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Philly Artists: Diane Burko's Lifetime Achievement

Posted by Matt Cantor

Injecting politics into art poses a variety of challenges: How does she make her message clear? And will an audience hear that message? Philadelphia artist Diane Burko — who will take home a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Women's Caucus for Art this weekend — can answer both these questions.

Burko's work is largely in landscapes, both painted and photographed. "Landscape captivated me because I came from a city," she says. "I fell in love with large open spaces. They allow you to make anything you want out of them." Her latest project uses the form to make a resounding point about the environment. It began a few years ago when a curator asked about one of her 1976 works depicting snow in the French Alps. How, she wondered, had the landscape changed over 30 years? Thinking and reading more about global warming, the artist ultimately felt she could no longer paint landscape without confronting the issue. Thus, *The Politics of Snow* was born. A series of diptychs, the work reveals our changing landscape by comparing past and present. To get her message across, Burko simply stayed "true to myself" by working within her chosen form. The works "seduce the viewer to look at the landscape" — and he/she can't miss how quickly it's changed.



As for an audience, Burko has been heard, loud and clear: She'll receive her award this Saturday in New York. The Women's Caucus for Art, founded in 1972, is a national organization dedicated to building community and advancing equality in the art world. Its Lifetime Achievement prize, which recognizes a range of arts professions, was first awarded in 1979 in the Oval Office. This year, Burko will be one of six recipients in a ceremony at the American Folk Art Museum.

Burko's not just being recognized for her work: She's been instrumental in advancing women in the arts. As a pioneer of the women's art movement in the 1970s, "I was there from the beginning," she says. She helped found the WCA, and organized a landmark celebration of women artists in Philadelphia, called *Focus: Philadelphia Focuses on Women in the Visual Arts*. The 1974 event grabbed national attention as, over the course of a month, city institutions from PAFA to the Civic Center focused on women's art.

In the 1970s, when Burko's career began, there were no women on the board of the prestigious College Art Association, now a century old. Today, she chairs its Committee on Women in the Arts. Official recognition of her achievements, the WCA says, is long overdue.

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