciers in Antarctica" 2017).

In another, *Photo Spot, Petermann Island, 11 Spectacular Days Antarctic Tour* (Figure 7), we see tourists snapping photos of penguins and seals just as they might in one of her photographs of dioramas or science centres around the world. As Anne Noble (2010) puts it, the Antarctic peninsula is "the perfect place to take people to recapture that image of Antarctica they already have" (9). This attitude leads to marginalizing and ultimately erasing the materiality of Antarctica's extreme nature by turning it into a prop in their photographs. Consequently, tourists cannot see how ice sometimes seems to take on a wilful life of its own, often destructive, or the more terrifying material ways Antarctica reveals itself as an anthropogenic landscape. Noble, who works as a conceptual artist and a traditional photographer visiting the real place (Antarctica) as well as the simulacra (the



**Figure 7.** Anne Noble, *Photo Spot, Petermann Island, 11 Spectacular Days Antarctic Tour*. 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Antarctic discovery centres around the world), gives both equal weight in her work to point out that tourists cannot always differentiate between the real and the simulacra. The point for Noble is that what is sold in these contemporary tourist images is not global warming or the threat of pollution but the promise of Antarctica's mythical past where icebergs, glaciers, penguins, and white male heroes dominate and define the horizon and (white) man's endurance. Antarctica's significance to climate change is absented not just from commercial images in entertainment centres but in actual cruises that are crafted to entertain tourists within secure and relaxed frameworks (luxury ships, Wi-Fi, zodiac tours, selfies, and drones) free from worry (Liggett and Stewart 2017, 368–391).<sup>5</sup>

One of the most compelling and well-known set of photographs that Noble took in Antarctica is entitled *Whiteout*. As its title suggests, her photographic images capture the shifting effect of light during a whiteout where they show us a landscape that is entirely abstract. Such images remind us that in the post-Heroic Age, although the region is increasingly more accessible, the anxieties of managing the forbidden climate remain but are less predictable due to the fact that Antarctica is one of the most rapidly warming parts of the world.

### **Attachments in the Anthropocene: The microscopic pteropods in Judit Hersko's "Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer"**

Judit Hersko has been working on Antarctica since 2008 when she first travelled there with the US National Science Foundation Antarctic Artists and Writers Program. She is an installation artist and professor at California State University, San Marcos, who works at the intersection of art and science. Like Noble, she searches for new ways to tell stories about the invisibility of women's historical place in Antarctica but in her case she connects this to the invisibility of the significant labour and herculean role of

microorganisms in the Antarctic oceans (Hersko 2009, 2012, 2020).<sup>6</sup> In this way, her work brings together the feminist question of the scale of the personal to the non-human. For her narrative, Hersko draws on both a rich artistic and literary tradition, including Ursula Le Guin's (1982) short story "Sur", a utopian feminist fictional account of an exploration in which a party of South American women reach the South Pole in 1909, two years before the official arrival of the real exploration teams of Amundsen and Scott. 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, of their presence at the South Pole, as evidenced by one of the characters' activities of fashioning sculptures from ice (Le Guin 1982; Glasberg 2012). Like the disappearing ice sculptures in Le Guin's short story, Hersko's artwork and narrative can be preserved only as objects doomed to disappear. She achieves this by emphasizing the ephemeral as well as the minute in contrast to the concrete forms and heroic scale of male exploration narratives and images.

"Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer" (2008–17) is both a narrative essay and a performative lecture about (and by) a fictional Jewish female explorer, photographer, and Antarctic biologist from the 1930s named Anna Schwartz who passes as a man to participate in Richard E. Byrd's 1939–42 United States Antarctic Expedition. In Hersko's narrative, Anna is the only woman to work before the 1960s as a biologist and photographer in Antarctica. In a series of transparent silicone objects that include *Portrait of Anna Schwartz* (Figure 8) and *Anna Schwartz's Letter Home* (1939) (in which Anna writes to her family to explain her sudden disappearance to Antarctica), Hersko has cast sculptural representations of pelagic snails (Figure 9). These pieces underscore the surprising obsession and motivation of Anna's clandestine expedition to Antarctica to study pteropods – microscopic planktonic creatures that are so integral to her trip that they are incorporated into her portrait and letter. These sculptures that meld representations of humans with non-human microscopic creatures allow us to imagine a world in which the divisions between them are abolished.



**Figure 8.** Judit Hersko, *Portrait of Anna Schwartz*. 2008. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 9.** Judit Hersko, *Anna Schwartz Letter Home* (1939). 2008. Courtesy of the artist.

Any suggestion of hope is undercut by the very choice of dates of Schwartz's trip to Antarctica (i.e. 1939) when Hitler invaded Poland. In this way, the presence of Schwartz, who is of Jewish Hungarian descent, connects the atrocities of Eastern European Jews loaded onto boxcars and sent to concentration camps in Europe, with the apocalyptic devastation of the accelerated climate crisis today (Ludecke and Summerhayes 2012).<sup>7</sup>

"Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer" (2008–17) is also inspired by the proto-surrealist albums of Victorian women such as Kate Edith Gough, who invented a method of photo-collage later adopted by avant-garde artists (Figure 10).

Hersko borrows this aesthetic style to visually render the placement of people in circumstances they could not ordinarily inhabit. To reveal how visually out of place her fictional explorer, photographer, and Antarctic biologist from the 1930s is, Hersko reworks famous images related to Heroic Age photography to create her own compelling photo-collages that illustrate women's exclusion from the masculine history of exploration. She places Schwartz into already existing photographs of Scott's failed Antarctic exploration. One is a 1912 photograph taken by Bowers of Captain Scott and his companions by Amundsen's tent at the South Pole where Hersko adds a young Anna Schwartz in the foreground, in place of Edgar Evans who stands there in the original photograph and who died on the expedition (Figure 11). In another photo-collage, Hersko places Schwartz in a photograph by Frank Hurley (Figure 12) depicting Shackleton's ship *Endurance* trapped in the ice of the Weddell Sea (1915).



Figure 10. Kate Edith Gough, from the *Gough Album*, "late 1870s" (Siegel 2009, 156). (Kate Edith Gough).



**Figure 11.** Judit Hersko, *With Scott at the South Pole*. Collage by Anna Schwartz. 2010. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 12.** Judit Hersko, *Anna Schwartz: Self-Portrait with Diatoms*. 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

The presence of Anna Schwartz in well-known Antarctic expeditions such as the failed Scott expedition creates an uncanny effect. This uncanniness is not just attached to the loss inherent in the Scott expedition, but to the connection it makes to the loss of Anna's own family members in the Holocaust. In a sculpture created for the exhibit titled *Anna's*

*Cabinet* (inspired by the objects from Scott's expedition that were left behind in the *Terra Nova* hut) Hersko makes a direct reference to this (Figure 13). The diaphanous objects include the candy jar of Anna's favourite aunt, who, Hersko informs us, died in the Holocaust.

Hersko also uses the narrative about Anna Schwartz, including Anna's and her daughter's research into the pteropods that are now threatened with extinction, to suggest comparisons between two holocausts. While Schwartz's male counterparts are engaged in heroic conquest of the landscape, she is there to find and photograph minute pelagic organisms. Through her story and scientific documentation, Hersko highlights what otherwise is impossible to see: two transparent planktonic snails: the *Clione antarctica* (sea angel) and the microscopic *Limacina helicina* (sea butterfly) whose existence is currently threatened by climate change (Figure 14). These snails were plentiful in the 1930s, but due to the effects of ocean acidification the shell of the *Limacina helicina* is dissolving. Hersko's highly sensuous photographic images of these elusive creatures introduce us to these pteropods that are usually seen only through deep-sea submersibles and videos and are still barely-known if not unknowable forms of life that inhabit the Southern Ocean. Her work furthers our understanding of how their decline is entangled with the violent changes in our environment that are threatening the survival of the ocean's ecosystem.

The danger to the pteropods that interests Hersko is less spectacular and less familiar to the public than dramatic popular images of the contemporary sublime and of apocalyptic climate change represented most iconically by images of polar bears in the Arctic and of penguins, dolphins, and sperm whales in Antarctica. Unlike these "poster children" of climate change, Hersko's creatures are microscopic and her narrative draws our attention to the contrast between the size of these pteropods and their herculean role in the oceanic food chain. Due to their special sensitivity to ocean acidification they are



Figure 13. Judit Hersko, *Anna's Cabinet* (detail). 2011. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 14.** Judit Hersko, *Clione antarctica* – *Sea Angel*. 2009. Courtesy of the artist.

also widely considered the “canaries in the coal mine” when it comes to the state of the oceans in the era of climate change.

As Hersko’s art explores representations of these microscopic creatures at a moment when they are disappearing, she creates a melancholic aesthetic that engages with the photographic materials from the past but gives them a new value that is different from the period when they were first made. The melancholia of her work asks us to think of these planktonic snails as having ceased to exist while we are presented with a fictional narrative and dream-like images about the first time they were documented in the 1930s by the fictional biologist Anna Schwartz. As her work aesthetically activates these lost images, they begin to signify two moments in time simultaneously, the era when they were first created as well as the present. The transparent and ephemeral portrait of the *Unknown Explorer* emphasizes the contingent nature of Schwartz’s heroism (Figure 8). We never learn definitively if the unknown explorer’s reasons to escape are connected to the Holocaust, but the evocation of this possibility seems to foreshadow further catastrophe for her pteropods. Significantly, Hersko’s reference to this history is tempered by her own personal relationship to this genocide as her own parents survived Nazi persecution. Her work also pays homage to her mother, Anna Hersko, one of the first women film-makers in Hungary, who passed away as Hersko was beginning this work.

Hersko’s narrative and archive are symbolic of alternate histories and possibilities since they imagine what Jewish women’s contribution to science, polar exploration, and cinematic history might have been in Antarctica’s early history if women’s relationship to

Antarctica was not merely speculative during Anna Schwartz's era. For this reason, Hersko's fictional narrative insists that one must take into account the imaginative histories that run alongside real polar histories. Her archive of images about Antarctica includes projected cinematic images, etched photographic images on glass and silicone, and photo-montages that deliberately draw on photographic tropes from the period to give the pictures a "reality effect". At the same time, her work disorients us since she puts people and organisms in an order and a location they would not normally inhabit such as the unlikely inclusion of Schwartz and her study of pteropods in Antarctica at the time when Jews in Europe were fleeing the Nazis. In other words, 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 connects to other intersectional human extinctions and extends to the non-human.

Hersko's work asks: how can we attune ourselves to the new ecological conditions that both humans and non-humans face in Antarctica outside of the dramatic images of the sublime and apocalyptic climate change produced by popular culture, and still bear witness to the transformation of the landscape from extreme climate change? Her work points to how the imagination of heroic polar aesthetics limits our ability to perceive an erasure in the landscape and oceanscape because the imagination of heroic polar aesthetics limits our perception to the obviously visible such as penguins and whales, and our short-term culture does not enable us to notice and represent what is happening around us, especially when changes occur gradually and imperceptibly over time. Consequently, her work engages her subject in new ways by searching for alternative narratives and aesthetics, and presents a different sensibility, aesthetics, and subjectivity from what we expect.

### The new polar Gothic in Joyce Campbell's *Last Light*

Joyce Campbell is a well-known interdisciplinary artist working in photography, film, video, and sculpture who utilizes anachronistic photographic techniques which date back to the beginnings of photography in the 19th and early 20th centuries to examine the relation between natural and cultural systems. She lives and works in Auckland, New Zealand, and Los Angeles, California and is a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland, Elam School of the Arts. Throughout her artistic practice, she uses outdated technologies to experiment with various mediums to rethink the role of art in grappling with issues of the Anthropocene. Campbell describes her work on Antarctica as "driven by my own burgeoning horror at the effects of climate change on the earth's polar ice caps".<sup>8</sup>

Her art work on Antarctica dates from 2006 when she travelled to the Ross Sea region of Antarctica for two weeks with the Artists to Antarctica program sponsored by Creative New Zealand and Antarctica New Zealand. In the work she did during that period titled *Last Light*, that consists of a series of vertical photographic scrolls, panoramic photographic murals, and 5 × 7-inch daguerreotypes and digital video loops, there is a lingering fascination with rethinking the tradition of the Gothic sublime to articulate a shift in the human relationship to landscape in the context of the climate crisis (Figures 15 and 16). As she puts it:

My photographs borrow their gothic sublime aesthetic from nineteenth century romantic landscape painting and do so to point out a troubling shift in the human relationship to



**Figure 15.** Joyce Campbell, *Ice Ghoul 1*, from *Last Light*. 2006. Becquerel daguerreotype. Courtesy of the artist.

landscape. Edmund Burke regarded sublime nature as awesome, overwhelming, humbling and simultaneously invigorating in its offer of a mortality glimpsed but not actualized. The twenty-first century viewer has an altogether more disturbing relationship to the mountain, the thrashing ocean, the crevasse and the glacier. Now we look at Nature askance and with guilt, aware that its grandeur has become somewhat sullied by our modernity and privilege. (Campbell 2008, n.p.)

One of the romantic paintings that she draws from includes Caspar David Friedrich's 1823–24 painting titled *The Sea of Ice* (Figure 17), which conveys a subjective, emotional response to the extreme nature of the Arctic that almost appears apocalyptic in its depiction of a spectacular shipwreck in the middle of a broken ice-sheet. Campbell's interest in the Friedrich painting is not to contemplate the catastrophic aspect of extreme nature but the new variation where the natural world has not only been rendered and contained, but irrevocably altered due to man-made climate change and neo-liberal economics. In so doing, her work erases that earlier sense of distance and safety the



**Figure 16.** Joyce Campbell, *Lower Wright Glacier*, from *Last Light*. 2006. Silver gelatin negative. Courtesy of the artist.



**Figure 17.** Caspar David Friedrich's painting *The Sea of Ice*. 1823–24. Courtesy of the Hamburger Kunsthalle.

older sublime afforded as we now understand that the climate crisis is not strictly a matter of sea level and coastlines but is an all-enveloping crisis that will spare no place and leave no life unchanged. However, that does not mean that this new “Polar Gothic” in Joyce Campbell’s series of photographic works of icescapes in Antarctica using the daguerreotype, an obsolete photographic process invented in 1839 (employing an iodine-sensitized silvered plate and mercury vapour) might not at times also display grandiosity and the spectacular destructiveness of an earlier sublime. But what has fundamentally changed in her work documenting this new terror is that the environmental instability

provoked by these glaciers' accelerated melting is no longer viewed as a separate and remote phenomenon from its observer.

The source of dread in the 21st century is not the polar regions and the invigorating and overwhelming scale of this wild landscape but its very disappearance due to industrial pollution and the threat its vanishing poses to a fossil-fuel-based society. Joyce Campbell draws attention to this more disturbing relation in her embodied and immersive visual approach to the signs of ice coming apart in the Ross Sea Region of Antarctica in her photographs and multiple exposure photographic murals that reconstruct the contorted face of a glacier by drawing attention to the fissures, flaws, pressure ridges, and even a screaming ice ghoul. In a time of digitized mediation, she deliberately uses a 19th-century technology – the daguerreotype – to offer analogue proof of place. For her, the intervention of this new “Polar Gothic” into the seemingly tame and managed modern Antarctica of science is a revival of an earlier era's close relation to terror, since it opens up the way Antarctica reveals itself as an anthropogenic landscape.

### Conclusion: Rethinking gender, aesthetics, and politics in the Anthropocene

If Hersko brings us back to the earlier days of polar explorers and the Heroic era by inserting her unknown Jewish woman explorer and biologist into her fictionalized re-enactment of the Byrd expedition, Campbell pulls us away, bringing us into another fantasy space of the Gothic and the horror genre where she plays with the inhuman aspect of Antarctica to make us imagine how climate change and globalization have transformed these spaces in ways we otherwise would not have imagined. This is also an important concern for Noble's photographs where she provides a more elaborate critique of the way heroic masculinist routines and stances from the Heroic Age continue in the “post heroic” era of anthropogenic climate change.

Hersko, Noble, and Campbell are telling stories about an absent subjectivity. Hersko uses this as an occasion to make a statement on the invisibility of women's place in polar narratives and how the Anthropocene has altered the terms and parameters of perception itself regarding how we reorganize our knowledge and perceptions to open up and think about the life of worlds of microscopic matter. Noble's photographs also remind us how the past is not dead as she records how Antarctica continues to be defined as an all-male space of bonding from the Heroic era. Campbell literally conjures the ghosts of the past by drawing on a “Polar Gothic” to revive the earlier era's relation to terror. Her photographs record an alien anthropogenic icescape devoid of humans and wildlife in order to shock capitalist logic into changing while there may still be time.

Noble's exuberant conceptualism and Hersko's and Campbell's sensuousness are extremely spare, though they all employ an emotionality to convey an informational richness in their work that differentiates all three from more reserved, deadpan photographic practices. But Noble's use of colour in the Antarctic displays and the *Bitch in Slippers* series tends to be more visceral than either Hersko's or Campbell's primarily black-and-white work.

Hersko's, Noble's, and Campbell's viewpoints suggest some important new directions in contemporary art, and, in the process, their work makes us think about how feminist intersectional perspectives have contributed to making us think critically about a landscape that has been romanticized, idealized, and rendered epic. The viewer's aesthetic experience of their work is not just about landscape, the masculinist heroic subjectivity,

but also subjectivity itself, be it male or female, since their narratives are about rethinking a landscape that is threatened as much by human actions as through the agency of geophysical processes alone. One can only imagine what could happen if they, or other artists in their wake, bring this transformed aesthetic sensibility to other contemporary sites undergoing environmental degradation to examine how it is often in the spaces that we cannot see or know where history, aesthetics, and climate politics intersect and collide in the most compelling of ways.

## Notes

1. This article draws upon an earlier version (Bloom 2017).
2. The special issue of the online journal *The Scholar and the Feminist* (Bloom, Glasberg, and Kay 2008) at Barnard College was the starting point for some of my current research.
3. See the first two volumes of a trilogy devoted to her photographic investigations of Antarctica (Noble 2011; Noble, Panek, and Jones 2014), as well as Glasberg on Noble's Antarctic photography (Bloom, Glasberg, and Kay 2008).
4. Thanks to Michelle Erai for this insight. She is based in New Zealand, was formerly professor of gender and women's studies at the University of California, Los Angeles and is of Maori descent.
5. On how the rise of tourism in Antarctica is disrupting its fragile environment, see McClanahan (2020).
6. See Judit Hersko's website <http://www.judithersko.com/> for images and a full description of her Antarctic art project, *From the Pages of the Unknown Explorer*. Hersko's art work on climate change and planktonic snails is an outgrowth of her collaboration with the biological oceanographer Victoria Fabry.
7. For a book-length study that addresses the veiled role of Jewishness in the understanding of feminist art in the US, see Bloom (2006).
8. Quote from <https://rcwg.scrippscollege.edu/blog/2008/04/04/joyce-campbell/>. *Last Light* was exhibited in 2007 at Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery, in the *Last Light* exhibition, Scripps College, Claremont, California.

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