

# E x p o s u r e



Spring 2014 | Volume 47:1

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SPE is a nonprofit membership organization that provides and fosters an understanding of photography as a means of diverse creative expression, cultural insight, and experimental practice. Through its interdisciplinary programs, services, and publications, the Society seeks to promote a broader understanding of the medium in all its forms through teaching and learning, scholarship, and criticism.

2530 Superior Avenue, #403, Cleveland, OH 44114

phone: 216/622-2733

e-mail: [admin@spenational.org](mailto:admin@spenational.org)

fax: 216/622-2712

online: [www.spenational.org](http://www.spenational.org)

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*Exposure* (ISSN 0098-8863) is published twice yearly. Domestic institutional subscription rate is \$35 annually; outside the USA, \$50 annually. Subscription to *Exposure* is a benefit of SPE membership.

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View

## Tiina Itkonen: Frozen in Time

Pirkko Siitari

Travelers throughout history have made a practice of exploring foreign lands and recording their impressions in words and images. Many memorable landscapes in the annals of photography have originated on such journeys. A whole new literary genre was born out of the Grand Tour—a mandatory rite of passage in the education of the upper classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—with many travelers publishing accounts of their personal experiences of foreign cultures and scenery. This legacy is carried on, in a way, by the photographer Tiina Itkonen, a visual expeditionist who has been documenting Greenland since the mid-1990s.

Itkonen has made numerous trips to Greenland, where she has spent weeks and even months studying the landscapes. Her earliest trips were to the Thule region in the northwest corner of Greenland, home to the world's

*Tiina Itkonen, Iceberg Gallery III, 2006, pigment print, 30 x 45 cm, edition of 7.  
Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*

northernmost communities. Her later travels have taken her all over the vast island from its northernmost tip to its southernmost reaches.

Travel is a tricky proposition on an ice-clad island. With no real roads to speak of, the best way to get around is by motorboat, hitching a ride with seal or whale hunters. The only way to get from village to village is by helicopter. Itkonen has also traveled aboard an oil tanker and light aircraft, overnighing in the wilds with Polar Inuits or in tents with local hunters.

Over the years, Itkonen has built close ties with Greenland and its people. She has studied the language, mastered the art of seal hunting, and befriended many locals. Greenland has become her second home. Her fascination with and first trip to the country were inspired by a friendship with a Greenlandic woman she met during her student days.

Itkonen's book *Inughuit* (2004) documents the life and landscapes of the Polar Inuits. It captures the vast Arctic landscapes and images of locals going about their daily chores in colorful interiors. In her most recent photographs, the landscape dominates, featuring natural landmarks such as the Ilulissat Icefjord, which has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Itkonen's immaculately lit Arctic landscapes exude an air of peace and supreme stillness—they appear frozen in time. People rarely intrude on these sweeping panoramas. The horizon recedes into the distance behind sculptural icebergs that float in the foreground in myriad shapes and forms.

Landscapes and nature have always had a self-validating place in the history of photography. In recent decades, the definition of the landscape has been broadened both by artists and by scientists. The presumed dichotomy between nature and culture has been called into question, and the landscape is now increasingly understood as a cultural space and sensual experience. Itkonen's images of Greenland are not pure landscapes beyond the reach of culture, for images are always the sum of particular choices. The photographer



Above: Tiina Itkonen, *Qaanaaq Graveyard*, 2005, pigment print, 50 x 140 cm, edition of 3, 70 x 200 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin

Below: Tiina Itkonen, *Qaanaaq 5*, 2010, pigment print, 70 x 200 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin

defines what is included and excluded: she sets a scene in which the defining elements are her personal perceptions and experiences, how she crops the image, and how she captures the play of light.

Itkonen's photographs do not come about by chance or in a fleeting moment. She bides her time, waiting for the perfect angle and light—sometimes it takes hours, sometimes the moment passes, eluding the click of the shutter. The palette of her landscapes is limited to harmonies of blue, white and gray.

Time seems to vanish in Itkonen's impeccable photographs, which vividly capture the unhurried pace of her encounters with the locals and the landscape. She has said that she spends little time actually shooting—most of her time goes into simply observing. She waits and watches, patiently studying the forms of the landscape and inflections of light before taking up her camera.

The beauty of Itkonen's images belies an ugly truth. Global warming is causing the polar ice caps to melt, radically altering the fragile ecosystem and traditional livelihoods of the Inuit in an alarmingly brief time span. The sea no longer freezes completely, the ice is thinner than before, and the shrinking ice cover has shortened the hunting season by half. Ecology is an inescapable theme in Itkonen's photographs, inviting us to consider the special value of the Arctic region and the local and global ramifications of climate change.

Itkonen's photographs are equally about aesthetic expression and exploring nature and culture. Her landscapes are sublime, majestic, and serene. They capture a meditative space and a sense of timelessness. Northern culture and life on this planet depend on these landscapes. The aesthetic and the ethical are thus inseparably intertwined.



Opposite, top to bottom:

*Tiina Itkonen, Iceberg Gallery VI, 2006, pigment print, 30 x 45 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*

*Tiina Itkonen, Siku 2, 2007, pigment print, 40 x 60 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*

*Tiina Itkonen, Iceberg Gallery VIII, 2006, pigment print, 30 x 45 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*

*Above: Tiina Itkonen, House 5, 2010, pigment print, 60 x 70 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*

*Tiina Itkonen lives and works in Helsinki, Finland. Her work has been exhibited at international venues such as at the 54th Biennale de Venezia, 17th Biennale of Sydney, Danish National Museum of Photography, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg, Ludwig Museum, and New York Photo Festival. Her works are included in collections such as the Moderna Museet, Stockholm; DZ-Bank Collection, Frankfurt; Fundacio Foto Colectania, Barcelona; and the Helsinki City Art Museum. Itkonen's first book, Inughuit, was published in 2004 and her second book, Avannaa, will be published in the fall 2014.*

*Since 1995 Itkonen has traveled regularly to Greenland to photograph the polar landscape and its people. She has traveled more than 1,500 kilometers in the west coast of Greenland by small plane, helicopter, cargo ship, oil tanker, sailboat, small fishing boat, and dogsled, along the way spending time in small villages. [www.tiinaitkonen.com](http://www.tiinaitkonen.com)*

*Pirkko Siitari has served as director of the Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland, since 2010. Prior to that, Siitari was chief curator of the Kiasma Collections, director of the Kerava Art Museum, and the chief curator of the Finnish Museum of Photography, Helsinki. She holds a master's degree from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, and has studied the theory of contemporary art at Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht, Netherlands.*

*Her many curatorial projects include Alfredo Jaar—Tonight No Poetry Will Serve (2014), Common Things—Finnish and Swedish Contemporary Art (2010), and Black and White—Japanese Photography (2008). Siitari has been a member of the National Council for Photographic Art 2007–2012, which operates under the Ministry of Education and Culture in Finland. Since 2012 she has been a member of the selection committee of the Ars Fennica Award. Her international work includes many portfolio reviews and jury work with special focus on contemporary photographic art. [www.kiasma.fi](http://www.kiasma.fi)*



Above: *Tiina Itkonen, Sermermiut 2, 2007, pigment print, 50 x 140 cm, edition of 3, 70 x 200 cm, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*

Below: *Tiina Itkonen, Dawn, Savissivik, 2002, 50 x 140 cm, pigment print, edition of 7. Courtesy of the artist and Gallery Taik Persons, Berlin*