

Mark Miodownik

Ice aesthetics



In 1970 the American artist Paul Kos produced a piece of work called *The Sound of Ice Melting*. The art installation consisted of a large block of ice surrounded by eight microphones. The whimsical nature of this piece contrasts with our modern relationship with this material. Ice has become part of our consumer machine. It is forced to melt on demand to cool our drinks, lubricate our skis, and as ice cream it features on practically every dessert menu in the world. But although we have learnt to manipulate and control ice, it is nonetheless a wild and ancient material, a fundamental geological force, and, perhaps, the most aesthetically beautiful material on the planet.

There are few more pleasing things than to wake up to find snow has silently fallen in the night and transformed our habitual world into a photographic negative. And like silver nitrate, snow crystals capture images of our world, not by reacting, but by melting and sintering in our footsteps. Everything about snow seems gentle and transformative. These are not the characteristics we associate with crystals, and yet ice is the original crystal, the root of the word itself means 'clear ice' and many ancient cultures believed that gem stones were some sort of fossilized ice. This is not difficult to believe when contemplating the ethereal blue ice of a glacier or towering green icebergs. And there is no more compelling evidence of the power of atomic forces than the perfect self-assembled snowflake that falls onto your coat on stormy winter days, twinkling in its mysterious hexagonal structure under your scrutiny, before abruptly melting away.

This, then, is ice's style, more enigmatic than its aqueous sister. It sparkles in deep but subtle hues and, instead of garish rainbows, it reveals its presence in the sky by the vague 'sun dog' or 'halo moon'. There are eighty types of snow, each one unique and difficult to pin down, but each one a reminder of the symmetry imposed by the crystalline state.

The natural aesthetic of ice is not to everyone's taste, and many cultures have discovered that it is an excellent material for sculpting

and building. Blocks of ice naturally sinter together and can then be easily shaped using chainsaws and icepicks. The Chinese town of Habin is famous for its ice festival, which dates back to the Manchu dynasty, where every year a forest of ice buildings, some of them nine stories high, arise from the Songhua Jiang river. Lit at night by encapsulated neon, these jewel-like buildings illuminate a forest of snow sculptures – the very image of frozen time. The blue diamond sediment-free ice in Fairbanks, Alaska is also famous for ice sculptors, and is host to the annual world ice art championships. There is even an ice hotel in the north of Sweden where as a guest you can appreciate the crack and creaking of the Ice Queen's embrace.

Many artists reject the notion of art as an activity that must produce objects, which can then be bought and sold, of art as commodity. For such artists ice is an ideal material, providing them with the opportunity to make something that they know will not last. The impermanence of ice also makes it a symbolic material for environmental artists. This is because the Earth in general is a bit too warm for ice. Even the cool temperatures of the polar regions, relative to its melting point, are too hot. These magnificent strange crystal landscapes creep and flow, not in geological timeframes, but in days, weeks, and years; thus these ice kingdoms that many think cold and static are more alive than our own more slothful rocky continents. It is this dynamism mixed with the beauty and majesty of ice that attracts so many artists to the ice caps supported by ventures such as the National Science Foundation Antarctic Artists and Writers Program (US) or Cape Farewell (UK).

So, 30 years after Paul Kos' original work, artists are once again recording the sound of ice melting, but this time the blocks of ice are the size of continents.

Mark Miodownik,
King's College London,
mark.miodownik@kcl.ac.uk