



ONLY LAGOONS OF MIST AND ICE

Gretel Ehrlich

She dips her finger in black powder and smears it gently onto “Mylar” – a biaxially-stretched polyester film. The plastic is embedded with tiny particles – like very fine sandpaper – that grab the charcoal strokes. The small rectangles of film are translucent. “There is little evidence of a surface, so I can get closer to drawing atmosphere,” Hilary Brace tells me. Images appear: heaving clouds, melting ice, waterfalls. She says: “It’s so smooth that the charcoal moves around easily, which allows for a lot of spontaneity, but it also allows for great specificity and detail.”

Charcoal and plastic; the ancient and the new. To which unimagined worlds is Hilary Brace leading us? Charcoal-making is ancient. From fire, the slow process of pyrolysis, wood or bone is burned black. Any tree branch will do: willow, pine, oak, grapevine, orange tree, or mesquite are piled end-up in cylindrical cones, lit, and slowly burned. In the tropics charcoal was made from coconut shells laid in a heap like skulls and charred;

in Europe a very hot 590 degree F conflagration of blackened bones. Whatever the source, if heated properly, a black residue forms and is pulverized into a powdered mass. For centuries it has been applied to cave walls, stretched canvas, paper. Hilary Brace has made a group of intense images on her most modern “canvas”: polyester film.

Her images are almost, but not quite, other-worldly. “In a sense I’ve put my feet on firmer ground, as the places I make have evolved from remote, cloudy worlds toward becoming more Earth-bound. In part because it’s difficult to ignore what is happening around us...there is a lot of melting going on in these images,” she says. Cloudfalls, ice dams, cyclonically lifted masses of liquid droplets, down-draining moulins, transverse crevasses, watery ponds, and wind-sheared oceans that have risen into the sky: these are the transitory landings she offers us.

“Moisture is the most prolific greenhouse gas there is now,” the Swiss glaciologist, Konrad Steffens, said recently. Hilary Brace’s stormy vision releases these vapors. Nothing has weight, only imminence and way-finding shadows, cloud-streets embossed with faint black edges, torn and half-erased. “I’m lead by curiosity, wondering what I’ll discover,” she says.

We travel with her and take the same uncertain path, entering a moisture-laden palace that twists our minds. Behind us, a stalled high pressure zone brings unrelieved drought. She hardens an edge and softens what might be melting permafrost. Ice deforms and clouds twist into new shapes. Three occluded suns set, or are they rising? Behind them clouds lift orthographically humping up over a mountain of ice and whooshing down as water.

Everything in these frames is spilling, yet it feels contained somehow, not threatening. We are only asked to move in the atmospheric flux. The perspective is from a seat high up, as if the artist was on a cloud passing over and under other clouds, yet always able to define her territory.

The Mylar grips wisps of charcoal dust. Rubbing it on, she then removes it. As water vapor amasses, her erasures reveal its amplitude. There’s more rain, more ice melt: we see black-edged mountain peaks swallowed in mist; a plain of ice far below riven by pooling water; a circular moulin drains the Greenland ice sheet; pancake ice spins; water surges over a sawtooth cliff-edge. This is how mist breathes, she seems to be telling us. One dark-fronted cloud-wave threatens: it heaves up and crests. Am I drowning or learning to see? Beyond is a vortex, a mouth so big it can swallow storms; we follow a path toward its dark secret: do we dare move in? Sun drives light through holes in the sky, as if looking upward in a coming-back-to-life dream. Is there a way to begin again?

In the news we hear of the accelerating melting of an ice sheet, of thermally heated oceans rising, of jet-streams that have taken on a wandering wavy shape as if drunk from too much moisture, of Arctic snow turning black from airborne ash and soot from wildfires and industry in the northern hemisphere. Looking at these not-quite-dystopian images our eyes lose peripheral vision, but gain depth and intuition. Curious and unsteady we lose our way. Moisture-whorls accelerate and flutter; beefy cyclones touch a cloud-plain at an angle. A crevasse splits open. A cold sun shines all the way through us. Are we transparent too?

Water surges into the frames. Methane bubbles tickle our shins and the riptides of rising seas thrash our shoulders. A hurricane spins into a dark tunnel. Slosh and rift—no gravity here, only lagoons of mist and ice that twist the viewer into reverie. One last cloud rises, but this one doesn’t break on our heads. Instead, its front edge lifts up like an architect’s modern roofline, allowing us to breathe freely. We are released into amniotic waters and take the easy route home.

Gretel Ehrlich is the author of *This Cold Heaven*, *The Future of Ice*, and *The Solace of Open Spaces*, among other works of nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. She lives in Wyoming.

HILARY BRACE is the recipient of numerous national and regional awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship (2006), National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship (1993), California Arts Council Fellowship (2003), and the Pollock-Krasner Foundation (1997, 2005).

Brace’s drawings are included in private and public collections such as: Boise Art Museum; Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Western Washington State University Art Museum. Other institutions that have exhibited Brace’s drawings include: Columbus Museum, Columbus, GA; Frye Art Museum, Seattle, WA; Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery; Real Artways, Hartford, CT; Riverside Art Museum, Riverside, CA; Schneider Museum of Art, Ashland, OR; South Texas Institute of Art, Corpus Christi, TX; Telfair Museum of Art, Savannah, GA; Weatherspoon Art Museum, Greensboro, NC.

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