

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

FINANCIAL TIMES

Liza Ryan: 'Antarctica was my teacher'



Liza Ryan, Real Blue, 2016

For years, artist Liza Ryan has carried a camera with her wherever she goes, taking photographs all over her adopted hometown of Los Angeles. But two years ago, when she travelled by sea to Antarctica to celebrate her 50th birthday, fulfilling a life-long dream, she was stymied, unable to shoot. "I felt almost trapped," she says, overwhelmed by the monumental gap between her own small figure and the frozen, otherworldly, glacial landscape.

Not until she began kayaking around the icebergs, sculptural in their beauty, awe-inspiring in their scale, was she able to take photographs. In the silence, she experienced a "bizarre explosion of the senses. I've tried to figure out why it had such a crazy, powerful impact on me," she says, taking a sip of tea on a bitter cold day in New York. "There's such a limited palette — it's really pared down to whites, blues, greys — and there are no distractions. You can hear the landscape breathe and crack. It's very strange."

She shot thousands of frames, some of which have become the basis for her captivatingly mysterious new series, Antarctica, making its debut on January 20 at Kayne Griffin Corcoran gallery in Los Angeles. The photo-based works about the slowly melting continent are at once documentary and impressionistic, emotional and political.

As Ryan internalised the ship's many rules — passengers had to wear special-issue boots when disembarking, for example, and were forbidden to walk in penguins' tracks because the birds have trouble righting themselves when they fall in bootprints — she came to an epiphany: "This land was so much more powerful than any human. We are not the greatest, smartest, most powerful creatures."



Liza Ryan, Perpendicular, 2017

At the end of the two-week trip, while the others onboard felt ready to return to their daily lives, "I didn't want to leave," she says. "I didn't want to have contact with my family. That was sort of disturbing." Back in LA, still processing her experience, she could not bring herself to look at her photos for nearly a year. Instead, she read extensively about polar exploration, focusing on the macho culture that excluded women from the continent until the 1930s. Ryan came to understand her journey — and the art that would be borne of it — as intrinsically feminist.

She slowly began to print her photographs, knowing that was just the starting point. "There were a lot of photographers on board who had their tripods and their this and their that," she says. "To me, the whole idea of capturing something is kind of repugnant to me. I'd rather absorb it and react to it."

Using pencil, charcoal, gouache and paint, she made subtle interventions on the pictures, sometimes drawing mirror images of the ice formations, other times intensifying shading or deepening the colour of the sky. "Tracing became a form of going back there," Ryan says. "Something about the tactile nature of following the line, the connection of the pencil to the paper, you lose yourself. It's easier to remember."

Examining an image of a calving glacier, she adds, "Rather than showing how Antarctica looked, I wanted to show how it felt. It was all done in the vein of respect, and learning. Antarctica was my teacher."

Virginia Heckert, curator of photographs at the J. Paul Getty Museum, admires Ryan's ability to merge seemingly disparate images and media. In 2009's "Spill", for instance, which the Getty showed in 2016, Ryan linked a strip of photographs — a bird, autumn foliage, a woman's bare back — with a stream of India ink. "Even though the viewer can't quite untangle it all, it's clear this is rich, dense work," says Heckert, who describes Ryan's oeuvre as "enigmatic" and "poetic".



Liza Ryan

Little coincidence that Ryan's mother was a poet, and Ryan, who grew up in Virginia, concentrated on writing at Dartmouth College in the 1980s. She then moved to California and landed an editorial job at San Francisco Magazine. But she was already hooked on photography. "It was more open than words," she explains. "I was always interested in poetry because of its talking around things to get a more nuanced understanding. I thought I could do that through the visual."

She took photography courses at night, then enrolled in California State University, Fullerton, for graduate school. Ryan was the only student in her class who had not majored in art as an undergraduate and had a hard time wading through the jargon. "I was like, are you kidding me?," she says. "These words aren't even in the dictionary. What irritated me was, I feel like being an artist is about communication, not masturbation." It was then that she came to formulate her own marker of success: "When someone looks at my work, leaves and then thinks about it once after they left."

Ryan settled in LA, where she now lives with her husband, a lawyer, and their teenage daughter and son. Her studio is a converted garage in the backyard. She admits she had romanticised the prospect of being both a practising artist and a mother, imagining, "It's perfect because I'll have these babies, they'll nurse a little, they'll go down to sleep in my studio, then I'll work. And I won't need anyone to help me. You know how that went. My children weren't allowed in my studio."

Ryan's practice involves intensive study. "After my mom died [in 1996] I became obsessed with researching sudden loss and what it does to you — the shake-up of the psyche," she says. "The closest comparison was a heavy gust of wind: you can't see wind. It's so violating: it makes your eyes dusty, and your hair gets in your eyes. It sweeps into your life, rattles your being, then leaves." Ryan's Wind Study series — tall grass blown over, a woman's dress clinging to her leg — was her lyrical response.



Liza Ryan, Falstaff, 2008

Her mother had loved birds, and after what Ryan describes as several “bizarre experiences”, such as a hawk perching outside her studio window, she dived into books about birds of prey, including J.A. Baker’s classic memoir *The Peregrine*, which heightened her fascination with the animals’ mind-body connection and their relationships with humans. Eventually, she spent time at a falconry academy, where she made a series of sharply detailed close-ups of falcons, as well as a video installation.

Its intellectual basis notwithstanding, Ryan’s process resembles free association. Take “I push a petal from my gown”, an impossible-to-overlook 2012 image of a woman standing, hand on hip, in a verdant garden, her head almost completely obscured by fire. It is not Photoshopped. Ryan had been reading Emily Dickinson — the title comes from the poet’s “I tie my Hat — I crease my Shawl” — when she dreamed one night that Dickinson breathed fire. Ryan recalls deciding immediately, “I’ve got to shoot it. Thank God I live in LA, where there are fire-breathing women. So I Googled fire-breathing woman.”

For the shoot, the performer she selected held kerosene in her mouth and blew on a burning stick tossed overhead by her boyfriend, creating a burst of flames. The man who lent his yard stood just out of the frame holding a garden hose.

Ryan tends to move on to a new series within a year, but, despairing about climate change and President Donald Trump, she hasn’t been able to let go of Antarctica, or even take the images down from her wall. “I feel protective of the place in reading of all the horror that’s going on environmentally,” she says. “It’s almost like a superstition. I need the visual reminder — proof that the whole world isn’t shit.”

—Julie Belcove