Music from the End of the World

Joseph Michael's Antarctica: while you were sleeping

by Sharmini Aphrodite

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Joseph Michael explores a crevasse, Antarctica, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael and crew sail past an enormous iceberg in Antarctica, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Antarctica: while you were sleeping on the UN HQ, New York, USA, 2019. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael, *Nelson Iceberg, Lemaire Channel, Antarctica*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael, *Valentine Iceberg, near Vernadsky Research Base, Antarctica*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.

In September 2019 Joseph Michael's installation Voices for the Future *lit up the United Nations General Assembly and Secretariat buildings in New York ahead of the UN's Climate Action Summit and global school strikes. Sharmini Aphrodite unpacks the journey of Michael and his team to Antarctica, the process of recording icebergs to create the work which dissolves spatial and aural boundaries between Antarctica, New Zealand and New York.*

It was at the beginning of the 2020 wildfires in California that I started listening to Joseph Michael's podcast, *Voice of the Iceberg*, first released on Radio New Zealand in 2017. I don't quite remember what the weather was like then, from where I live in the southernmost point of Malaysia, but it has been erratic over the past week.[01] This is the standard for the end of the year in this part of the world, when the monsoon winds blow down from the North Pacific, interspersing days of thick heat with rains that last for hours, eclipsing all other sounds and sight with their white ferocity. The weather reports all say the things they have been saying for years: *it's getting hotter, but it will get hotter still*.

In California, as in nations like Australia and Peru, the process of 'getting hotter' has been disastrous. The images coming out of the Pacific coast in September were apocalyptic. The description is a cliché, but looking at those diesel-bright skies, the first thing that sprung to mind was that the colour looked like something you would expect to see on a Martian frontier. Perhaps it was a little later on that I started listening to *Voice of the Iceberg*, and instead of those images of heat, coupled with the old tropical heat I was probably sweltering in at the time—I was, briefly, somewhere else. Somewhere as cold as I imagined starlight to be. Somewhere quiet, glistening with beds of drifting ice, of a blue so bright that it was almost white.

The German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe described the colour blue "as a hue… [that]... is powerful… [and] a stimulating negation".[02] "We love to contemplate blue," he wrote, "not because it advances towards us, but because it draws us to it".[03]

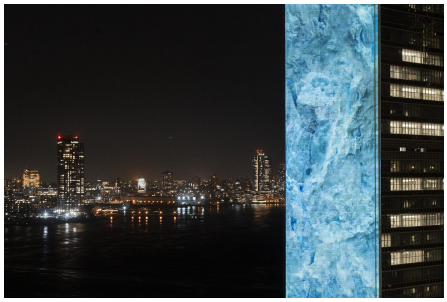
There are some places in the world that have that same power. Antarctica is one of them. Mostly uninhabited, it is a remote and harsh continent, the coldest on earth. Yet the oceans there are also getting warmer, and the continent's glaciers are melting—a phenomenon that is especially worrying for those who live in the Southern Hemisphere. Beyond the human cost, there is plenty to be lost: the Antarctic Ocean is home to a great biodiversity, with ecosystems that are fragile and unique to the area. Much of the weight behind global warming comes from, of course, oil companies such as Exxon, Chevron, BP and Shell and Saudi Aramco.[04] And while the Antarctic Treaty, signed in 1959, currently prevents the Antarctic from being exploited for minerals, this is up for review in 2048. Already issues surrounding the ownership of the Antarctic and its resources have been raised, with nations such as the United States, Russia, and China all in possession of infrastructure in the Antarctic that could boost their overall global positioning.[05]



Antarctica: while you were sleeping lights up the UN Secretariat and General Assembly, ahead of the 2019 UNDA and Climate Action Summit, New York, USA, 2019. Image courtesy the artist.



Antarctica: while you were sleeping on the UN HQ New York, USA, 2019. Image courtesy the artist.



Close up view of *Antarctica: while you were sleeping* on the UN HQ New York, USA, 2019. Image courtesy the artist.

In 2019, the United Nations held a Youth Summit on climate change in their headquarters in New York City. Part of that summit included the project *Voices for the Future*, created by the New Zealand artist Joseph Michael, and produced in collaboration with the environmental charity Project Pressure and the Permanent Mission of New Zealand to the United Nations. The work was a large-scale projection of footage that Michael took of the icebergs in Antarctica, transposed onto the surfaces of the UN building, which turned a glittering, clear blue against the urban grit of New York. That blue was the blue of the icebergs of Antarctica, to which Michael and his team had journeyed in 2015. It was that same team that collected the sights and sounds of Antarctica, and brought them back. It was this journey that was documented on the podcast that I had been listening to. First, to Michael's home nation New Zealand, where the footage taken in Antarctica was displayed on the Auckland War Memorial Museum building; then, two years later, to New York. In both Auckland and New York, not only were viewers of the work able to see the icebergs, they could also *hear* them, with the projections including audio of the icebergs, mixed with the compositions of Rhian Sheehan. The crunch of ice splitting and falling into the sea, a swell of music. A sound that was hypnotic, beguiling—something to reel you in.

Lulled by his work, I spoke to Joseph Michael in a Zoom call to understand more about his project. Currently Artist-in-Residence at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT), Michael works mainly in photography and the visual arts. Much of his work focuses on the landscape, challenging the human-centred view of

the environment. In Michael's work, nature takes centre-stage, as it does in *Antarctica: while you were sleeping*. When I spoke to Michael, a tropical storm was lashing against my windows, and his blinds were pulled down against the harsh sunlight of an Antipodean summer, but both of us were brought away to Antarctica as he began telling me about the process of his work.



Antarctica: while you were sleeping on the Auckland War Memorial Museum, New Zealand 2017. Image courtesy the artist.



Audience views of *Antarctica: while you were sleeping* on the Auckland War Memorial Museum, New Zealand, 2017. Image courtesy the artist.



Audience views of *Antarctica: while you were sleeping* on the Auckland War Memorial Museum, New Zealand, 2017. Image courtesy the artist.

His journey to Antarctica began at the tip of South America and wound through the Drake Passage, which connects the Southeastern Atlantic Ocean with the Southwestern Pacific Ocean. The team then arrived on a peninsula that mirrored the Andes Mountains of the country they had just left behind. The journey took 3 or 4 days, and they spent 22 days in the Antarctic. They sailed through the ocean, went onland, and drifted through iceberg graveyards: the result of ice shaving off glaciers and congregating together in clusters that gleamed like crushed diamonds. The crew included photographers, cinematographers, sound-recorders. There was an underwater specialist, an iceberg cartographer, hydrophones that could record the sounds of the icebergs from beneath the water.

Each of the icebergs, too, had its own individual music: unique frequencies, shocks, and pitches. There was a liveliness to them, the sense of a different universe teeming beneath the surface. Instead of labelling these icebergs with detached and clinical numbers, the team gave them names; such was their familiarity with them that they were able to recognise them by their sounds.

When they returned to New Zealand, Michael's attention turned to putting the installation together. The idea of the work was to emulate what the team had seen and heard back in Antarctica, to translate the experience for an urban audience. Michael also has hopes for similar installations to take place in other locations worldwide. These locations are vastly different from Antarctica. The difficulty of the work thus lies in capturing precisely the holistic sensorial experience of Antarctica, in locations and climates that are fundamentally different from the continent. For instance, exhibiting the work in New York was more challenging than Auckland, because of the city's density. While the Auckland War Memorial Museum was set in a park, in the midst of a forgiving cove of darkness and natural hush, the UN Headquarters was pressed in by an urban hum—the opposite of the Antarctic.



Joseph Michael explores a crevasse, Antarctica, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael and crew sail past an enormous iceberg in Antarctica, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Sound recordist Mark Michel captures audio in Antarctica, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Recording sounds in Antarctica, in front of the Lincoln Iceberg, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.

The difficulties of reproducing the silent and stark beauty of Antarctica in the busiest city on earth were various: there were some issues regarding technical aspects of the projection (having to project the work over a significant distance, considering the security around the UN building) but there was also the aural

aspect of the project. While the 40-storey projection would be easily visible—the crystalline, shifting blue of the icebergs standing out even against the city's neon and fluorescent lights—it would be another thing for the audience to be able to experience Antarctica holistically, to be able to *hear* it, alongside seeing it. The approach that Michael and collaborator Rhian Sheehan decided on was to create a soundtrack that blended into its surroundings, that worked with its environment. Michael described the soundscape for the UN reiteration of *Antarctica: while you were sleeping* as a little grittier than its Auckland counterpart. This grittiness melded for me into the natural music of the icebergs' calving—the crackles and pops and crunches, the splashing into a sea already tight with cold. This also allowed the work to be transportive—on one hand, the viewer was confronted, and perhaps held at bay, by the majesty of the visuals, but on the other, the soundscape of the work allowed the barrier between the viewer and the icebergs to *dis solve*, for them to feel not so much that they perceiving the landscape, but that they were part of it. *Antarctica: while you were sleeping* was not a wall, but an invitation, like ripples of water that extend outwards, encompassing everything.

There was a particular aspect of the work's soundscape that allowed for this rippling quality. Michael described to me a moment of discovery in a warehouse in New Zealand. While working through Sheehan's various compositions, he suddenly found that he could speak to the sound engineer, also present in the room, at a normal volume, that he could even whisper and still be heard over the noise. The explanation for that had to do with frequency: Sheehan's composition—at that particular moment—had used a precise frequency that was outside the volume of human speech, allowing them to speak naturally while still being immersed in a wall of sound. The frequency of human speech in relation to the level of sound pressure can be illustrated as the core of a bubble, around which other types of sound ripple. Human speech is located within the greater "bubble" of music. As in the chart below, speech is closer to the sense of hearing, whereas other sounds, on the other hand, might even reach the other end of the most overarching bubble, the threshold of feeling (e.g. vibrations).

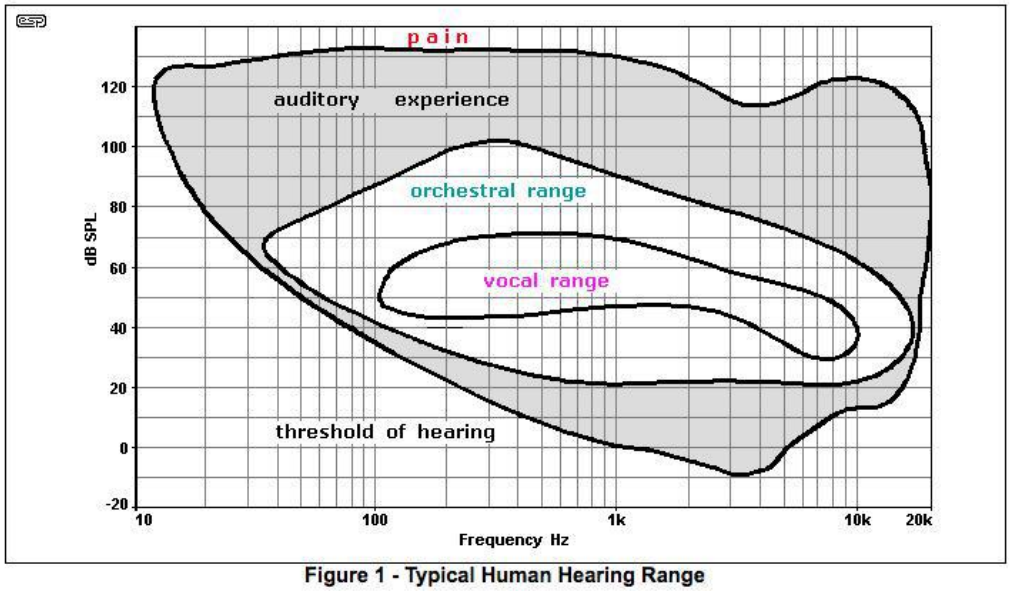


Figure 1 - Typical Human Hearing Range

This particular track was used for the UN projection, enabling viewers to speak to each other in hushed tones, before the track drew in the crash of the icebergs calving. In doing this, Michael wanted the audience to feel they were being folded into the larger bubble of Antarctica's soundscape, as if they were not watching the world unfold in front of them, but were tucked within it. Viewers were thus confronted with the violence that has been done to Antarctica, with icebergs crashing off into the sea and the battle-ground accompaniment of sound, but they were also buoyed by the sense that they were part of what was happening, drawing them into Antarctica's heart.

But these ripples go further and deeper than just between Antarctica and the audience. New Zealand is also embedded in the core of the work, paying homage to Michael's homeland, with a fitting focus—given the nature of *Antarctica: while you were sleeping*—on the land itself. This nod to New Zealand also brings the work full-circle: from New Zealand to Antarctica to New Zealand again, a pattern that mimics the cyclism of nature and creates a conversation between both places. To do this, Michael reached out to Alistair Fraser, a well-respected player, composer and researcher of the nga taonga pūoro, to create the music that would join that of another musician's—Brian Eno's—in Sheehan's composition. Nga taonga pūoro are the traditional musical instruments of the Māori, the people indigenous to Aotearoa New Zealand. The specific instruments used by Fraser were the porotiti

and the pūrerehua. The porotiti appears as an ovallish disc with tapered edges like a leaf, hung at the centre of two strings. To play it, one pulls the strings taut, and then releases them, creating a sound like a breath of wind. The sound made by the pūrerehua, meanwhile, sounds more like wind going through leaves, or over water on a rough day. Both of them are deceptively simple-looking, yet the music that they create clings to the earth so closely that it is almost as if they—and their wielders—are having a conversation with it. Flesh and wind, water and soil. In this way, the soundscape of the works accompanied the course of Michael's team to Antarctica. They came and conversed with the sea and the land, but they took nothing away that the earth would grieve to give.



Joseph Michael, *Yoko Iceberg*, *Lemaire Channel, Antarctica,* 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael, *Valentine Iceberg*, *near Vernadsky Research Base, Antarctica*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael, *Lincoln Iceberg*, *near Danco Island, Antarctica*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.



Joseph Michael, *Nelson Iceberg*, *Lemaire Channel, Antarctica*, 2016. Image courtesy the artist.

The thing about our senses is that one naturally evokes another. To hear the ice pop in Michael's work is also to have your mouth fill with cold water. To see that otherworldly blue hulking over a city is to be able to feel that same chill. There is a physical seamlessness that is evoked in *Antarctica: while you were sleeping*. Even the title of the project impresses something of the blurred boundaries of the dreamscape. To view *Antarctica: while you were sleeping*, or the

pictures taken on the team's journey to Antarctica, to listen to the RNZ podcast, is to slip between worlds. To not only traverse geographies, but also imaginations.

This transience inherent to Michael's project, this sense of not just slipping in between worlds, but dissolving into them—of becoming a part of a greater landscape—can be attributed to Michael's own sense of wonder regarding Antarctica. When Michael spoke about Antarctica to me, his awe was obvious. The feeling that the icebergs evoke in him is the same feeling he gets when he looks at the stars. It is the feeling of having to reckon with one's place in the world: so small against the backdrop of the universe, but still holding, in the body, the same stuff of starlight. The same atoms, cosmic dust. That pull that Goethe spoke of, which is the feeling that one gets when one looks at the sea; the same sea that is pulled by the moon. That blurring of boundaries that is only possible when one accepts that they are not something separate to the earth, but of it, when one realises that the earth is not a commodity, but a living thing, that it has its own music. At the far end of the world, Michael and his team found that music: the sizzle of water so cold that it freezes, the chirp of seals. That music, in either the urban hum of New York or crackling through cheap earphones, reminds us of this earth-life. The loom of the icebergs, crystalline against smog and light pollution, reminds us of the same. It can take up to 10, 000 years for an iceberg to form—generations and generations of human dreaming. While we were sleeping, Michael and his team combed through the Antarctic cold and produced a body of work that reminds us of what the earth is, was, and—if we can pry it from hands that aim only for profit—will be.

Footnotes

01. As of 12 January 2021, weeks of abnormally heavy monsoon rains have led to severe flooding in several states in Malaysia. The floods have led to an evacuation of over 50,000 people and at least 6 fatalities, with heavy rainfall expected to continue, necessitating urgent relief efforts, some of which are detailed in the second footnote directly below. NA, *Malaysia: Floods* - Jan 2021 (n.d.) www.reliefweb.int/disaster/fl-2021-000001-mys (accessed 12 January 2021) NA, *Relief efforts ramp up as Malaysian floods worsen* (9 January 2021) www.reliefweb.int/report/malaysia/relief-efforts-ramp-malaysian-floods-worsen (accessed 12 January, 2021)

02. Von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Theory of Colours*, Dover Publications, 2006.

03. Ibid.

04. Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts, Revealed: the *20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions* (9 October 2019) www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/09/revealed-20-firms-third-carbon-emissions (accessed 5 January 2021)

05. Leslie Hook and Benedict Mander, The Fight to own Antarctica (23 May 2018) www.ft.com/content/2fab8e58-59b4-11e8-b8b2-d6ceb45fa9d0 (accessed 5 January 2021)

Biographies



Joseph Michael's artworks embody a magical balance between fine art and forward-thinking technical knowledge. His large-scale projections of icebergs on monumental buildings bring the remoteness of the Antarctic to the core of urban centres, thus challenging a human centred worldview, by collapsing the space and time relationship between humans and the natural world and bringing into stark focus the consequences of our treatment of the planet. Michael's current project, *Raised up Sky* is an augmented reality artwork that explores the interconnectivity of humans and nature through the digital scanning and representation of significant trees from the Amazonian and New Zealand forests.



Sharmini Aphrodite was born in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah, and raised between the cities of Singapore and Johor Bahru, where she still lives. Her short fiction has been shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, placed on the Australian Book Review Jolley Prize and Golden Point Awards, and published online and in print. Her art writing appears online and has been a runner-up for *Frieze Magazine's* Art Writing Prize. She is a submissions editor at *Smokelong Quarterly* and a fiction reader for Singapore Unbound's SP Blog.

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