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Artist's Statement: Woven Prayers on Melting Ice – Walking the Retreats of Glaciers

Sarah Joy Stoker

<https://www.janusunbound.com/media/woven-prayers-on-melting-ice-k8ab2>

In April 2023 I was part of The Arctic Circle Residency for Art and Science. A self-directed residence sailing aboard the tall ship *Antigua*, the two-week journey led us to some of the most isolated areas in the high Arctic, navigating around the west coast of Svalbard to reach beyond 80 degrees latitude, nearing the North Pole. We were a group of 28 artists, two scientists, four Arctic guides, the captain and his three crew, the cook and his three crew: totalling 42 people. We saw two polar bears from a great distance, not visible with the naked eye, about eight walrus, dozens of beautiful curious seals, hundreds of wild and extraordinary sea birds, and the most incredible and beautiful land, sea, and skylines I have seen in my life.

My intention was to put myself in this environment, incredible, and “untouched,” and exactly not somewhere that we (humans) should be. I brought materials and objects into the environments with me that, along with the humans, were clearly things that should not be found there. A fire hot red weave created for the project by my sister Stephanie Stoker, older weaves made by her from industrial fishing lines, and various examples of plastics.

As we are all too well aware, the Arctic is vital and has long been a barometer for the measurement of global climate change, higher average temperatures, wildfires at ever-higher latitudes, permafrost loss, reduced ice coverage of the Arctic Ocean, rapidly receding glaciers and the melting ice sheets. Longyearbyen, the northern most settlement in the world and the location of the airport to travel to Svalbard, has seen its year-round temperatures rise four degrees Celsius, five times faster than the global average, and winter temps have jumped a full seven degrees in the past half century. And as I write this, against massive protest from activists, scientists, fisheries, and the international community, Norway has just announced plans to allow deep sea mining off the west coast of Svalbard, near where these images and video were captured. This will be devastating.

This work is an alert, a call for extreme caution and mobilization for a fundamental shift in how we live on this planet. An alarm, a warning, a distress call,

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an EMERGENCY – the red weave is blood, life, mothers, passion, hearts, anger, grief, violence, despair, urgency. The fishing line and darker weaves speak to transformation, the dark and sickly forced changing of environments and ecologies. The degradation and mutation of life and form and shapes that we know and knew, the devastation of the world that supports us and the knowledge that it is because of us. They are creatures of death and grief, and monsters of mourning born of our modern world and our behaviour in it. Making and showing this work is an act of hope. A complete rejection of imperial colonialism, raging blind capitalism, entitlement, arrogance, and violence. It is an act of, and call for, the most extreme reverence, the most profound love, and the deepest grief.

Biography

Deeply preoccupied by and committed to ecological health and justice, I am an interdisciplinary artist whose work is rooted in dance, performance, and installation. I acknowledge with the most profound respect and gratitude those that were here first: the people, land, water, and animals of the unceded ancestral homeland of the Beothuk, Mi'kmaq, Innu, and Inuit territories on this, Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland, and Labrador), where I live and work.

I am deeply affected by what continues to happen to and in this world due to such a dramatic disconnect from nature fuelled by our colonial past and present. For three decades my work has been an expression of grief and a reaction to the destruction, injustice, greed, excess, insatiable want for more and the complacency and apathy that are epidemic. As we find ourselves in the free fall of the world's ecological, climate and extinction crisis, I work, hoping to instigate reflection, introspection, and aggressive mobilization for change, hoping to facilitate commonality of thoughtful and sympathetic sentiment and processing around this pivotal period in our world and communities.

My practice lives in the realms of contemporary dance, interdisciplinary performance, and installation. From *They cut down trees so you can wipe your ass and blow your nose with the softest tissues ever* (1999), *Je ne peux pas* (2001), *B* (2002), *From your head down to your feet* (2003), *Le bordel* (2003), *Rocks on* (2005), *Sapiens lay here* (2007), *When the birds fly happy* (2011), *The worth of* (2014), to *Our heart breaks* (2018), *Once we were trees* (2019), *Fort/tress* (2020), *Walking the Retreats of Glaciers*, and *Woven Prayers on Melting Ice* (2023). I believe art is an active force in life and should be used as a vehicle for action, engagement, and provocation. My most recent work comes from time spent in the Arctic Circle in April 2023, navigating the west coast of Svalbard aboard the tall ship *Antigua* as part of the Arctic Circle Residency. gutsink.nf.ca.