

## **SEEING NATURE (AFTER THE HUMAN) ON PAINTING AS PHILOSOPHY**

I vividly remember my first visit to Rob Reynolds' studio.

There were the, almost disturbing, brown-blue tones of glacial runoff and pooling produced by the melting ice of a South American alpine glacier; the shades of blue that give his paintings of floating icebergs and shipwrecks, stuck in and overgrown by ice, an unusual vivacity.

I found myself gripped by the aesthetic appeal of Reynolds' depictions of nature, and struck by the feeling that what I was looking at were philosophical investigations carried out in the genre of painting.

Reynolds' icebergs, glaciers, shipwrecks, botanicals and suns are contemporary studies of seeing, of how we have come to see — and experience — nature. What is more, they are explorations of how to see differently, of how to constitute oneself through the act of seeing.

While his current practice includes sculpture, video, digital work, and collaboration with earth scientists, Reynolds' paintings transfer us out of a human-centric way of looking at the world and into an Earth-centric experience of being part of a planetary system.

The paintings no longer tell the story of sublime nature, of humans that escaped a heroic yet terrifying state of origin. Instead, they make visible the deep history of Earth. Their colors shapes and conceptual re-framings tell of the biosphere, of how its chemical composition changed over eons. The depth of time that reverberates through meticulous brushwork in his paintings renders ridiculous 18th century ideas in which only humans have histories, while nature goes on in endless seasonal circles.

His icebergs calve because of rising temperatures, they float in a sea heated by greenhouse gases, discharging fresh water into the sea, where it has the tendency to sink and disrupt marine ecologies and currents that are highly sensitive to changes in temperature and salinity.

In fact, what is discharged from Reynolds' icebergs — from his paintings based on his recent Arctic fieldwork — is a story of Earth that is neither for humans nor about humans; it is a story that brings humans into view as a late-stage episode in planetary history, written in the language of geochemistry. Indeed, if one gets close enough, one can see, and feel, how his icebergs enroll humans in a story of Earth that exceeds them by billions of years, bringing human action into view in

the language of geochemistry, as if they were saying, 'No, there is nothing special about you.'

In *Earthrise* (2021), the artist commits a section of a photo of Earth taken in 1968 from lunar orbit to paint on canvas. The photo that the painting was based on was taken by astronaut William Anders more than half a century ago and shows the arctic to be covered in a thick shield of ice, brought back for us to reckon with anew, Reynolds' version speaks to the present. Might it reveal that the ice has receded, and much of the once-white space has given way to a new chilling bright blue?

Reynolds' disposition is distinct from the approach of Gerhard Richter who has taken on similar subject matter. Unlike Richter, for Reynolds, estrangement is not an end but a means, serving as a disruption to our current mode of seeing, a release of the natural world from the modern conception of the human and nature as separate or oppositional. Richter's blurred version of nature, despite its inherent mediation through the photographic apparatus, is still indebted to the more Romantic Arctic conceptions of Casper David Friedrich, and later Fredric Church, for whom the beautiful and terrifying, the Other of the human, are fundamental to a conception of selfhood. Insofar as they break precisely with the concept of nature that organized the ruins of Friedrich and Church, Reynolds' paintings do not show the fragility of civilization and the human in the face of a terrifying nature. What capsizes in his shipwrecks, for instance, is not so much the ship but the conceptual grid — the choreography of seeing — of modernity.

The effect of Reynolds' paintings is that both humans and nature cease to exist — cease to exist as being the seeing thing, cease to exist as indexes of a sublime nature and what emerges is a new kind of beauty. Instead both humans and nature become something else, something still tentative, explorative, experimental: they become planetary.

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