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Sand, Sea And Glaciers: An Interview with the Dexterous Pastellist, Zaria Forman

By Danielle Gourgey · On June 26, 2015

American Artist Zaria Forman has proved her skill with her hyper realist, large-scale pastel drawings of remote landscapes. From reconstructing the melting ice in Greenland to the rising sea levels in the Maldives, Forman uses her drawings to document the effects of climate change. The New York based artist has teamed up with British pastel makers, Unison Colour, to create a new range of pastels, 'Ocean Blue'. We talk to her about her work, her influences and her recent collaboration.

Danielle: How did your [Unison Colour Soft Pastel](#) collaboration come about? How did you end up deciding on the colours for your [Ocean Blue range](#)?

Zaria: There was a specific colour of compressed, aged ice that I was struggling to create, even when mixing a few colours I couldn't achieve the exact translucent turquoise hue I was looking for. When I contacted the folks at Unison to ask if they could attempt to create it for me, they happily took the challenge on. I described what I wanted and sent them several photos of icebergs that I had taken in both Greenland and Labrador, and after a few rounds of trial and error, sending me test colours to try out, we perfected it! We also ended up liking a few of the other colours that came out of the tests, and decided to create an "[Ocean Blue](#)" range.

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Zaria Forman: 'Greenland #58', Pastel on Paper, 30"x44"

Danielle: Can you tell me a bit about your creative process, from choosing you're subject to the final, finished piece?

Zaria: When I travel, I take thousands of photographs. I often make a few small sketches on-site to get a feel for the landscape. Once I return to the studio, I draw from my memory of the experience, as well as from the photographs, to create large-scale compositions. Occasionally I will re-invent the water or sky, alter the shape of the ice, or mix and match a few different images to create the composition I envision. I begin with a very simple pencil sketch so I have a few major lines to follow, and then I add layers of pigment onto the paper, smudging everything with my palms and fingers and breaking the pastel into sharp shards to render finer details.

The process of drawing with pastels is simple and straightforward: cut the paper, make the marks. The material demands a minimalistic approach, as there isn't much room for error or re-working since the paper's tooth can hold only a few thin layers of pigment. I rarely use an eraser—I prefer to work with my "mistakes," enjoying the challenge of resolving them with limited marks. I love the simplicity of the process, and it has taught me a great deal about letting go. I become easily lost in tiny details, and if the pastel and paper did not provide limitations, I fear I would never know when to stop, or when a composition were complete!



Zaria Forman: 'Greenland #54', Pastel on Paper, 40"x60"

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Danielle: How have you managed with your increasing popularity? How do you find the time to create art as well as handle the business side of things?

Zaria: About a year ago I hired a Studio Manager who handles most of the business aspects for me. I still do some emailing and coordinating opportunities on my own and I mainly do my own social media, but my Studio Manager helps with everyday things that need to be done (ie: emailing clients and galleries, organizing shipments, framing, handling of the artwork, image contracts for magazines, and even accounting!) This way I can give more time to actually creating my drawings.



Zaria Forman: 'Maldives #5', Pastel on Paper, 45"x60"

Danielle: What connection do you have with the icy landscapes and seascapes that recur in your work? What draws you to these scenes of nature?

Zaria: I think most human beings are drawn towards water in one way or another. It makes up more than 75% of our bodies, and covers most of the Earth's surface. We need water to survive, but we also gravitate toward its beauty — the respite, shimmer, and movement it adds to a landscape. I think of water as a metaphor for life – forever transforming, both fearsomely and beautifully. It is an endless source of inspiration to me as it constantly changes, taking on new forms from one instant to the next – a movement I attempt to evoke in my drawings. There will always be more for me to learn about the methods with which water can be conveyed in pastel, and I enjoy that never-ending challenge.

In terms of where I go next, I follow the ice and it's melt. At the poles, the ice is melting at an unprecedented pace. This melting ice is one of the largest contributors to rising sea levels, which, among many other issues, is drowning low-lying island nations. Essentially I follow the melt water from the Arctic to the equator.



Zaria Forman: 'Maldives #12', Pastel on Paper, 40"x60"

Danielle: What or Who pointed you on your artistic path?

Zaria: The inspiration for my drawings began in my early childhood when I travelled with my family throughout several of the world's most remote landscapes, which became the subject of my mother's fine art photography. I developed an appreciation for the beauty and vastness of the ever-changing sky and sea. I loved watching a far-off storm on the western desert plains; the monsoon rains of southern India; and the cold Arctic light illuminating Greenland's waters.



Zaria Forman: 'Greenland #63', Paste on Paper, 50"x75"

Zaria: My mother, Rena Bass Forman, taught me everything I know about light. How to wait for it, and how to recognize those magical moments when it's just right. My mother and I were very similar- I inherited her aesthetic taste and although our mediums were different (I make drawings and she was a photographer), our compositions were often quite similar. She took me to far off, remote and often desolate landscapes, influencing my eye from an early age.



Zaria Forman: 'Greenland #71', Pastel on Paper, 50"x60"

Danielle: What's the best piece of advice you have been given in regards to your work as an artist?

Zaria: I have had a few vital mentors over the years, and they have given, and continue to give me invaluable advice. I wouldn't be where I am without them. I honestly can't think of one specific piece of advice that was the best, but I think the most important thing for anyone to do in a lifetime is to find their passion, their "gift", and use it to serve our global community.



Zaria Forman: 'Maldives #13', Pastel on Paper, 72"x127.5"

Danielle: Do you have any upcoming projects?

Zaria: I am currently working towards my upcoming solo show at Winston Wächter Fine Art in New York. The opening reception will be held on September 10, 2015 from 6-8pm and my work will be on view through October 17, 2015.

In Nov/Dec I will be doing a 5-6 week art residency in Antarctica, aboard the [National Geographic Explorer](#) with Lindblad Expeditions.

[Ice to Islands](#) continues to evolve and take shape through documentary film, expeditions, panel discussions and performance. We are working towards our first major exhibition – stay tuned!

Cover image by [Francois Lebeau](#)

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- To view the Unision Colour Soft Pastel Ocean Blue range, please visit [here](#).

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