

Views from A Precarious Path

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by Elizabeth Cook-Romero

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Not long ago, Andrew Smith's Grant Avenue gallery was a bed-and-breakfast, and like some old-time Santa Fe galleries, it has the feel of a private home. This winter, in one of the building's second-floor rooms, Joan Myers' photographs of Antarctica were juxtaposed with her panoramic shots of familiar Santa Fe landmarks like the Cross of the Martyrs that rises above Paseo de Peralta. Viewing Myers' images of the melting Antarctic and our dry Southwest in that intimate room, which still projects the comfort of a cozy bedroom, caused this viewer to muse about how small and fragile our planet is.

In Myers' Antarctic images, dark-green ocean swells roil through passages cut into icebergs and glaciers. Towers and arches of ice glisten, melt, and drip into the salty sea. These photographs snag rolling movement that has implications for every living creature. By contrast, the hills, houses, and streets depicted in Myers' pictures of Santa Fe appear stable—at least, at first glance.

"I have always been interested in time and landscape," Myers said during a recent studio visit. "I don't see landscape as a static object sitting in front of the camera. I constantly look at the land and wonder how it looked 100 years ago or 1,000 years ago." Myers took her first serious photographs in Los Angeles during the 1980s. "Then, I thought the human imprint on the land was benign," she said. "Now I realize we change the planet forever."

Working prints and proof sheets of images Myers shot during recent trips to Iceland, Pompeii, and Yellowstone National Park were spread out on a large white table. Although there are few people in the images, often humanity's footprint is clearly visible in the form of gardens, walkways, roads, and small buildings dominated by chimneys releasing the white steam of geothermal energy. Combined with photographs Myers has taken in Antarctica, these new pictures are part of a work in progress she calls "Fire and Ice."

In the proofs spread on Myers' table, Pompeii's courtyard walls are painted in brilliant reds, blues, and yellows. Light and shadows fall on an ordered geometry of doorways and the rectangular bases of fountains. Near an active volcano, the landscape is clearly alive, Myers noted. "For me, it's alive everywhere. It's even alive in the center of a city. If you try to cover that up, you do it at your own peril, as they found out in Pompeii."

Myers' compositions are infused with a quiet calm that is rare in the 21st century. "I realized in my very first photo class that I had a classical eye, and that's not exactly where things are in the art world," she said. Her first teacher told her she could spend her life fighting her natural tendencies or work with them. She chose the latter course.

The locations Myers is drawn to often remind her of her own mortality. In one image from her recent Icelandic trip, a boardwalk provides a path over boiling pools. In the middle ground there is a small, rickety observation platform, but the view is obscured by mist. "It was a little scary," she recalled while looking at the small proof. "All that steam is putting moisture on the boardwalk"—and over years of absorbing that water, the walkway has become almost too slippery. One wrong step and she could have fallen into boiling, mineral-rich water.

The mood of Myers' shots of Yellowstone is more reassuring. In her earlier work, Myers hand-colored black-and-white photographs, and her Yellowstone images have the same soft colors as those prints. She visited the park in midwinter and captured the stark verticals of nearly black trees silhouetted against snow and the muddy browns and light blues of hot mineral pools. In some pictures, it's impossible to tell if branches are outlined by the buildup of salt crystals or by snow.

Seen through Myers' lens, Yellowstone's geothermal pools, shrouded in mist, seem almost mystical. Yet her vision is unclouded by sentimentality or fuzzy thinking. She is an artist who has the luxury of time. "I'm not a young artist who has to struggle to get my work out there." To more fully grasp the metaphorical meanings of her subject, Myers read Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover: A Romance* and *Volcano*, a novel by Shusaku Endo, as well as several geological texts. Some artists would use that research to construct a conceptual framework, but Myers said, "At the moment I go out to photograph, I forget what I have read. It's only when I come back to the studio and look at the pictures that the conceptual stuff helps to make order. ... And certainly the good photographs are always of something I never could have imagined." For instance, before she arrived at Pompeii, Myers thought she would be

artist who worries about the world her children and grandchildren will inherit. And she is as comfortable discussing scientific theory as she is talking about a novel. To summarize her artistic philosophy,

Myers noted, "I always said that a photographer's job is to see clearly."

Joan Myers' work is on permanent display at
Andrew Smith Gallery
122 Grant Ave., Santa Fe, NM
505 984-1234.

[Top of the Page](#)