Jonathan Marquis draws Vulture Glacier in Glacier National Park. "Every time I put a pencil to paper, it's always a discovery. That's my style. I don't know what I'm doing, let me try," said Marquis. PHOTO BY RICHARD FORBES

WITNESS

Jonathan Marquis draws connection between Montana's glacial and human communities

BY RICHARD FORBES

Jonathan Marquis puts pencil to paper, shaping the glacier as it claws the mountain before us. Lost in quiet exchange, he doesn't seem to notice the bellowing grizzlies 1,000 feet away, their roars reverberating throughout the basin. The Vulture Glacier, wrinkled with melt lines and patterned blue ice, is perched opposite him above the lake-lined valley it carved long ago. Marquis sits cross-legged on the rocks, his body hunched, embedding himself in the landscape. The glacier is a lifeworld and Marquis is bearing witness.

Over the last nine years, as part of a lifelong journey to see and share how climate change is affecting his chosen community, Marquis has visited and drawn nearly 50 of Montana's glaciers. By the end of summer 2022, the artist only had seven left to visit.

When Marquis talks about his drawing project, people always tell him he better hurry up, because he doesn't have long. Indeed, temperatures in Montana and the Intermountain West are rising faster than the global average. These rising temperatures, coupled with decreasing snowfall, are melting glaciers ever more quickly. For years now, glaciologists, climate activists and journalists have tied glaciers to the climate movement, using stories of the glaciers' degradation as an emotional catalyst to spur people into action. But that's only a small part of the story of glaciers. Marquis believes a singular narrative centered on loss does glaciers and the animal, plant and human communities that surround them an immense disservice, and may imply that there's almost no hope left.

Here's Marquis' take: What if, instead of scaring people into addressing our fraught relationship with the planet, he used his art to show what the glaciers look like, right now? What if his drawings could show that glaciers aren't chunks of ice, they're beings, and therefore members of our global community of humans, plants, animals and elements, each worthy of life? By offering a different way to imagine glaciers—as their own rich lifeworlds in need of caretaking— Marquis believes he can be part of a broad network of people inspiring a healthier relationship with our world.

Marquis never meant to become a landscape artist. Study-

>>

After sneaking past a pair of grizzlies in Glacier National Park, Marquis leaps over a gap on the way back to camp. PHOTO BY RICHARD FORBES

ing at Ball State, and later at the University of Montana, he became a process artist, subscribing to an artistic movement in which the process of making art is as important as the final product. At that time, he was exploring pop art, abstract expressionism and collage. He was also pursuing his own mindfulness practice, spending days wandering around the mountains near Missoula, slowing down and drawing whatever he saw. Marquis sought a long-term project in which to lose himself.

In 2013, Marquis attended a presentation by Doug Peacock, a writer and conservationist whom he'd long admired. During the Q&A, Marquis asked Peacock what a young artist could do to continue the conservationist's work. "Bear witness to your own backyard," Peacock said.

At first, Marquis wasn't sure what exactly he should bear witness to, but at the time, glacial melt in Glacier National Park was all over the news. With some research, he learned there were at least as many glaciers in Montana outside the national park as inside, some only 30 miles from home. He remembers thinking, "Holy shit, there's a fuckton of wilderness glaciers in Montana, and no one's talking about those. What's going on in there?" Marquis and his friends had spent more than a decade mountaineering throughout the state and he knew he had the skills to at least get started. He figured the project would take him six or seven years at most.

Nine years later in early June of 2022, I met Marquis for a beer in Missoula. He's thin and angular with a cockeyed smile. His eyes are expressive, and when he's thinking hard—which is often—he squints. Even then his eyes are always twinkling with a joke, making him seem younger than his 41 years.

Marquis had just arrived in Missoula from Tucson, where he lives most of the year teaching art at the University of Arizona and a local community college. When the spring semester ends, he drives to Montana for the summer. I'd learned about his project a few months earlier, and after an hour talking mountains, I mustered up the courage to ask if I could visit glaciers with him.

He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "What story are you trying to tell about glaciers?"

I wasn't sure how to answer, so I said what I knew: I wanted to tell stories about the relationship between people and glaciers and see what I found. That was good enough for him.

It is extremely difficult to reach most glaciers in Montana. Few have trails and most are deep in the backcountry, plastered to protective cliffs and guarded by miles of dense vegetation and scree. While the West is full of peakbaggers chasing summits, few other than scientists set their sights on glaciers, and even they rarely have the funding, time or skillset to visit the most remote glaciers.

Visiting all the glaciers in Montana is a bold goal, one I can find no record of anyone achieving. To pull it off, you need to be a few things: absurdly stubborn; comfortable enough in the backcountry to know you can handle whatever you find; and willing to go in blind, as Montana is famous for its tightlipped outdoors community. In California and Colorado, there are endless forums devoted to unraveling the mountains. In Montana, as soon as you leave the beaten path, you're on your own. Big adventures require hours poring over maps and building trust with the small communities who know how the landscape fits together. Even when

I once asked Marquis to describe a glacier for someone who'd never seen one. He said watching a glacier as it tears the land is raw, everything around it upturned and fresh. Glaciers are so present, he said. It's impossible to look away. They are sublime, wondrous, frightening, rugged, exhilarating.

you think you understand the terrain, you'll never know what conditions you'll find. Each trip is founded in faith, tenuous tips and the unknown.

In early August, we got a chance at our first glacier together. Forty miles and three days into the trailless depths of Glacier National Park, we found ourselves at Vulture Glacier. Vulture was the third of five glaciers we'd hoped to visit this trip, but the terrain was rougher than we'd expected and we realized we might only have a chance at one more. Marquis started a few drawings and packed them up to finish later in the studio.

I lagged as we pressed toward the next glacier, careful not to disturb a grizzly sow and her cub foraging for larvae, wrestling and bellowing at one another. Only a few years earlier, one of Marquis' friends had been attacked by a grizzly a few miles away. To give them space, we found a new route creeping across a steep snowfield and slogging our way up fields of loose scree. At every step, the park's infamous rotten rock crumbled underfoot and sloughed down the mountain.

From the summit, we could see at least seven glaciers, one of which Marquis hadn't yet visited. The day was beginning to fade, so Marquis took photos to draw from later. We skidded headlong down the loose rock back to the basin and the squabbling grizzlies.

We tiptoed past them, shielded by a rock rib, holding our breath, before safely emerging into a different valley. As the sun set, we walked by glacially-carved slabs and fields of wildflowers to camp. The next day we arrived back at the car with four glaciers, 60 miles and 20,000 feet of elevation gain behind us.

Glaciers are defined as masses of ice flowing downhill under their own weight. If the ice stops moving, it's no longer a glacier. But no one knows how much ice is necessary to move downhill, and it can be hard to tell via satellite if ice is moving. For purposes of study, Montana glaciologists have adopted a standard: if by the end of summer the ice is larger than 25 acres, it's a glacier. If it's smaller, it's a permanent snowfield. Glacier sizes are reassessed every five to 10 years.

But Marquis isn't preoccupied with these glacial classifications and instead works from a list of Montana glaciers he compiled in 2014. He's much more concerned with how the glacier interacts with the landscape around it; how it shapes the earth in its path and feeds the communities below it with fresh, cool water.

I once asked Marquis to describe a glacier for someone who'd never seen one. He said watching a glacier as it

>>

Top Left: Red Eagle Glacier drawn by Jonathan Marquis. 2022. Red Eagle Glacier is no longer large enough to be called a glacier.
Bottom Left: Siyeh Glacier drawn by Jonathan Marquis. 2018.
Right: Beartooth Glacier drawn by Jonathan Marquis. 2021.

Top: Marquis draws Whitecrow Glacier. "If we can imagine a glacier as a rich life world that's in need of caretaking, we can shape the world to be more accommodating to glaciers and all other living creatures that call this place home," Marquis said. PHOTO BY RICHARD FORBES

Bottom: Marquis takes in the views near camp. "I'm so inspired by these places that I have to make something about them, being silent isn't an option," Marquis said. PHOTO BY RICHARD FORBES

tears the land is raw, everything around it upturned and fresh. Glaciers are so present, he said. It's impossible to look away. They are sublime, wondrous, frightening, rugged, exhilarating.

After nine years of seeking glaciers, Marquis' life has become its own cyclical piece of process art. When the school year ends, he drives from Tucson to Missoula to stay with his friend Ryan, whom he's known for 21 years. Marquis adventures with Ryan near town while waiting for the winter snow to melt, revealing the glaciers. For the rest of the summer he stays with another friend just outside Glacier National Park, visiting glaciers until it's time to head south. He spends his fall and winter teaching art, finishing the previous season's drawings and preparing for the next. After years of research, he knows roughly how to reach each glacier, but before each season, he calls friends for advice and asks who might be crazy enough to join the next set of trips. Every step of his process involves his community.

Each of his drawings is a process in and of itself. As Marquis hikes, he immerses himself in the land, breathing it in until he reaches a glacier. Then he slows down: What is it like here? Is it raining? How does he feel? If everything allows, he pulls paper and pencils out of a Ziploc bag and looks to the glacier. In that moment of connection, he and the glacier begin to collaborate. Marquis bears witness, just as Peacock instructed him to do years ago, his attention flicking between his paper and the snow, drawing as fast as he can take in new details. He makes a few drawings before packing up and moving on. Later he will finish the drawings in Tucson aided by photographs. A single drawing can take up to 40 hours.

The reality of climate change can feel heavy—a 2020 survey by the American Psychological Association found that two-thirds of respondents felt at least some "eco-anxiety," and a quarter of them said they felt it a lot. Perhaps the premise of Marquis' project may feel depressing, but not to him. In fact, he spends very little time thinking about what might happen if these places disappear. He believes preemptive grief distracts from the real work to be done

Marquis and Colin Sibbernsen cross a meadow beneath Two Oceans Glacier. PHOTO BY RICHARD FORBES

now: to know and protect these places.

Marquis accepts that glaciers have always and will always be changing. He chooses to spend his time here by building a relationship with the world, even as it changes, and through this process, he finds space for both grief and joy.

A week after visiting the Vulture Glacier, we're in the northeast corner of Glacier National Park, seeking Miche Wabun Glacier. On our way to the valley where the glacier lives, we push through thickets and ford a river five times. The water is numbingly cold, fed by the glacier we cannot yet see.

Black clouds gather in the upper reaches of the valley. After hours spent climbing a ridge, the wind begins to whip us with raindrops. From the ridgetop, we can see the glacier more than 3 miles away. The sun is going down. We will not make it. The decision to turn back is easy.

We linger on the ridgeline for 30 minutes, taking photos and spending time with the glacier as close as we're allowed to come. It's too wet for a drawing, the rain sweeping through in gusts. Marquis is bundled up in all his layers. We head down, reaching camp just as the last light leaves.

Marquis only has seven glaciers left to draw. If he wants to, he could finish next summer, and he may. But he doesn't want to finish too quickly. In fact, recently he's been thinking he may decide to leave some glaciers uncontained in a drawing; to disregard the selfish impulse to see everything; to let something live its own life in its own way without human interference.

He also knows he's not going to stop drawing glaciers, even when he's finished with this project. He's going to keep giving back to the glaciers in whatever way he can. This is his life's work. When he's finished with this drawing project, he'd like to have an art show and then keep making more. He tells me he'll keep visiting glaciers until he can no longer walk.

Richard Forbes is a Montana-based outdoor guide and environmental journalist. When he remembers to slow down, he writes poetry and sits next to rivers.