

# CAUGHT IN THE ACT OF SCIENCE

A LOOK AT THE TECHNIQUES AND INSPIRATIONS BEHIND  
APRIL SURGENT'S CAMEO ENGRAVED GLASS WORKS.

BY SUSIE J. SILBERT



**I**n 2003, April Surgent was about to leave glass for good. Though she had been blowing since high school and was studying glass at the Canberra School of Art in Australia, she could not find a way to meld her love of drawing, photography and printmaking with the heat and intensity of the hot shop. Frustrated, she'd made up her mind to switch majors. All that changed when she won a scholarship to the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, not far from her childhood home in Seattle.

"It was like a switch," Surgent explains. "I left for Pilchuck thinking I was going to quit glass, and then I came back and I...more or less stopped blowing glass overnight and started engraving." A workshop school founded in 1971 by catalytic glass artist Dale Chihuly,

Pilchuck brings together artists and students of all levels from around the world for multi-week courses in a wide variety of glass techniques. With its intense and jovial atmosphere, it has altered the course of more than a few lives.

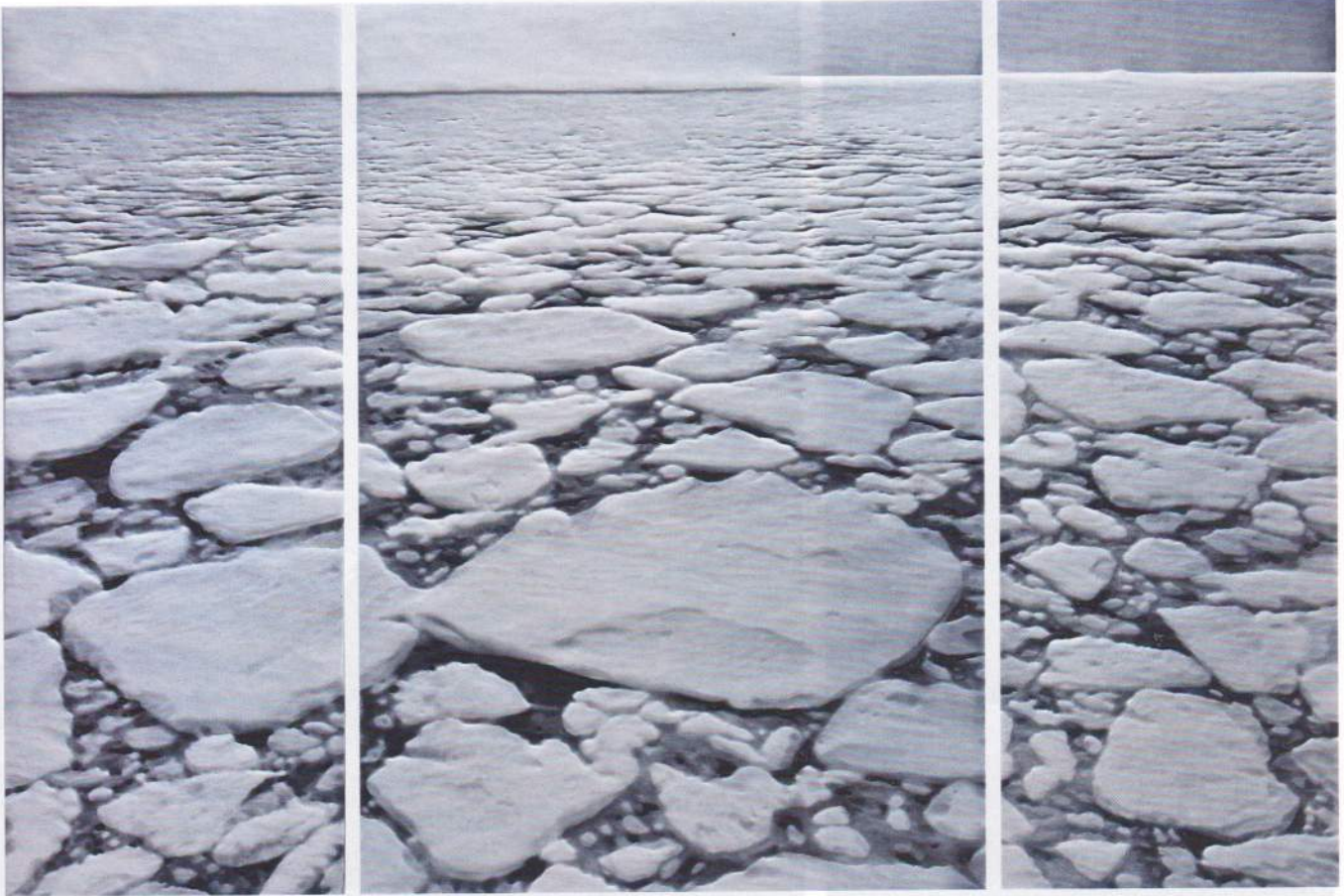
For Surgent, the life-changing moment came watching Czech master engraver Jiří Hrcuba carve into a glass blank to draw out powerful, evocative and—crucially—realistic portraits with seeming effortlessness. Trained in classical engraving, Hrcuba had gained world renown for his innovative ability to capture, sometimes with only a few cuts, the essence of a subject. In his assured technique, Surgent found the answer to her quest to combine the detailed layering of her works on paper with the material qualities of glass.

**1**  
*Intake*, cameo engraved glass, 7 x 21 x ¾". Photo by David Conklin.

**2**  
*Frozen Oceans, Biscoe Bay, Western Antarctic Peninsula* (triptych), cameo engraved glass, 18 ½ x 27 ½ x ¾". Courtesy Heller Gallery, New York.

**3**  
*Portrait of a Birder, S. Farry* (triptych), cameo engraved glass, 17 ½ x 25 ½ x ¾". Photo by Russell Johnson. Courtesy Heller Gallery, New York.



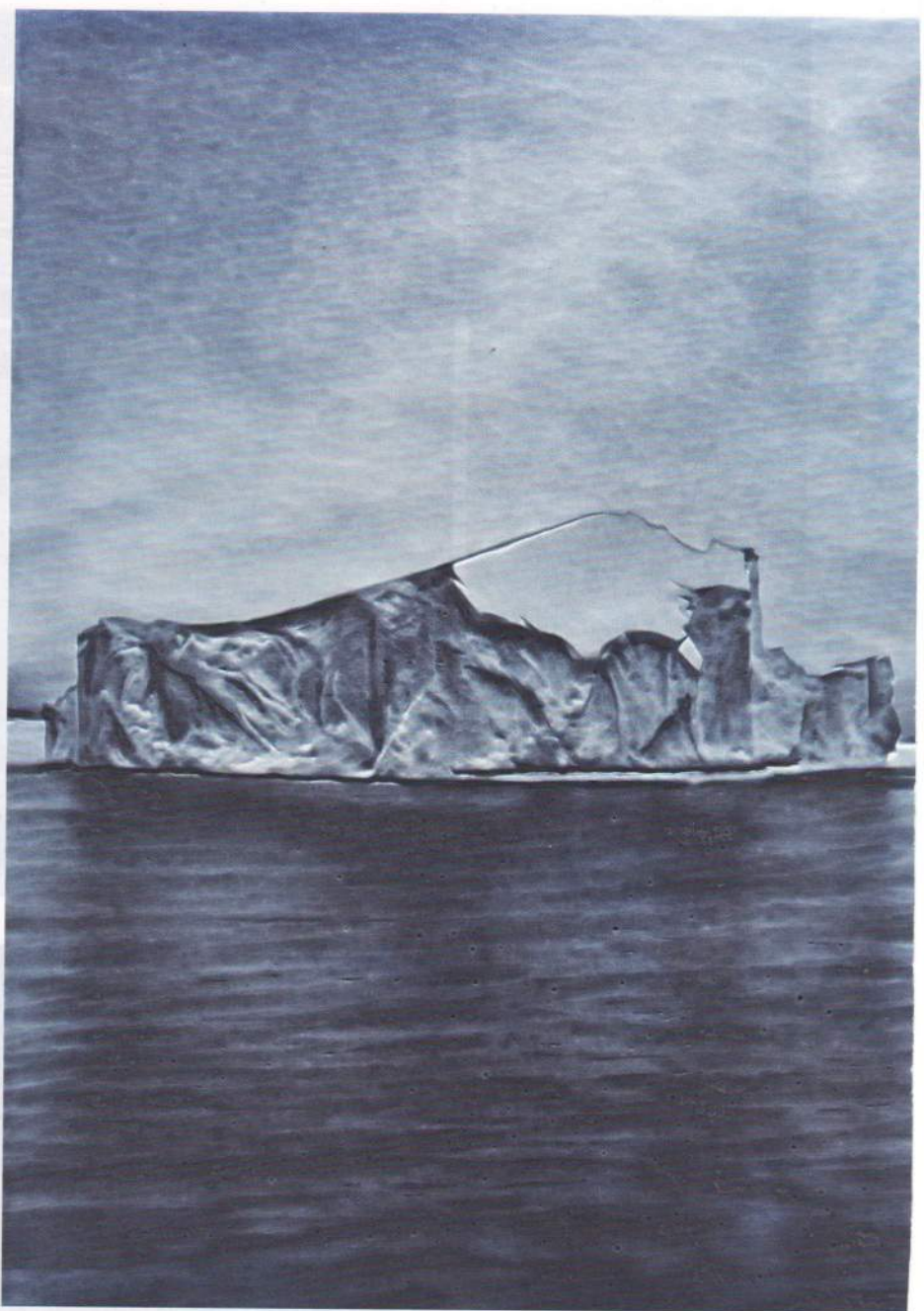


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**4**  
*Portrait of an Iceberg, Gerlache Strait, Western Antarctic Peninsula* (triptych), cameo engraved glass, 18<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 29<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 3<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub>".  
 Courtesy Heller Gallery, New York.

**5**  
*Self Portrait at High Latitude* (triptych), cameo engraved glass, 15<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 23<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 2".  
 Photo by A. Surgent.

She returned to Australia, started engraving, and has never looked back.

Engraving is unusual within the palette of artistic practices. Using three-dimensional carving techniques to create two-dimensional images, it defies easy categorization, hovering instead between sculpture and painting. Unbound to a specific material and dating back millennia, the technique has been applied to a range of media: shell, bone, glass and stone. The ancient Romans, for instance, cut stunning portrait cameos out of multicolored agates as well as staggering tour de force depictions of classical mythology in glass vessels like the Portland Vase, now in the British Museum.

Rather than directly reference these antique precedents, Surgent uses engraving as a method of

expressionistic photorealism. After first planning her compositions on paper, combining elements from photos and drawings, she begins working on specially prepared blocks of layered and fused glass, typically in shades of blue capped by white. Then, using brass wheels mounted on a cutting lathe, she carves through the top layer of white to reveal varying shades of the color below, like a cameo writ large. Sculpting her images cut by cut, varying the depth, angle and intensity to modulate the feeling and tone, her finished pieces are imbued with a strong emotional power. With sensuous attention to line, light and atmosphere, they appear as blue-and-white snapshots sculpted out of memory itself and already invested with the patina of time.

Over the years, Surgent has selected imagery





visualization serves her well in a recent series documenting landscape and life in Antarctica. A terrain so remote and inhospitable few have ever traveled there, Antarctica occupies a mysterious place in the mind. Most know where it is and can locate it on a map, but few have more than a passing sense of it as anything other than a barren, frozen wasteland. In pieces depicting the clapboard intake building of a research outpost or giant ice flows lying flat across the ocean's surface like so many paving stones, Surgent literally cuts through the whiteness to reveal the details and textures of daily life in this alien landscape.

Recently on view in *Life on Ice* at the Heller Gallery in New York City, the works in this series were inspired by the two months Surgent spent as an artist-in-residence at the Palmer Research Station in 2013. Located on the Western Antarctic Peninsula, Palmer sits on one of the fastest warming places on the continent. As a result, it is teeming with scientists working to document the place as it was, as it is and as it is becoming. Surgent's pieces mirror their efforts; these works are both misty reminiscences and documents of a quickly vanishing world.

Some pieces, like *Portrait of an Iceberg*, are formal renderings in the vein of Victorian silhouette cameos or Ansel Adams-like photographs. Rising out of placid dark water, and resting under a modulated, pensive sky, the namesake iceberg sits like a mountain, magisterial, inscrutable and distant. The piece approaches being a scientific record in and of itself, a frozen moment in the iceberg's life cycle indelibly carved in glass.

well suited to the moody character of her cutting. The reflection of a pedestrian caught in a shop window on a foggy London afternoon, the soaring architecture of the Prague railway station that nonetheless frames a listless day of waiting, the buzzing hush of a Vermont back road in the height of summer—Surgent uses the visual to evoke the emotional. Like a gifted poet or novelist, her textured presentations overtake the viewer, making them feel as if her experiences were theirs, no matter that they have never been to England, never waited for a train in the Czech Republic.

Surgent's affinity for dramatic

Other works are more atmospheric and use the visual complexity of reflection to elaborate the human experience of being in such an otherworldly place.

In both *Portrait of a Birder* and *Self-Portrait at High Latitude*, for instance, the subjects gaze wistfully outward to an expanse just beyond the frame, highlighting the divide between habitable interior space and the inhospitable, unconquerable wilderness. Looking out the windows as if to make sense of all that is outside, Surgent's characters are presented in the moment of learning. Face to face with the wildness of the elements, working to condense this expansive landscape into useful data for the rest of us, these are people caught in the act of science.

And in a sense, Surgent is caught in that act, too. Whether in works interpreting the Antarctic landscape or moments in global cities, Surgent excerpts elements from the big, wide world and, preserving them in glass, makes them available—and meaningful—to us all. Hers is an art on the edge of science, a science on the edge of art. ●

Susie J. Silbert is a curator and writer with a background in craft and design. Based in Brooklyn, New York, she has worked on projects in Houston and North Carolina, and is a lecturer at the Rhode Island School of Design. She lectures and writes frequently on the history of craft.

