

PRESS COVERAGE



## **U-N-F-O-L-D**

March 17 — April 23, 2011

1. Chicago Reader, 3.31.2011
2. Time Out, 3.31.2011

# GALLERIES & MUSEUMS

UNFOLD

REVIEW

## So Much Hot Air

Many of *Unfold's* responses to global warming look an awful lot like the problem.

By Noah Berlatsky

The low point of *Unfold: A Cultural Response to Climate Change* comes with *Portraits*, a series of photographs by David Buckland. Spread out, like the rest of the show, between two Columbia College venues—the Museum of Contemporary Photography and Glass Curtain Gallery—*Portraits* comprises head shots of artists who participated in expeditions to the Arctic (2007 and 2008) and the Andes (2009) under the auspices of Buckland's London-based charity, Cape Farewell.

The treks were intended to give the artists a firsthand look at the effects of climate change, so they could bring the bad news back to us less sensitive sinners. Buckland's pictures explore the sublime intersection of art, celebrity, and extreme tourism. Images of the likes of rockers Robyn Hitchcock and KT Tunstall, garbed in winter adventure gear, are juxtaposed with typed effusions from same. It's as if you're in the room with these hardy souls, listening to them gush about how they've learned valuable things and rededicated themselves to woozy hippiness. As Rufus Wainwright's singing sister, Martha, says, "I had my first real teary moment, which is usually an indication for me of something important."

But leave it to a poet to express the true pomposity of the endeavor. Seizing the reins of self-importance, Lemn Sissay rides off into the glaciers declaring, "This was a group of artists wanting to create, battling with ideas in the middle of the sea, disappearing by icebergs and the possibility of a disappearing planet."

Global warming as an occasion for romantic kitsch. I'm moved.

*Portraits* is by far the worst piece in *Unfold*, but it's also emblematic. Buckland says his images are supposed to help us understand how the participants "formulated their own

Through 4/23: Mon-Wed and Fri-Sat, 10 AM-5 PM, Thu 10 AM-8 PM, Sun noon-5 PM, Museum of Contemporary Photography, 600 S. Michigan, 312-663-5554, mocp.org. Also: Mon-Wed and Fri, 9 AM-5 PM, Thu 9 AM-7 PM, Sat noon-5 PM, Glass Curtain Gallery, 1104 S. Wabash, 312-369-7663, colum.edu/unfold.

idiosyncratic expression of climate change"—and, sure enough, many of the contributions come across as attempts to transform the world into a vehicle for narcissistic display. The idea may be to point out our collective

responsibility, but the practice mostly replicates the solipsism that gave us climate change in the first place.

Canadian singer Leslie Feist provides the perfect example. Her *Grey, Green, Blue, Black, White, Pink* is basically a home movie—the sort of thing you'd put together to show your friends and neighbors that, hey, I went to the Arctic. It reduces the landscape to a consumable. "I thought I'd film some Super 8," she writes, "and give myself a frame to look at that enormity through."



An image from the *Ice Texts* series by David Buckland

Other artists offer just as little insight, but with more pretention. In *Red Ice*, for instance, Brit artist Chris Wainwright shows an iceberg lit red... because it's hot, get it? Sunand Prasad's photo *Greenhouse Gas* gives us four people standing in a valley, holding big balloons—also red—that represent the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> emitted per month per person in the UK. And Buckland himself photographed icebergs with wry witticisms projected on them—stuff like "Going to Hell on a Handcart" and "Discounting the Future."

This sort of easy moralism, pandering to a like-minded audience, is bad enough. It's the bland egotism that's truly unsettling. The artists have put a hand on nature, framing it, manipulating it, and hauling it home like a lion pelt collected on a safari. They emulate the hubris they're trying to indict. They suggest that nature is ours to have, hold, and fuck with. And *fuck*, with its sexual connotations, is the right word, too: there's sadism in the unacknowledged, fetishized lust for control that's put on display here. The world serves and is subsumed into the artists, who use it for their own pleasure and what they take to be its good.

Some of the canner contributors attempt to avoid the problem of speaking for the world by collaborating with it. Bookbinder Tracey Rowledge placed paper and felt-tip pens under the chair she sat on aboard ship and let physics do its work; the result is *Arctic Drawings*,

a series of black or multi-colored blobs on paper. Generally isolated in one portion of the page, the blobs seem fragile and spastic—tiny random motions on a white field.

Even more successful is a video showing "microbial" artist Daro Montag working with Amazonian leaf-cutter ants. Using powdered graphite, Montag draws a line with a small gap in it across a piece of paper, then sets the ants loose on the paper. The ants, it turns out, tend to avoid the graphite. They use the gap to travel from one side of the paper to the other, so the line gets smeared mainly at that spot. The result, as Montag notes, looks like iron filings drawn by a magnet. The piece is a testament to both the ants' adaptability and human limitations. We can put down carbon if we like, and that will have its effect, but the ants will find their own response. We make the world, and the world makes us.

Just as Buckland's projected slogans are reductive in their pessimism, though, so Rowledge's and Montag's pieces are reductively cheery. Yes, we don't control nature—but we're not exactly in harmony with it, either. Clare Twomey's *Specimen* addresses that paradox with a delicate lyricism. The piece consists of a box filled with dirt, atop which sit unfired clay zinnia blossoms; more such blossoms are scattered around the floor. The text notes that travel and shifts in climate will cause the exquisite little sculptures to deteriorate—and, indeed, that the art

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of making them is being lost. "They are a remnant of the past," Twomey says, "honoring something we cannot save." If we collaborate with nature, it's not only in creation but in loss and decay.

Perhaps my favorite piece of the exhibition is Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey's *Polar Diamond*. This is an actual diamond, created artificially from the carbonized ash of a cremated polar bear bone. I wasn't aware until I saw it that diamonds could be synthesized, but apparently we tricky humans have been making our own for decades now. That alone amazed me. But to know that we can take a polar bear bone and turn it into a diamond seemed especially awe-inspiring. What can't we do, after all? Well, one obvious answer is that we probably can't keep polar bears from dying out if we radically raise the temperature of the earth—or (and this, not global warming, is the current greatest danger to polar bears) if we keep shooting them.

*Polar Diamond* revels in the power that Buckland and others simultaneously demonstrate and disavow. We can turn bear bones into diamonds. We can ship boneheaded celebrities to the ass end of nowhere. Our brains spin and spin, and when they're done spinning there's a hole in the world. That hole is our distinction and our sin. By it we'll be judged. ①

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# Art & Design

Edited by Lauren Weinberg  
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## Reviews



Sunand Prasad,  
*Greenhouse Gas*, 2008.

## "U-n-f-o-l-d"

★★★★★

**Museum of Contemporary Photography and Glass Curtain Gallery**, through Apr 23 (see Museums & Institutions).

Once, it was common for artists to accompany scientists on voyages of discovery, including Charles Darwin's expedition to the Galapagos.

David Buckland is on a mission to resurrect such collaborations. As the creator and director of Cape Farewell, the English artist organizes expeditions to remote places where the effects of global warming are easiest to observe. He invites artists to participate alongside scientific researchers to instigate "a cultural response to climate change."

That phrase is the subtitle of this exhibition, which showcases the work of 25 artists, musicians and writers who participated in Cape Farewell trips to the Arctic and the Peruvian Andes between 2007 and 2009.

Curated by Buckland and artist Chris Wainwright, the exhibition gains celebrity cachet from contributors like Robyn Hitchcock and Feist. However, there is a refreshing minimum of shallow political sloganeering. Instead, many works in "U-n-f-o-l-d" employ text with unusual thoughtfulness, and the curators fully integrate songwriters' and poets' words and recorded performances with artists' photographs and videos.

The exhibition catalog proclaims "the intensive experiences of seeing the effects of climate change firsthand were instrumental in creating a greater awareness" among the artists. But there's a problem: Climate change



Noach; *Through the Ice, Darkly: Kongsfjord Brae* (detail); 2010.

unfolds in geologic time. Its effects are not immediately perceivable to a casual observer who journeys to the Arctic for just a few days. So, the Cape Farewell artists had to rely on the testimony of local inhabitants who had observed changes over several years and of researchers who measure change using scientific instruments and data analysis.

Artist Michèle Noach addresses these issues of observation and perception. Her series of lenticular photographs *Through the Ice, Darkly* (detail pictured, 2010) pairs pictures of Norwegian glaciers from century-old tourist postcards with images of the same places today. The identical visual treatment of the images—vintage and modern—blurs the line between past and present. The aesthetic recalls Eadweard

Muybridge's early stereoscopic views of Yosemite. Noach admits that her images of shadowy human figures confronting sublime nature are "intentionally romantic." Yet the pairings serve an educational purpose, too, revealing the melting of glaciers over the past 100 years.

Not all of "U-n-f-o-l-d" is as strong. In Daro Montag's installation *RANÉ-CHAR*, 12 bags of biochar (a natural carbon-based soil fertilizer) spill out of a wooden crate. Straightforward text printed on the crate's lid explains the material's uses, but it's hard to tell if this is art or product placement.

## Climate-change shows have given viewers a degree of melting-ice fatigue.

Sam Collins's *Sometimes the Journey Is Better than the Destination* tackles a thornier issue. The artist mounts a monitor with a GPS tracking system on a pile of large wooden shipping crates. The monitor displays the coordinates of "U-n-f-o-l-d" as it travels the world. Collins critiques the carbon footprint of the show itself, forcing us to ask how the organizers and artists contribute to global warming by shipping this large exhibition—and themselves—around the planet.

As with all successful expeditions, the voyagers have returned with new information and new perspectives. But it's not always easy to inspire the folks at home. During the past decade, there have been many exhibitions on climate change featuring photographs of icebergs and polar bears—which have given viewers a certain degree of "melting-ice fatigue." These shows also seem to suggest that global warming affects only the Arctic and other places far away from civilization.

Though "U-n-f-o-l-d" is far better than most in this genre, much of the Cape Farewell artists' subject matter still seems impossibly remote to most of us. Perhaps Buckland's next challenge is to organize an expedition that interprets the effects of climate change on our own doorsteps.

—*Franck Mercurio*

View more of "U-n-f-o-l-d" at [timeoutchicago.com/art](http://timeoutchicago.com/art).

## Ben Russell

★★★★★

"*Uh-Oh It's Magic*," threewalls, through Apr 23 (see Galleries, West Loop).

As a filmmaker, Ben Russell has proven that his medium is uniquely suited to handle a tricky subject: magic. The Chicago artist's work chips away at the sober world of reason and science to explore alternate means of perception and human experience. In "Uh-Oh It's Magic," he conflates the "magic of filmmaking" with mysticism and the occult—but the title's humorous reference to a Cars song reminds us not to take this too seriously.

Russell's installations stand out from galleries' typical film-and-video fare because of their multisensory appeal. In *An Incantation for Eternity* (After *Abbie Hoffman*), five 16mm projectors play films that are all black except for a single clear frame apiece, which appears as a flash of light in the otherwise dark room. The piece is fantastic because it's resolutely analog: The noisy, rhythmic spooling and popping of the film make it seem as though the projectors—arranged to form a star—are chanting a spell together. They generate a rainbow pentagram whenever light from all five projectors is refracted by five prisms at once—a reference to Hoffman's attempted levitation of the Pentagon as well as the magical symbol.

Russell's even stronger two-channel video projection, *Seven Dogon Magicians* (pictured), demonstrates how editing affects the way we interpret films. One video evokes ethnographic documentaries, examining the religious practices of Mali's animist Dogon people using tight editing and formal shots. The other video could be made up of the first's outtakes; it shows the Dogon magicians smiling at the camera or caught off guard. By incorporating heat lamps as well as high-definition video, Russell transports us to Mali. Yes, there are magicians in the world today. —*Jonathan Kinkley*



Russell, still from *Seven Dogon Magicians*, 2011.