

Molten Energy

Diane Burko's fascination with lava informs her fluid paintings



Diane Burko (above right) depicts a calm volcanic landscape in *At Viti, Myvatn A, B, C*, top; and a fiery one in *Palami Pali (October Flight, 2000)*, bottom.

Landscape painter Diane Burko's passion for volcanoes has taken her from Alaska's Aleutian Range to Hawaii's Kilauea and Haleakala, and the Aeolian Islands of Stromboli and Vulcano. "That Burko equates the flow of lava with the flow of paint is powerfully clear," wrote art critic Carter Batt-cliff in praise of Burko's "Volcano Series" of oil paintings exhibited at the Locks Gallery in Philadelphia in 2001.

Tricia Vita caught up with Burko in her Philadelphia studio, where the globe-trotting artist was sifting through more than 1,500 slides from a three-week exploration of Iceland, one of the world's most active volcanic islands. Her Iceland paintings will be displayed later this year at the Locks Gallery (tel. 215-629-1000, www.locksgallery.com).

TV: How did you become a lava-lover?

DB: I first got interested watching Arenal in Costa Rica because that landscape was alive right before my eyes. Then I went to Alaska, where I hired a seaplane and flew all day over volcanoes buried in snow. That took me back to earlier times, when I used to paint the Himalayas. It all started connecting. The idea that volcanoes represented the origins of the world began to fascinate me.

TV: What kind of research went into planning your itineraries?

DB: I started by reading books about geology and tectonic-plate theory, a great book by volcanologist Haraldur Sigurdsson, called *Melting the Earth* – even Susan Sontag's *The Volcano Lover*. A trip to Alaska's Aleutian Range led me to follow the Ring of Fire down to Hawaii's hot spot under the Big Island. I started making paintings from slides taken from the Hawaiian Volcano Observatory. A grant from The Leeway Foundation in 2000 was the key to being able to afford those trips and hire the pilots who work with scientists and volcanologists.

I have felt the heat of Kilauea while hanging out of the helicopter window and shooting slides; I've watched lava fireworks on the top of Stromboli after an arduous three-hour climb; and I have almost slipped into sulfurous quicksand while climbing around Krafla's Viti crater in northern Iceland.

TV: How has climbing to the rim of volcanoes and hiking over lava fields informed your studio work?

DB: It has provided me with the actual feel of the contour, surface, and texture. I'm not a "super-real" painter just working from a photograph; the photograph serves as the record of my experience of smelling and feeling the lava. And then I also bring my memory to the work. My painting has always been about the physicality of paint, not just about paint as a tool to represent. These kinds of paintings allow for that flow and movement.

TV: What sights can we expect to see in your paintings of Iceland?

DB: What I've discovered in Iceland is an incredible and varied landscape. It's a country about volcanoes, but there were unexpected bonuses: the geysers, glacial lakes with icebergs, and the colossal waterfalls. Because of all the glaciers melting and moving, throughout the country you have incredible falls along the roads or buried deep between giant rock formations. I saw about eight. Because I've never painted a waterfall, I'm doing that right now. ♦