

Antarctica's "Wondrous Cold"

The adventurous spirit of Joan Myers

by Michael More



Daryl Cobabe, South Pole Tunnel Worker, Antarctica



Cape Evans Blizzard, Antarctica

Daryl Cobabe's contract calls for high pay, free room and board, and mandatory breaks every half hour. He works indoors, in a climate-controlled environment where temperatures hover around 60 degrees—below zero.

Cobabe (page 18) is a “tunneler,” one of a few hundred handpicked specialists with the skills and stamina required to keep science projects at the South Pole Station up and running.

The Antarctica we know calls to mind tuxedoed penguins belly flopping off dazzling white glaciers into dazzling blue water under dazzling blue skies. But look at Cobabe's portrait and the other images in this portfolio and you understand why Joan Myers thinks of her tripod heads freezing solid.

She has sailed for hours to photograph the point where an iceberg 120 miles long tails off into the sea. She laughs when describing how a pile of blubber cut by the famous 1913-1916 Shackleton expedition still oozes 90-year old fresh blood in the spring thaw.

Myers has now spent three years on her Antarctica project, taking thousands of pictures, and then returning to her studio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, to make spectacular prints. Her sweeping ambition has been to take it all in. She has traced the history of past expeditions,

whose huts, boots and potbellied stoves are literally frozen in time. She has recorded varied landscapes where caverns are made of ice, deserts of ancient snow, where the light rising on the water offers original colors unlike anything else on earth.

She has photographed blizzards with 50-mph winds, a virtual nation of 50,000 penguins, the frozen relics of legendary explorers, the wildlife, the telescopes, the icebergs, and the endless desolation, and the ravishing beauty.

She shows us the 90-year old darkroom set up by Herbert Ponting (page 22), a member of the tragic 1910-1913 British expedition under Captain Robert Falcon Scott. There are seals and penguins, meteorites and fossils, and the complex scientific equipment used today.

She has visited a number of the international stations on the continent to photograph “the most wonderful people in the world.” She has portrayed the selected scientists and workers whose exceptional skill, will and stamina are prerequisites for admission. Myers has documented “anthropological artifacts” such as the cappuccino machine that Italian scientists at the Terra Nova station consider essential.

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King Penguins, South Georgia

McMurdo Station, Antarctica





Crystal Sound Iceberg, Antarctica

Others have made wonderful pictures of Antarctica. Sir Ernest Shackleton's "Endurance" expedition was documented by Frank Hurley's breathtaking glass-plate studies. Eliot Porter's 1978 *Antarctica* is a magnificent book. National Geographic photographers and other photojournalists have brought back glorious pictures. But Myers' project (funded in part by the National Science Foundation) is the most ambitious.

The small portfolio here attests to her technical competence with traditional and digital technologies. Much "fine art" digital photography calls attention to its Photoshop roots through self-congratulatory effects that are just a bit too theatrical to be believed. Myers has spent years mastering digital camera and darkroom technology, and she freely switches between silver, platinum and silicon materials and processes to arrive at final effects that never call attention to their underlying dexterity.

Technical details and a wealth of other information about Myers's work (including her journal) can be found at joanmyers.com or andrewsmithgallery.com.

But technique is only one leg of the tripod. The second is content. The best documentary pictures from exotic lands keep us looking and asking questions. Take the picture of McMurdo station (page 20, bottom), with a summer population, 1,000: Why so few windows? Anybody bring their kids? Do they need a police force? Does anybody get cabin fever and have to be hauled out of there? How does a woman who wants to drive a tractor down there apply for a job? What do they do for TV? Can you cut loose a little on Saturday night?

Most of these pictures are so interesting in themselves that we forget how accomplished they are. We want to know all about that blizzard at Cape Evans (page 19, top). Did everybody get out of these buildings OK? Did the photographer get back in OK? How did Myers keep her cameras working, her fingers from freezing?

Most readers of this magazine can imagine themselves tooling around Antarctica taking pictures like these,



Ponting's Darkroom

maybe even making prints of such quality. It's only when we step back to consider the third leg of the tripod—for lack of a better descriptor, the "grace factor." Are these more than documentaries? Do they have their own private aesthetic power? If you hung this on the wall would you care about it a year from now?

Look again at that blizzard. Or study the luminous blue roots of an iceberg (page 21) that calls to mind the phrase "wondrous cold," lines from Coleridge's "Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner." (Myers uses that title in a current exhibition.) And it's hard not to see this congregation of penguins (page 20, top) as senators in an ancient forum, gathered for some grave purpose.

To those lucky enough to have seen these in their correct (usually much enlarged) dimensions the "Wow!" factor is self-evident, but the payoff comes from the long

look. Myers cites Paul Strand and Paul Caponigro as early influences. There is music in her best prints, subtle, lovely, and nuanced.

Antarctica today is a curious balance of astounding anecdotes and scientific discovery. Myers will be collaborating with New York Times science writer Sandra Blakeslee on a book about all this, and one can only hope its design and production matches the best work of both.

Myers won the New Mexico Council on Photographers 2003 Eliot Porter Prize for long-term projects of unusual merit. In announcing its decision, the Council noted that Myers has undertaken one ambitious project after another over the last 25 years. They range from photographs of WWII Japanese internment camps to portraits of mature women, to pictures made along the legendary Santa Fe Trail between New Mexico and St Louis.

In announcing the \$5000 award (which will lead to more pictures in Antarctica), the council's president, Abigail Adler, offered the most astute comment of all: "Joan Myers is a national treasure." ■