



Stranded Iceberg, by Camille Seaman, taken off the coast of Antarctica's Cape Bird in 2006.

Q&A Camille Seaman

Iceberg imager

Camille Seaman photographs icebergs and storm clouds. With an exhibition of her work opening in January in San Francisco, California, she talks about stalking supercell storms and watching hungry polar bears destroy a bird colony.



What do you aim for in your photos?

I try to allow myself to feel something. My main aim is to reveal beauty. We live in boxes, and most of us are not connected to the outside world.

Once people feel something, it is the start of a relationship. If we keep degrading our environment, it will hurt our lives. Every iceberg that I have photographed is gone. In a couple of hundred years, photographs such as mine will remind people what icebergs and penguins looked like.

How did you start to photograph icebergs?

In 1999, I got a free plane ticket. On a whim, I flew to the Bering Sea and naively decided to walk across the frozen ocean towards Russia. I returned with the sense that I had met my planet. In 2003, I boarded a Norwegian icebreaker in Svalbard; crashing through sea ice was exhilarating. In 2004, I travelled to Antarctica, near where Shackleton's ship was trapped and crushed a century ago. The scale of the icebergs was beyond belief. Since then, I have worked as an expedition photographer for companies in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Camille Seaman, *The Last Iceberg III*

Corden | Potts Gallery, San Francisco, California.
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How do icebergs 'behave'?

Melting ice lowers the salinity of the seawater and releases minerals that allow krill to bloom, attracting fish, birds, seals and whales. After a glacier calves, the fallen ice creates a crackling sound like billions of pop rocks. My grandfather, a Shinnecock Indian, once asked me to sit still on a warm summer day and watch my own sweat evaporate. The vapour becomes part of a cloud, which falls as rain to feed plants and animals, which feed us. Each iceberg is different. Some are stalwart, refusing to break apart despite being pounded by waves. Others just collapse.

What have you learned from scientists?

Working on ships has allowed me to spend time with researchers in many disciplines. A marine biologist explained that whales became so scarce in the early twentieth century that some companies boiled penguins for bird oil. I didn't appreciate the courage of penguins until an ornithologist sat me down for hours to observe their behaviour. A geologist showed me a 3-billion-year-old stone. He was trained to see scales of time that are beyond an average human's comprehension.

Humanity may not survive, he said, but he wasn't worried about the planet.

How did you begin to chase storm clouds?

It was serendipitous. My daughter was watching *Storm Chasers* on television, and said, "Mom, you should do that." Three days later, I was in Kansas in a Chevy Suburban with storm expert Todd Thorn, chasing a supercell mesocyclone. When you stand under these supercell storm clouds, which have a persistent rotating updraft, it is like a nebula where stars are forming. The creation of these storms in our atmosphere involves the coalescence of gravity, wind and electrical current.

Have you ever feared for your life on the job?

I have no desire to end up dead. I want to photograph the beauty and structure of these storms, and to do that you have to get some distance. You can avoid tornadoes, but hail can be dangerous when it gets to baseball size. Lightning can strike anywhere at any time. Storms are unpredictable. One time in South Dakota, we had been chasing an epic supercell storm for several hours, when it started to collapse. All the energy that had built up was rushing out at 110 kilometres an hour, like a sandstorm in the desert. We had to drive at 150 kilometres an hour over dirt roads for quite some time to outrun the storm. The next morning, we found that a rear wheel on our vehicle had nearly come off.

How do you create your images?

Before I pick up my camera, I ask, what in my field of vision is making me feel a certain way? I use the camera like a Geiger counter to find the source of the emotion. Then I push the button. Nature is awesome without additives. I don't exaggerate colours or contrast, and I don't crop or straighten. My joy is in creating the image in the camera, not on the computer. I love analogue photographs but have begun to shoot digital since getting through airports with film has become difficult. Now that the files are large enough, you can get huge digital prints with the same tactile sense of detail as with film.

How has climate change affected your work?

I left the Arctic last summer heartbroken. The expedition got within 400 kilometres of the North Pole without the nuclear-powered icebreakers that are usually necessary. Our time on land was spent witnessing hungry polar bears destroying a full year of bird colonization. Last year, I realized that people are not willing to make the changes necessary to keep what we have now. I left knowing that the future is not about preservation or conservation, but about being able to handle the changes ahead. The changes are coming; the question is whether we will be prepared. ■

INTERVIEW BY JASCHA HOFFMAN