

JOURNEY THROUGH LIGHT, TIME AND SPACE

By [Rita Cipalla](#) | January 30, 2024

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Seattle artist Iole Alessandrini checks her camera settings during a two-week photographic and scientific journey to the North Pole (Photo: Rich Pell)

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To say that **Iole Alessandrini** would travel to the ends of the Earth to capture images of light, time and space is no exaggeration.

In fact, the Seattle artist spent two weeks this past October in the **Arctic Circle**, traveling with an international group of 30 artists aboard a sailing ship in the Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, just 10 degrees of latitude below the North Pole. Although it is one of the world's northernmost inhabited areas, the region has more polar bears (3,000) than residents (2,700).

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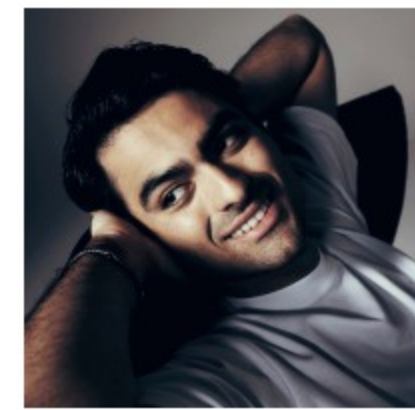
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Inside an abandoned research station at Kinniva, artist Iole Alessandrini gets ready to capture another photograph (Photo: Daniela Naomi Molnar)

Alessandrini specializes in a photographic technique she invented called **laser plane photography**. This technique captures a phenomenon produced by light that retains images of objects or people long after they have moved through the laser plane. “My work suggests that humans leave an intangible mark on the environment, evoking memories, emotions, and energies that linger even after they have physically left the space,” she explained.

Alessandrini’s Arctic journey was part of a two-week residency and expedition made possible by the nonprofit organization, **The Arctic Circle**, with support from optical engineer and colleague **Ed Mannery** and about 150 Kickstarter supporters. Navigating extreme temperatures to experience the Arctic’s pristine environment first-hand, Alessandrini was driven by her lifelong interest in sustainable environments coupled with her cutting-edge work in laser photography. It would be the first time she would create her laser art in a natural setting, rather than an urban one.

The logistics were daunting. “Going to the Arctic is like going to the moon,” said Alessandrini. “I had special clothing, boots, and gloves. I was pretty well-equipped for temperatures that were 7 or 9 degrees below zero Celsius until I had to remove my gloves to set up the camera or tripod, adjust the lasers, or replace the batteries. That was not fun.”

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Above: a ghostly image remains after a fellow artist passes through a laser plane, suggesting that human actions can leave a mark on the environment long after the space is vacated (Photo: Iole Alessandrini)

The expedition traveled aboard a traditionally rigged barquentine, a specially outfitted sailboat equipped with workspace, common areas, and ample room for privacy and creativity. “The cabins were comfortable, and we had everything we needed on board,” said Alessandrini. “There was ample water for showers and baths, and we had a chef who prepared our meals.”

Twice a day, the artists went ashore in smaller Zodiac vessels, accompanied by four armed guides who kept a sharp lookout for polar bears. The group saw many polar bear footprints in the snow but never actually saw one during the expedition.

Although Alessandrini expected to see beautiful scenery, she was unprepared for what she found. “It was probably the most beautiful place I’ve ever been in terms of its natural environment,” she said. “It made me realize that nature can create amazing ice sculptures that are abstract and expressive all on its own, without the need for humans. But even though the region looks pristine and uncontaminated, when you factor in climate change and human-caused pollution – for example, high levels of PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) in the water that affect not only fish and animals but can make their way into humans through the food chain – you realize there is a stark contrast between what appears to be pristine and what actually is.”



Seattle artist Iole Alessandrini spent two weeks in October on this sailing vessel in the Arctic where she used laser plane photography to call attention to climate change (Photo: Iole Alessandrini)

Alessandrini is grateful for the opportunity to experience the Arctic first-hand – an experience that could never be duplicated through books or videos. “The reality of that environment takes you by surprise,” she said. “It resets your expectations. For example, the color blue in the North Pole is so intense, it’s palpable. I felt as though I could cut it with a knife. I’ve never seen such a pure vibrant blue. I kept checking my camera settings to make sure they were accurate.”

For years, Alessandrini has explored the intersection of art and science. She began experimenting with light as an artistic medium in the late 1990s, creating large installations that combine custom-built lasers, light-sensitive sensors, sound, and other equipment to expand our perception of the world. With the Arctic project, she has moved from urban settings to natural ones. “During the expedition, my goal was to capture the profound connection between individuals and their surroundings,” Alessandrini explained. “The laser photographs help show that our impact on something as fragile as the Arctic has a lasting effect beyond the immediate moment and space. I hope my work sparks conversations that transcend political differences and helps foster shared responsibility toward our environment.”

Born in Abruzzo, Alessandrini moved to Rome when she was young. In 1994, she relocated to Seattle to attend the University of Washington, where she earned a second master’s degree in architecture (the first was from Sapienza University in Rome). She’s been a Seattle resident ever since. She has had solo and group exhibitions coast-to-coast from Seattle to New York, Tacoma to Miami, and her work has been exhibited in galleries and museums in many cities in Italy. She also teaches at the University of Washington and at Bellevue College.

Alessandrini has fully embraced the shift to exploring light in a natural environment. “My work in the Arctic is in response to climate change and aligns with my interest in sustainable environments,” she said. “I want to use my art to call attention to a place that seems so far away yet plays a critical role in the overall well-being of our planet.”

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