

DIANE BURKO

(REVIEWS)

Locks Gallery | Philadelphia



In John Logan's new play *Red* (2010), Mark Rothko instructs his assistant to notice how patches of color "ebb and flow, and shift, gently pulsating." He adds, "The more you look at them, the more they move. ... They float in space, they breathe...." Without giving much thought to paint's vitality, most theorists routinely commend photography as the medium most appropriate for political art, given its transparency. Others flat out deny photography's evidential status, yet no one could doubt the underlying reality of Diane Burko's source material—photographs of glaciers undergoing

meteorological erasure, shot by USGS geographers, spanning the last century. But I suspect her decision to paint has little to do with the conventions of political art. Burko's chosen medium focuses more on truths about painting, such as paint's penchant to ebb and flow like melting glaciers, painting's fluid dimensionality (resizing photographs degrades them), the role of artistic imagination, plus her urge to paint sustainably, as well as to mine the format of geological surveys (their dependence on serialized imagery to convey change across decades). Can it be any coincidence that the United States Geological Survey's motto is "science for a changing world"? What figurative painter wouldn't be tempted to try out painting's unique possibilities on shifting geographical formations? Burko's painted glaciers prove that video isn't the only time-based, dynamic medium available.

All the melting, trickling, and dripping depicted in Burko's "Politics of Snow" paintings (through March 13) triggered films in both my mind's eye and ear, not unlike the rippling waterfall in Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés*. Although Rothko was explaining his own paintings, he could easily have been describing Burko's *Matterhorn Icon Series* (2007-09), a series of eight square paintings depicting different facets of the craggy summit enduring climate change, as if weather is wearable. This series captures the implacable peak, either snow-covered or bare, crowned by heavy mist, blustery squalls, or deep-blue sky. The vertical *Disappearing Series 2A and 2B* (2008) and horizontal *Nunatak #1* (1938, after Bradford Washburn) and *Nunatak #2* (2005, after David Arnold) (2010) contain imagery that seems to extend from top to bottom and left to right. Since the glacial lake's mirror image appears snowier than the peak above, it must reflect the artist's imagination. With the horizontal diptych, the gushing, plunging, rustling river on the left feels loud in comparison to the hushed, silt-laden riverbed to its right. Although the same USGS geographers documented the Nunatak and Twenty Mile glaciers, *Twenty Mile Glacier #1* (1938, after Bradford Washburn) and *Twenty Mile Glacier #2* (2005, after David Arnold) (2009) clearly convey "same site, different era." With *Twenty Mile Glacier*, the 1938 panel feels frozen, stiff and placid, while the 2005 panel reads as hot, verdant, and bloody. Despite this moist site's current fecundity, it stands to end up barren like *Nunatak #2*, a warning to global warming deniers who claim warming benefits agriculture production.

With a diptych like *Boulder Glacier #1* (1932, after T.J. Hileman) and *Boulder Glacier #2* (2005, after Greg Peterson) (2010), the snowy 1932 glacier remains veiled and covered, while the stripped 2005 glacier exposes the striated mauve limestone below. Similarly, the tetraptych *Grinnell Mt. Gould #1* (1938, after T.K. Hileman, GNP Archives); *Grinnell Mt. Gould #2* (1981, after Carl Key, USGS); and *Grinnell Mt. Gould #4* (2009, after Karen Holzer, USGS) (2009)—hung here as a triptych absent its third panel—depicts what appears to be a welcomed change as an otherwise uninhabitable, treacherous glacier melts, leaving an expanding teal pool, enabling naysayers to view warming as akin to climate taming. By contrast, the 2006 panel of *Grinnell Glacier Overlook* (2009) looks more menacing than the 1960 panel, since the river's momentum swells as it passes through a narrow, constrained passage. However compelling Burko's paintings of erased glaciers appear, such serialized panels stimulate thoughts of what lies ahead, as precious, stored resources slip into the rivers, dragging along toxic chemicals and topsoil to the oceans, eventually causing all sorts of unimaginable crises for coastal communities.

In light of the rising focus on sustainable practices, some doubt painting's future (too few opportunities for reduce, reuse, and recycle). Burko's newest paintings demonstrate one possibility: use as few resources as possible. By depicting so much with so little paint, she shows that it's still possible to one-up the legacy of landscape painting, whose enduring concern has always been nature's erasure.

—Sue Spaid