

Zaria L. Forman '05

The Creative Thought Matters Award of Distinction



“Impeccably naturalistic” may be the best way to describe Zaria Forman’s drawings of remote landscapes and environmentally sensitive locations. Using her fingers and palms to render marks in soft pastels on paper, she creates large-scale images of glistening icebergs, turbulent arctic waters and crashing tropical waves so stunningly realistic that they are easily mistaken for photographs.

But Zaria’s goal is far more than producing beautiful artwork. A dedicated environmental activist, she seeks to educate viewers about the urgency of climate change. “I want people to come away determined to save these essential and fragile corners of the natural world.”

Traveling to far-flung corners of the globe, Zaria takes photos and creates sketches, working from these and her memory in her studio. She led an Arctic art expedition up the northwest coast of Greenland that retraced the 1869 journey of American painter William Bradford. Following the meltwater from the Arctic to the equator, she later journeyed to the Maldives, an archipelago southwest of India that is the world’s lowest-lying country, predicted to be entirely under water within this century. In 2015, she delivered a TEDTalk after touring Antarctica as artist-in-residence aboard the National Geographic Explorer. More recently, Zaria flew with NASA’s operation IceBridge over Antarctica and the Arctic.

As a child, she watched her photographer mother, Rena Bass Forman, capture images of remote landscapes. But Zaria did not come to Skidmore intending to major in art or pursue it professionally. She saw herself as a theater major, working in a few art courses along the way. Among them, she recalls, was an “unforgettable” drawing class with John Moore. “His teaching methods were brilliant. He challenged us to draw with our feet. Once, we spent a week analyzing the details of a complex still life, only to have him announce, ‘Now draw it upside down.’” Other art faculty members invited her to craft her own course of study. By the end of her sophomore year, Zaria was an art major. She spent her junior year studying at Studio Art Centers International in Florence, Italy.

After graduation, she began focusing on pastel landscapes and contemplating the crucial role artists can play in communicating climate change. Zaria dedicated her career to translating scientific data into a medium that people can experience on a deeper, visceral level.

“My drawings explore moments of transition, turbulence and tranquility in the landscape, allowing viewers to emotionally connect with a place they may never visit. I choose to convey the beauty, as opposed to the devastation, of threatened places. If people can experience the sublimity of these landscapes, they may be inspired to protect and preserve them.”

Zaria believes that emotion is the most powerful trigger to action. Art is the tool she uses to initiate that process, and people from all walks of life and corners of the globe have taken notice.

A series of Zaria’s drawings served as the set design for the classic ballet *Giselle*, which premiered in 2012 at the Grand Theatre in Geneva, Switzerland. Ten of her drawings became the backdrop for the Netflix series *House of Cards*. Zaria has been a guest speaker at Amazon and Google headquarters and NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center. She’s presented at the United Nations and Harvard University’s Advanced Leadership Initiative and participated in solo and group exhibitions across the country and internationally. Zaria and her work have also been featured across worldwide media, including *The New York Times*, *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian Magazine* and *BBC News*.

She is represented by Winston Wächter Fine Art in New York City and Seattle, and the limited series prints of her work sell out quickly. The Brooklyn-based artist and husband Jared recently moved to upstate New York, where she also works.