



Diane Burko: Bearing Witness



Diane Burko, Parallels II, 2024

By **WM STAFF**, March 1, 2025

Climate artist and activist Diane Burko stays busy. Her research-based, environmentally focused practice has taken her around the globe. Driven by relentless curiosity, she has traversed glaciers in the Arctic Circle, explored Antarctica multiple times with glacial geologists, and joined oceanographers and pilots on month-long expeditions to Hawaii and American Samoa—witnessing and documenting the rapid changes unfolding in the planet’s most vulnerable ecosystems.

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Blending scientific data with artistic expression, Burko's work serves as a powerful form of environmental monitoring, fusing maps, charts, and graphs with formal painting. She pushes the boundaries of data visualization, showing how art can capture what numbers alone cannot.

Her current solo exhibition, *Bearing Witness*, on view at [Cristin Tierney Gallery](#), showcases a selection of her energetic collages and large-scale paintings that spark genuine curiosity about our natural world and the climate phenomena shaping it.

WM: To start, can you introduce us to your practice? When and where did your journey as both an artist and a climate-focused artist begin?

DIANE BURKO: I'm a research-based artist working at the intersection of art, science, and the environment. My career began in the 1970s. I entered my MFA program creating large oil-stick abstract works and left with landscapes inspired by monumental geological phenomena, initially sourced from *National Geographic* and calendar photographs.

That quickly evolved into taking my own aerial photographs of vistas such as the Grand Canyon and the coastlines of Maine, California, and the Pacific Northwest. Residencies in Bellagio and Giverny, along with grants to fly over and into remote locations further enriched my visual vocabulary.

However, by the 21st century, the joy of painting awe-inspiring vistas no longer felt satisfying. My focus shifted to the precarity of these landscapes, leading me to become a climate activist. I began engaging with environmental scientists and bearing witness to sites of climate emergency in the Arctic, Antarctic, Pacific Ocean, and, presently, the Amazon rainforest.



Diane Burko, Amazon 34, 2024

WM: As an artist with a heavily research-based practice, what does your creative process look like from start to finish?

DB: It starts with concern and curiosity stemming from relevant articles, environmental sites, and books; I have an extensive library on climate, philosophy, geography, geology, and environmentalism. From there, I reach out to researchers in glaciology, marine biology, or climate science—and more recently, I have been contacting educators, philosophers, anthropologists, and historians.

This remote research is followed by what I consider to be the most crucial part of my practice: bearing witness. All my studies lead me to place myself in the location of the threatened environment.

I have walked on glaciers in the Arctic Circle and below the equator in New Zealand and Antarctica. I have flown over the Great Barrier Reef and photographed coral in Hawaii and American Samoa. Most recently, I've traveled through the Amazonas, spending time in a residency at a rainforest reserve outside Manaus, Brazil.



Diane Burko, Grandes Jorasses, Pointe Marguerite, 1976

WM: Travel and collaborative work with scientists play a crucial role in your work. What do these on-the-ground expeditions look like? Can you walk us through how you gather information in the field?

DB: Unlike a scientist who conducts field trips with a hypothesis in mind, I'm not necessarily gathering specimens, recording data, or checking instruments. Instead, I experience the site on an intuitive level. My camera serves as the notetaker, while my eyes act as the primary recording device.

When fortunate enough to accompany a scientist, I naturally question them about what I'm seeing and what they're doing. When I'm in the air, flying over a landscape, it's the pilot who informs me about what I'm seeing. Afterward, I take notes.

While a great deal of preparation goes into connecting with researchers and planning these expeditions, it's all unscripted when I'm there, bearing witness to the scene. I process the phenomena that spontaneously grab my attention, using that experience and those details to bring everything back into the studio in an effort to communicate the emergency they represent to the regular viewing public.



Diane Burko, Summer Heat 1 & 2, 2020

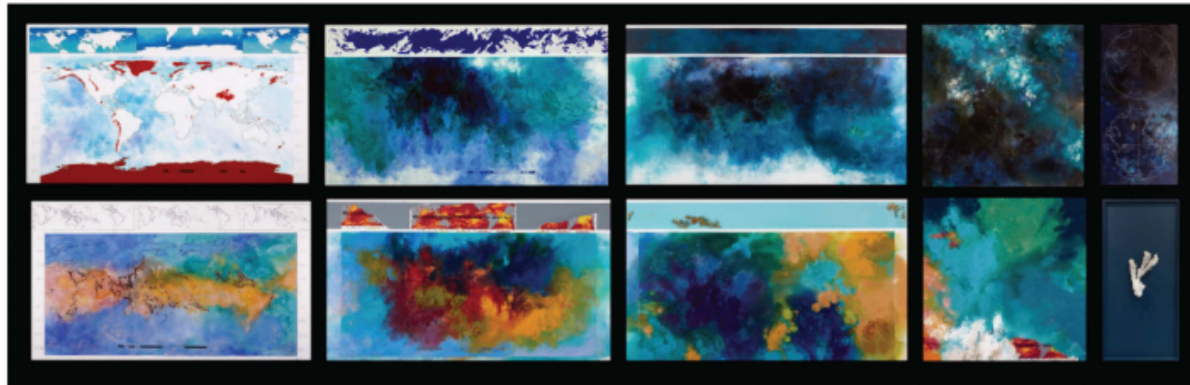
WM: What data and visual references are present in your work, particularly the pieces on display in Bearing Witness?

DB: My gateway to understanding is visual—I love maps.

The news in 2020 during the pandemic was constant—growing COVID deaths, heatwaves in Europe, and fires in Australia. All of this fed into *Summer Heat*. I transposed the lurid heat maps, iconic images of animals racing through fire, and the data itself into a multi-paneled painting.

I believe in beauty; my challenge is to make good paintings with purpose. Integrating the Keeling Curve—which measures the rise in temperature—needed to be both a formal element and a factual one. *Glacier Map 1* and *Reef Map 1* are part of my 56-foot-long *World Map Series*, which articulates glacial melt issues and coral reef degradation. The top provides reference information found or alluded to, while the main area includes an obscured map of the world, with the equator and a distance scale along the bottom—like those old paper maps that I love

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world map series, all grid

WM: Art has the power to make scientific research more accessible and can help spark curiosity about climate change. How do you see your work bridging the gap between data and public engagement?

DB: Absolutely—actually, *Summer Heat* was used to prove just that in a controlled study published in *Nature Magazine* in 2023. The fact that my work could serve as a bridge between the emergency and the public is what I'm most concerned with.

As a result, public programming is another integral part of my process. My exhibitions include panels and walk-throughs, where I integrate information about climate change, hoping that it will reach people and inspire them to take action.

My most successful public engagement was at American University in 2021, where *SEEING CLIMATE CHANGE* was on view for the entire semester. Before that, I met with faculty across disciplines and even the dean, collaborating on a three-day symposium focused on how the arts can serve as an essential tool for communicating climate issues to the public. National thought leaders and university faculty participated in public panels that took place both in-person and online. Bill McKibben was one of the keynote speakers, too. It was so gratifying.

Bearing Witness will be on view until March 8, 2025.