

GLOBAL WARNINGS



Marjorie Moore



11. *Polar Dilemma*, litho crayon and oil crayon on paper, 26 x 40 1/2 inches 1987-89
Cover: 1. *Arctic Journey*, oil on canvas, 78x66 inches 1987

An Art of Arctic Animism

Marjorie Moore's Prescient Polar Paintings

Edgar Allen Beem

The paintings and drawing featured in Marjorie Moore's "Global Warnings" exhibition at the Maine Jewish Museum form a body of work from the late 1980s that might best be described as "prescient" in that they describe in their animistic way not only what was about to take place in the animal kingdom in the Arctic but also the disruption and dislocation about to occur on a global scale.

"Global warming" was a phrase first used in 1975, but it did not gain currency until June 1988 when NASA scientist James E. Hansen testified before Congress that "global warming has reached a level such that we can ascribe with a high degree of confidence a cause and effect relationship between the greenhouse effect and the observed warming."

A year later, in March of 1989, the Exxon Valdez struck Bligh Reef in Alaska's Prince William Sound, spilling 260,000 gallons of oil along 1,300 miles of coastline. The Age of Environmental Disaster had been ushered in, just as Marjorie Moore described in images of refugee polar bears, wolves and seals wandering an oily Arctic wasteland.

Marjorie Moore lived and worked in Maine from 1970 to 1993, when she and architect husband Steven Moore moved to Texas. They returned to Maine in 2017. I hadn't seen her work since she left the state, but I was very familiar with her art of the 1980s, which ran to pop culture imagery used in irreverent fashion. She made puppets as human surrogates, painted cows as embodiments of domesticity, deer as skittish beings threatened by human development and Disney cartoon characters as the carriers of human psychic baggage.

"Bambi meets Dumbo on the road to salvation and deliverance. Absurd? Perhaps," I wrote in a February 1990 profile of Moore in *Maine Times*. "But Marjorie Moore is an artist who is constantly seeking the deep in the dumb, the meaningful in the mundane, the truth in the trite."

Animism infused much of her work, a sense that all things – animate and inanimate – are ultimately alive with the same life force, a spirit that infuses human and non-human life alike. Moore's Arctic paintings and drawings were informed by trips to the Peary-McMillan Arctic Museum at Bowdoin College and by her readings of Barry Lopez's visionary *Arctic Dreams* and *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Eskimo* by anthropologists William Fitzhugh and Susan Kaplan. Her art has always maintained a delicate balance between information and imagination, the empirical and the ineffable.

Marjorie Moore's contributions to the Arctic of the imagination were anthropomorphic polar bears, wolves and seals engaged in a narrative of loss long before polar bears on melt ice became the totem animals of climate change and environmental destruction.

"Arctic" derives from the Greek word for "bear," (arktos). This one-to-one correspondence between wild landscape and its wild inhabitants is expressed in Moore's art by polar bears that seem to well up out of the greasy snow almost as if in a fever dream. Yellow highlights give a buttery look to these strange beasts, who seem part bear, part human, part cartoon, distant cousins of New Yorker cartoonist Ed Koren's hairy humanoids.

Paint and figure, line and ground are all one in Moore's vision. The bears seem the wilder of the creatures, while the wolves have a human quality that is almost complicit in the mysterious events that have turned the pristine whiteness of the ice and snow above the Arctic Circle into a sickly, sooty landscape of dirty snowdrifts and ice floes.

In *Polar Artikos*, a rearing polar bear seems to be contemplating a seal coveted by a wary wolf. In *Arctic Traveler*, a bear sniffs the sack carried by a wolf-man, a sack that might well conceal a seal. A pair of polar bears make their wary ways in across the filthy ice floes in the background.

Arctic Journey depicts a wolf couple who seem to be saying their good-byes as a quartet of bears heads off in search of something – food, land, solid ice, a new home? Mrs. Wolf seems to have been hiding a seal beneath the hem of her fur coat. In unspoken ways, this is an image about existential dilemma and survival.

Moore's sketchy litho crayon drawings depict the displaced wolves adrift as sea in boats that are also seals. The animals have only themselves to rely on in this sea of catastrophe.

The "Global Warnings" narrative is one of uncertainty and despair, a searching for safety that anticipates the waves of environmental, economic and political migration of the 21st century. The psychological impact of these paintings and drawings, however, is both timely and timeless.

In her *Bambi* and *Dumbo* paintings of the 1980s, Moore was dealing with pop culture manifestations of primordial fears such as the loss of a mother. In her polluted Arctic paintings and drawings she is concerned with the loss of Mother Nature.

In 1993, the same year she moved to Texas, Moore received an Earthwatch fellowship to travel to Venezuela to work on a red howler monkey project. Assisting scientists with the study and collecting skeletal remains of red howlers to draw ushered in a new chapter in Moore's art. On the one hand, she continued her fascination with how humans appropriate animals to create faux beings such as the sock monkeys and wind-up monkey toys that crowd a shelf in her Portland studio. On the other, she ventured into the art of the scientific, studying and drawing the monkey bones she collected.



5. *Arctic Travelers/Threesome*, litho crayon on paper, 26 x 40 1/2 inches, 1987



7. *Arctic Travelers/Rub-a-Dub-Dub*, litho crayon on paper, 26 x 40 1/2 inches, 1987



2. *Polar Arktikos*, oil on canvas, 78 x 66 inches, 1987

Marjorie Moore's recent work, such as that shown at PhoPa Gallery last year, takes the form of naturalistic drawings of seaweed and shells as well as collaged constructions that incorporate seaweed, shells and pebbles.

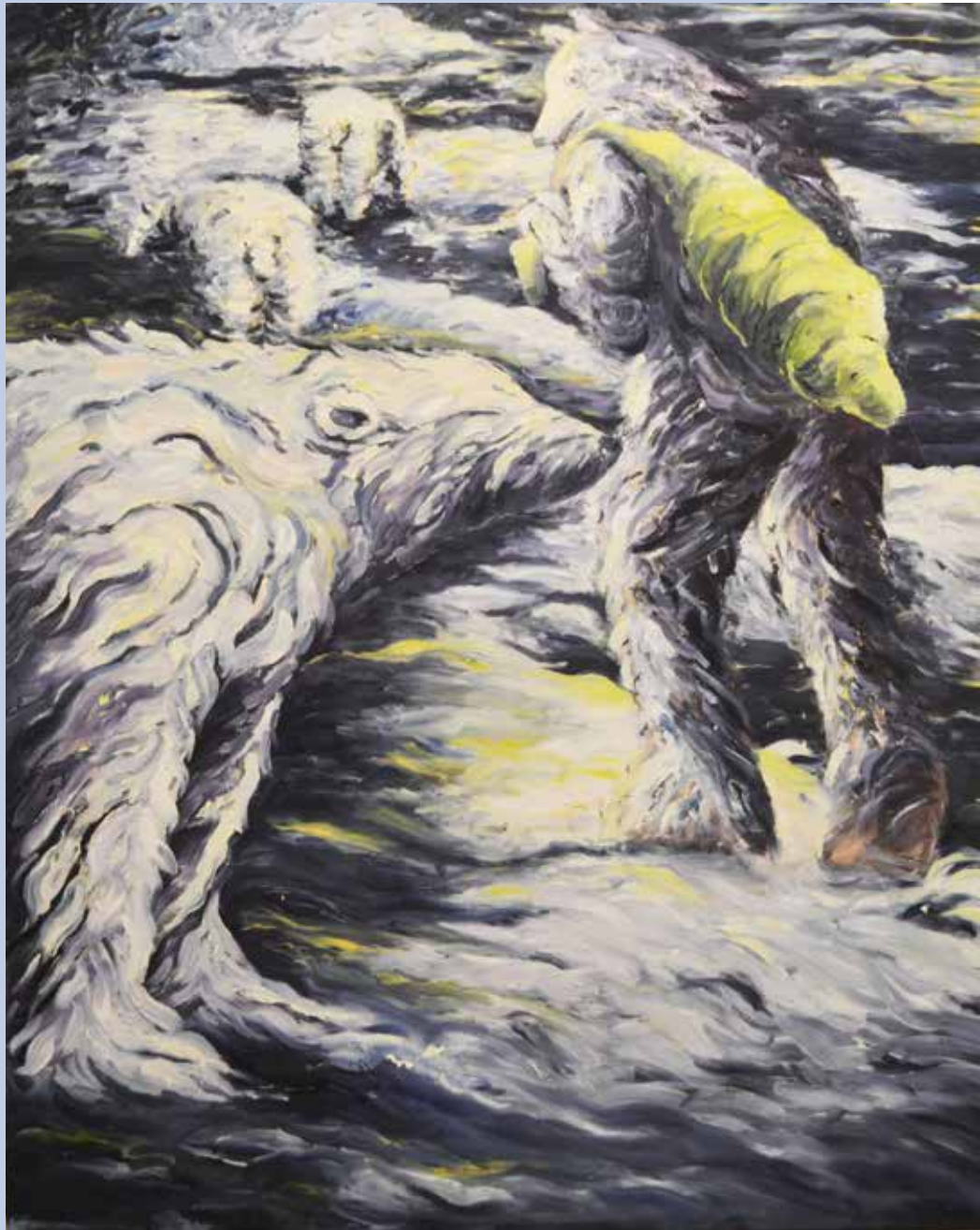
"The older work was more narrative," she says. "I have come to this kind of work because it is calmer. It's about observation and quietness."

Just as Moore's appropriation of cartoon characters was not itself cartooning, her use of flora and fauna is not natural history illustration but rather a logical extension of a lifelong art practice driven by material investigation, methodical process and a determination to make sense of a phenomenal world that is at one and the same time mysterious, miraculous, chaotic, incomprehensible and all that we have.

Bringing her vision of polar nightmare up to date and into three dimensions are a new series of wood and collage boats derived from the seal craft of the drawings. Entitled "Afloat," the suspended boats are a collaboration between Marjorie and Steven Moore that speaks to a shared concern about climate change and environmental degradation.

Ultimately, what Marjorie Moore is doing with the cautionary tales of her "Global Warnings" paintings, drawings and constructions is what every serious artist since prehistory has been doing, searching for meaning, and, when they cannot find it, making life meaningful through the act of creation.

In 1987-89 when these images were created, they were fables of impending doom. Today, they read like reports from the front of a climate crisis that might have been avoided. Marjorie Moore got it just right. Now, we must all hope she is wrong.



3. *Arctic Travelers*, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 1988



5. *Canis Bound #2*, oil on canvas and wood, 44 x 44 inches, 1988

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Marjorie Moore

July 7-September 7, 2019, Maine Jewish Museum

CHECKLIST

1. *Arctic Journey*, oil on canvas, 78 x 66 inches 1987
2. *Polar Arktikos*, oil on canvas, 78 x 66 inches, 1987
3. *Arctic Travelers*, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 1988
4. *Arctic Dream*, oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches, 1988
5. *Canis Bound #2*, oil on canvas and wood, 44 x 44 inches, 1988
5. *Arctic Travelers/Threesome*, litho crayon on paper, 26 x 40 1/2 inches, 1987
6. *Fishing For*, litho crayon on paper, 40 1/2 x 26 inches, 1987
7. *Arctic Travelers/Rub-a-Dub-Dub*, litho crayon on paper, 26 x 40 1/2 inches, 1987
8. *Lone Wolves*, litho crayon on paper, 40 1/2 x 26 inches, 1987
9. *Arctic Travelers/Searching Open Ground*,
litho crayon and oil crayon on paper, 1987
10. *Totemic Conversation*, litho crayon on paper, 40 1/2 x 26 inches, 1987
11. *Polar Dilemma*, litho crayon and oil crayon on paper,
26 x 40 1/2 inches 1987-89
12. *Arctic Deer #1*, oil crayon on paper, 30 x 30 inches, 1989
13. *Arctic Deer #2*, oil crayon on paper, 30 x 30 inches, 1989
14. *Afloat #1*, combined media (plywood, handmade ink stained papers,
waxed thread), 43 x 42 x 16 inches, c. 2019
15. *Afloat #2*, combined media (plywood, handmade ink stained papers,
waxed thread), 28 x 46 x 12 inches, 2019

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