

Fire and ice

Forget all you know about man versus the elements: ice sculptor K.A. Colorado is his very own force of nature.

Think icebergs. Picture everything from blinding monoliths that thunder along with Antarctic currents to sailboat-sized chunks of ice bobbing in the waves.

Forget white. Think of ice that glows turquoise and jade in infinite shades as it floats past dark, sheer land masses.

If you're sculptor K.A. Colorado, at this point in our scene, you've probably hitched a lift on a scrappy little fishing boat, maybe off the coast of Alaska, Newfoundland or Antarctica. You'll spend a day or two looking for the right chunk of ice. Then, in a little rubber dinghy that bobs and lurches in the one-degree water, you'll make for the lip of an iceberg.

With a grunt and an eye to the icy water, you'll huck your gear across the gap and you'll make the jump yourself, sticking the landing with your crampons.

Then, you sculpt. You spend two or three sleepless days and nights hewing your creation with ice- and snow-sculpting tools you bent and shaped yourself: twisted, reinforced shovels, doctored Chinese wood saws and razor wire, fabricated gouges like giant ice cream scoopers. If the terrain is steep, you might have a rock-and-ice-guide with you who ropes up and anchors you at the high point so you can work safely.

When you're done, you shoot some video, maybe a few pictures, and then you push off. The iceberg, and the sculpture with it, barrel away with the current.

Colorado has repeated this scene no less than nine times in frigid waters around the globe.

Call it a pet personal project of his – the world famous snow sculptor doesn't make these excursions with big exhibitions in mind. He uses these journeys to "connect with cold, deep places," and they are tied to his project to connect people with the same.

"In my head, it's (working with snow, ice and icebergs) much clearer, much more conducive to a natural environmental approach."

The Arctic and Antarctic applications of Colorado's work began in 1981 when the artist was appointed lead sculptor for the U.S. snow-sculpting team at an international competition in Savonlinna, Finland.

In 1995, he founded an international snow sculpting festival in Perm, Russia where he still participates as a judge and sculptor.

Over the years, Colorado and his peers began to notice a change in snow conditions around the world.

"Over 15 years I was recognizing that the weather was changing, also," he explains. Dry cold was becoming "damp cold." There wasn't much public debate about climate change, but sculptors were paying mind.

Colorado felt that in competitions around the globe, once dry, powdery snows that ideally compressed to super-hard blocks were holding and collecting moisture in ways that compromised structures.

One of his sculptures, "Boy and Dolphin," nearly fell apart at a competition in France.

"The piece was on a snowy hillside but it sucked all the moisture from the snow.



CORE SAMPLE - Painter and ice sculptor K.A. Colorado stands with one of his new sculptures.

Daniel Pi photo

There was water leaking out (of the sculpture)."

In his "Kinetic Snow Sculpture" (a system of 30 six-foot tall snow blocks that tumbled, domino-like, into a fireworks-applauded grand finale that smashed a wall of sheer ice), Colorado demonstrated the wetter, less adhesive nature of the 21st Century snow by creating blocks that sagged under the weight of the water in the snowpack, bending from pillars to arcs. That piece exhibited at the Perm festival in 2006.

While the changing face of snow sculpting may not qualify as bomb proof empirical evidence for climate change, the fact remains that over three decades Colorado has plunged his hands into snow all across the globe to make his living. That makes him a qualified observer.

"What happens to me a lot is people come to me and say, is it true what they're saying about weather?" says Colorado, who is uncomfortable with the idea of making all his snow and ice sculpting into a solely political statement, but nonetheless is committed to the dialogue about climate change.

In 2006 Colorado was invited to give a paper at a conference in Moscow dedicated to "hydrometeorological security." In 2007, he spoke at the British Library in London at a Polar Archive Symposium.

With one of his latest projects, a series of ice core replicas, Colorado hopes to "speak about these issues from an aesthetic perspective."

The artist grafts scientific text about weather, ice and snow into glass or acrylic replicas of scientific ice core samples.

This February, an expedition team will carry one of Colorado's ice cores, embedded with text about the Kyoto Protocol, to the Monte Pissis volcanic caldera in the Andes. There they will bury the sculpture in the volcanic subsoil.

A replica and parts of the series will be exhibited later this year at LA Artcore in Los Angeles. Colorado quotes the concepts of "fire and ice coming together" when discussing the project, a concept not far from describing his steely intensity and passionate fervour for his sculpting.

He laughs. "I think I'm intense with my work. Outside that I think I'm pretty funny. I have a dog. I like to walk my dog ... when I'm working that's when I'm intense."

Still, it's not hard to picture Colorado at one of his studios, either Gastown, Oregon or Mexico, or one of his exhibit spaces like the chilly banks of the Kama River in Perm, his broad back contracting with the swing of his tools, chunks of ice, red hot metal or volcanic sprays splaying out behind him.

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