Cold truth

Mark Coreth's ice bears are not just pretty sculptures but carry a powerful environmental message. **Samantha Whitaker** meets the artist to find out more

Far North, floating over 400 fathoms of black Arctic Ocean on a raft of ice, sculptor and ROSL member Mark Coreth searches for a polar bear. Surrounded by ice that shimmers with a "*Doctor Who* vibrating blueness" Mark realises that sculpting a polar bear isn't enough. There is an issue that needs to be communicated. An issue that is critical to the whole Arctic environment.

Mark is a master sculptor of animals in motion. He recently created a 6.5 tonne bronze bull elephant, and regularly holds exhibitions at the Sladmore Contemporary Gallery in London. To create "a really honest exhibition", Mark 'becomes' the creature he is studying. He immerses himself in its environment, watching, listening and learning from local guides, with no expectations, no preconceptions, just open eyes.

Travelling with Inuit guides across the Arctic near Baffin Island in November 2007, he found that the consequences of global warming became "stonkingly real". The sea-ice – where the Inuit live and hunt – is disappearing. And while scientists admit that there is natural cyclical warming of the planet, a great part of global warming cannot be accounted for by natural causes, and that is the influence of humans. "It's like a pendulum", says Mark, "and we have put a great lump of lead on it so that now it's swinging harder and faster than it would naturally."

Mark realised that he was no longer just sculpting a polar bear, but a serious issue. And as he witnessed the commanding power of the Arctic ice, it became evident that bronze alone wasn't enough, that ice must play a fundamental role. And so the idea was born: a bronze polar bear skeleton encased in a body of solid ice, which would eventually melt, leaving a skeleton, a pool of water and a powerful environmental message.

Many of us would not understand the complicated science behind climate change and the melting of the Arctic ice, but Mark's ice bear gets the message across in a simple piece of sculpture that can be understood by all. Everyone who touches the bear can feel the ice melting beneath their hand: the human contribution to climate change. A flat hand left for a long time causes significant damage, but if you touch it with the tip of a finger for only a second, the impact is minimal. As the skeleton emerges, the bronze conducts the heat and melts the bear from the inside, just as the Arctic Ocean does as the sun warms it. And as the majestic bear thaws into a fearsome skeleton, the effect is frightening. Just as it is frightening that even the scientists don't really know what will happen when the Arctic ice melts.

The first ice bear in Copenhagen became the art icon of the United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP15), and media from all over the world used it as their backdrop when reporting on the talks. As the bear melted, Mark and his team returned to London, where, on 11 December at 5.30am, the second bronze polar bear skeleton encased in ice was delivered to Trafalgar Square. During the morning, Mark, with Duncan and Jamie Hamilton, furiously chipped away, and by midday the second ice bear was complete.

For the next fortnight, people became 'sculptors' themselves as they touched the ice. For many children, when they touched it for the first time, the effect was like an electric shock, which they will hopefully remember, even if they don't fully understand the message. "One couple had been dragged down to London from Blackpool by their children!" said Mark. And so the message spreads.

An ice bear will very soon travel across Canada, hopefully as far as Vancouver, to the Winter Olympics in February. It will then go to Washington for Earth Day, to Denver, and then to New York. The London skeleton will go to Sydney in August, and then hopefully to Hong Kong and China. "Everywhere you do it, it will behave differently," says Mark, "but its message is the same."

Mark asks that everyone does whatever they can – from putting pressure on the scientists and politicians to take the big but necessary steps, to simply switching off the light as you leave a room. Some people can do more than others, but if we all work together to reduce the weight and calm the pendulum, then nature might be able to regain its balance.

Visit www.icebearproject.org to find out more.



© Samantha Whitaker

BARE BONES: The sculpture in Trafalgar Square on day one (below) and day eleven (above)


© Brian Skilton