

Judit Hersko

## “PAGES FROM THE BOOK OF THE UNKNOWN EXPLORER”

For a recent exhibition of my work in Budapest entitled “On the Way to Antarctica” I completed the first three pieces in what I plan to be a series of “book pages” that weave a layered narrative of the history of Antarctic exploration and science. “Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer” centers on a fictitious “unknown explorer” from the 1930s called Anna Schwartz. Anna’s obsession with two Antarctic plankton snails the *Limacina Helicina* (sea butterfly) and the *Clione Antarctica* (sea angel) propels her to successfully attempt the impossible as through a series of fortuitous events she manages to join the Byrd Antarctic expedition of 1939.

While this work is based on years of extensive research its genesis is my collaboration with Dr. Victoria Fabry, a biological oceanographer, who studies the effects of ocean acidification on calcifying organisms including plankton snails such as the *Limacina Helicina*. Dr. Fabry is part of a group of scientists who published an article in *Nature* (September 29, 2005) warning us about the impending changes in ocean chemistry due to the increasing levels of CO<sub>2</sub> absorbed by the oceans. She and her colleagues found that ocean chemistry will become corrosive to calcifying organisms such as sea urchins, cold-water corals, coralline algae, and plankton known as pteropods much sooner than previously expected. The models project that in the ocean's coldest surface waters, such as in the Weddell Sea of Antarctica calcifying organisms will simply begin to dissolve in about 50 years if the current standards of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions persist. This aspect of climate change can be measured with great deal of certainty and scientists fear that the consequences will be grave since these organisms provide essential food and habitat to others and their demise could affect entire ocean ecosystems.

I have been working with Dr. Fabry for over four years and in 2006 I exhibited my first installation based on her research entitled “Shifting Baselines.” The show borrowed its title from a web page that was launched in 2003 by marine biologists at Scripps Institution of Oceanography working together with ocean conservationists, underwater cinematographers, and Hollywood filmmakers in an attempt to inform the public about the gradual degradation of the ocean environment. The work in “Shifting Baselines” visualized processes of dissolution and extended the metaphor of gradual degradation to social processes as well.

It was on the invitation of Dr. Fabry to join her impending research in Antarctica that I decided to apply for the National Science Foundation Antarctic Artists and Writers Grant. However, as I embarked on the lengthy research process preceding my application I came across a number of books that launched my interests in new directions. Among these Lisa Bloom’s “Gender on Ice” opened my eyes to the rich and layered cultural metaphors embedded in polar exploration and helped me eventually to connect my lifelong interests in feminism, history, and science with my current investigation of climate change.

Unlike the masculine identities implicated in the “literal” heroism and drama of the British explorations of the South Pole or the “visual and technological” heroism of the American exploration of the North Pole, Anna Schwartz’s exploration is invisible and unwritten in every sense. She is invisible as a woman who has to pass as a man in order to join an expedition and her passion is for two creatures that are invisible due to their microscopic size and their transparency. Nor do we know about her efforts because as far as records go no woman set foot on Antarctica until much later. While the information presented in “Pages from the Book of the Unknown Explorer” is based on true facts and actual people the insertion of the fictitious Anna Schwartz into the story speaks about the absence of women in Antarctic exploration and science until the late 1960s.

Anna’s character is modeled on several women who were involved in polar exploration in various ways such as Ada Blackjack and Evelyn Stefansson Nef. While Ada Blackjack actually participated in (and heroically survived) a polar expedition her story is very complex and deeply layered with racial and colonial issues that do not apply in the same way to Anna. On the other hand Evelyn Stefansson Nef (born Evelyn Schwartz) is from a Hungarian Jewish background, which places her in a believable relationship to the fictitious Anna who hails from Hungary. It is in fact their imagined relationship that makes Anna’s adventure possible as Evelyn who runs the library of the famous polar explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson (whom she later married) is able to introduce Anna to important people connected to polar exploration. Stefansson was in fact the one who initiated and organized the ill-fated expedition of which Ada Blackjack was the sole survivor thereby bringing the story full circle.

As one of the reviewers of my exhibition in Hungary noted the date of the Byrd expedition to Antarctica into which I inserted Anna Schwartz’s character weighs heavily on the work. With the occupation of Poland in 1939 dark clouds were building over Europe and the contrast between that reality and the Antarctic landscape throws the complexity of history into high relief. This is further heightened by the fact that in 1940 after her trip to Antarctica Anna will return to Hungary where she will become a survivor of the Holocaust. Meanwhile for Evelyn who was born and raised in New York the war is only background noise that is only mentioned in passing when she worries that Stefansson won’t be able to make it to their wedding in April 1941 because his expertise might be in high demand regarding the US invasion of Greenland.

The three pieces I have completed in the series are sculptural book pages made of transparent silicone rubber that also cast shadows on the wall. I chose this material because of my longstanding interest in transparency and invisibility, which in this case serves as a metaphor for Anna as well as for the *Limacina Helicina* and *Clione Antarctica* who are composed of transparent gelatinous substances. The first piece is a portrait of the unknown explorer Anna Schwartz based on a photograph from the 1930s of my mother (a photographer who did travel in the late 1930s - although not to Antarctica - and who did return to Hungary only to weather the Holocaust). The portrait is “embedded” with tiny plankton snail shells that were cast into the transparent rubber and then removed leaving fossil like remnants. The second piece is a letter cast into the silicone rubber surface that is legible in shadow form on the wall. In this letter Anna Schwartz tells the story of how

she managed to join the Byrd Antarctic expedition of 1939. This letter sets the stage (based on actual historical facts) for the future of this series. The third panel is a scientific page from the notebooks of Anna Schwartz that contains the scientific descriptions of the *Limacina Helicina* and the *Clione Antarctica* flanked by two minimalist squares on which I have placed playfully sculptural representations of these plankton snails reminiscent of butterflies pinned to a surface. This page also contains a brief paragraph that speaks about the unique interdependence of these two plankton snails. The *Clione Antarctica* feeds exclusively on the *Limacina Helicina* and if this tiny snail is affected by ocean acidification (which is the subject of Dr. Fabry's research) than the *Clione Antarctica* will lose its sole food source thus illustrating the effect of climate change on the food chain and the ecology of the oceans.

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