



OHAN BREIDING

Belly of a Glacier

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In 2019, Iceland constructed the first memorial to mark the death of its Okjökull glacier. Since then, funerals have been held worldwide to mourn the melting of glacial bodies. Drawing attention to the urgency of climate change, these rituals of collective grief also recognize — in artist Ohan Breiding’s words — “the intimate entanglement of human and environmental well-being.”

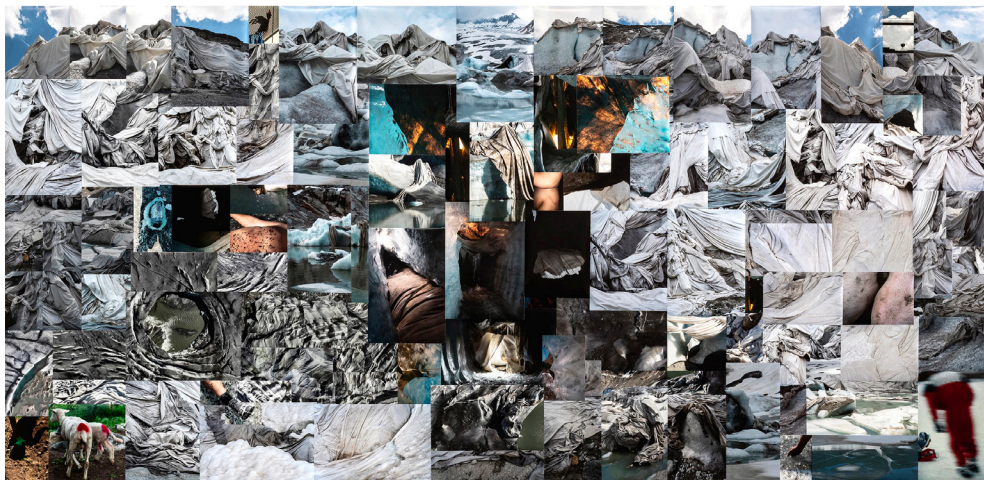
The Rhône Glacier is located near Breiding’s family home in Switzerland, and the artist has witnessed firsthand the dramatic shrinking of the ancient accumulation of snow and ice, which scientists predict will be gone by 2050. It seems unfathomable to think that in the artist’s lifetime, this river of ice which formed thousands of years ago will have disappeared — an unexpected confusion of human and geological time.

A sweeping rumination on the Rhône Glacier, Breiding’s film *Belly of a Glacier* makes its fate less abstract. Staging a funeral, the artist helps us process the reality of the untimely loss. In one scene, rows of empty chairs face a memorial photograph of the glacier. Taken at the turn of the nineteenth century, it stands against a large backdrop printed with a recent

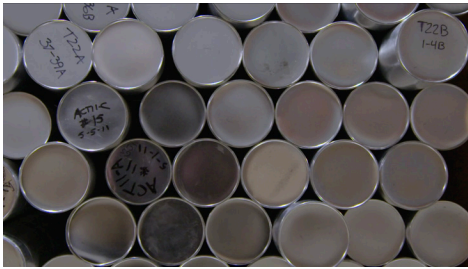
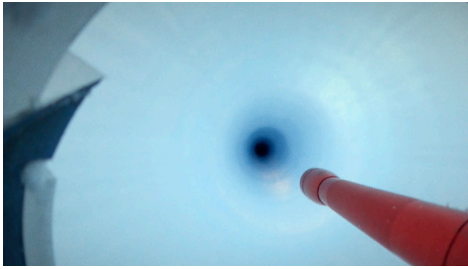
image of the same terrain spilling into a pond of meltwater. In the stark room, a program and a conspicuous, lipstick-stained plastic cup are left behind.

The entirety of Breiding’s poetic documentary functions like a eulogy, telling the story of the glacier via words, images, and sound, as well as its relationship to those who will be left behind to mourn its loss, and those who may never experience its presence. The artist reminds us that the Rhône Glacier is the source of the river that shares its name, and that it provides water to much of Europe. It sustains humans, plants, and animals, alike. Cows, sheep, and mountain goats shown in the film graze the Alpine meadows and drink from the glacier’s puddles. A chorus of cowbells once used to track freely wandering cows now eerily announces the end of a way of life.

For Breiding, the story of the glacier goes back to childhood. A grainy photograph of the artist playing in the pristine snow opens the film. A child’s voice recounts the desire to gift a beautiful snowflake to their mother and the resulting disappointment when it disappears in the heat of their palm. Within



Ohan Breiding, *To dress a wound from the light that shines from it*, 2023.
111 Giclée prints. 128 ½ × 266 inches. Courtesy of the artist and OCHI



Ohan Breiding, *Belly of a Glacier* (film stills), 2024.
HD video, with sound, 32:35 min. Courtesy of the artist and OCHI

this memory — this small moment — lies the momentous truth of our continued impact on the environment — the complex network that both the glacier and we humans are a part of. Just a minute and a half into the film, we witness the birth of a calf, protected in its amniotic sac, which strangely resembles ice. Liquid drips from the mother's womb, recalling the gentle trickle of a melting glacier. Calving is the term for the birthing of a calf and also for a glacier shedding off a section of ice, an event which we both hear and see at the climax of the film. Thunderous sounds accompany images of large chunks of ice breaking off the glacier and sinking into roiling water below, adding to the rising sea. Creation and destruction are intimately connected — both the source of transformation. This visceral scene is saturated

in red, like all of the archival footage in the film. It is the color of warning, of danger. Red is also the color of heat, of fever. Here it is a result of the fading cyan dyes of the filmstock, which, like the glacier itself, is deteriorating.

At the U.S. National Science Foundation Ice Core Facility in Lakewood, Colorado, ancient glacial ice cores are preserved in metal tubes stacked on racks in a storeroom refrigerated at -36°C .¹ Breiding takes us to this archive, the world's largest, where some of Earth's oldest records of time are stored. Ice holds our histories, trapping atmospheric debris, including volcanic ash, greenhouse gasses, carbon, and lead. Breiding documents the visibly varied layers, slowly panning a camera across an ice core — across time. Thin slices of ice samples are studied under microscopes and reveal details of the past in the abstract patterns and surprisingly vibrant colors of the ice crystals. The climate effects of natural disasters, plagues, and war are all registered in the ice. These frozen records are drilled and extracted from glaciers around the globe, then transported in insulated boxes to the facility, whose mission is to preserve the stories buried in this ancient ice for future generations.

Along with the scientific community working to conserve what might someday be the last traces of glaciers like the Rhône, Breiding also includes documentation of the caretakers who attempt to maintain the glacier in its current state. A culture of care has formed to nurse and protect this disappearing behemoth. Every spring, inhabitants of Obergoms, the village that sits below the glacier, drape many kilometers of ice with a geotextile to shield it from rising temperatures. This thermal blanket covers the glacier as if it is a sick patient. Torn in many places, billowing in the wind, or crumpled to the ground, it also fittingly resembles a shroud.

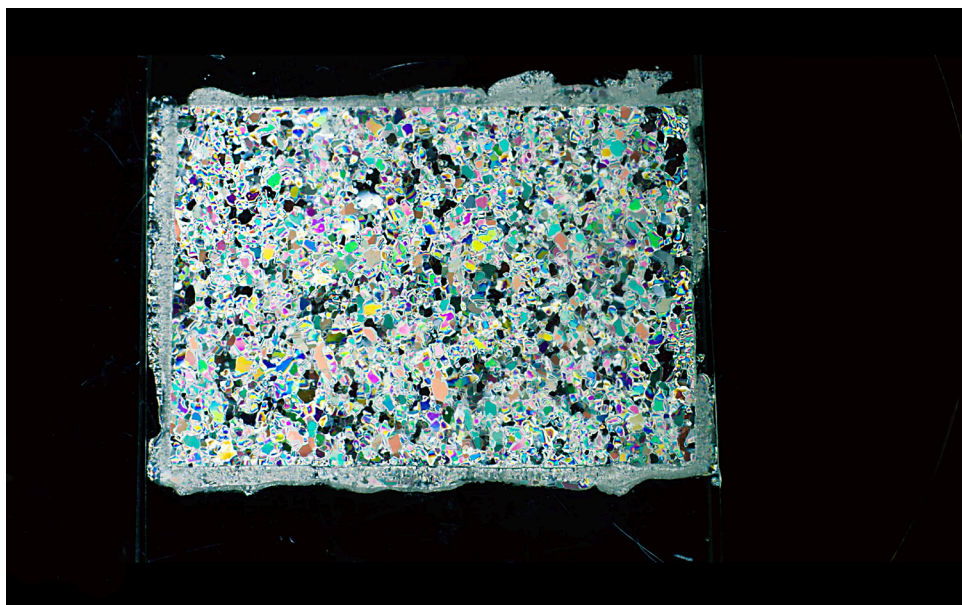
Like death, the future is often difficult to fully comprehend. A recent study suggests that when we think of our future selves, our brain responds like we are thinking about a stranger,

and thus have trouble acting on behalf of the future.² Breiding's moving portrait makes the Rhône Glacier less of a stranger. They bring us closer to their subject with their film and with a monumental montage of over 100 photographs. Each image presents a different view of the glacier, as if the accumulation of details and fragments comes closer to a complete picture. While landscapes are usually photographed horizontally from afar so that viewers can take it in all at once, Breiding imparts the immensity of the landscape but avoids a heroic view. Instead they capture many perspectives and invite us to look closely. Aerial images from a drone are presented alongside close-ups that impart a striking intimacy.³ Details of the ice's texture and the folds of cloth suggest bandaged and wounded bodies, dark orifices, and aged and mottled skin. Interspersed are details of the artist's body: a scarred elbow and knee, leg, and chest with the imprints and dirt from the glacier left on bare skin. Within the patchwork of images, ice, fabric, and body become

indistinguishable, their vulnerabilities shared, like the intertwined limbs of lovers, when the border marking the end of one and the beginning of the other disappears. Toward the center, passages cut into the ice appear intestinal, vaginal, esophageal — inviting us deeper inside the body of the glacier — yet we are already inextricably part of it. Our actions, our histories are trapped in the ice and also now in the water dripping, streaming out from deep inside its belly into an unknown future.

— Susan Cross, Senior Curator, MASS MoCA
with Lisa Dorin, Deputy Director, WCMA

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- 1 Film - which similarly holds our stories — is also stored at cool temperatures to halt its deterioration.
 - 2 Hal Hershfield "The Self Over Time," *Current Opinion in Psychology*, Vol. 26, April 2019.
 - 3 Perhaps not by coincidence, most of the individual prints are oriented vertically, in the manner of a portrait.



Ohan Breiding, *Diamond dust under petrographic lens: 68000-year-old atmosphere trapped in West Antarctic ice (IV)*, 2023. Giclée print on Elegance velvet fine art paper. 14.4 × 9 inches. Courtesy of the artist and OCHI

Ohan Breiding (b. 1981) is a Swiss-American artist who employs a trans-feminist lens to the discussion of ecological care and the systemic failures and violence of the Anthropocene. They received an MFA from California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, CA, and a BA from Scripps College in Claremont, CA. Their work has been exhibited internationally at venues including Museum für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Eupen, Belgium; Frac des Pays de la Loire in Carquefou and Nantes, France; Kunsthaus Zürich in Switzerland; Haus N Athen in Athens, Greece; Dilalica Gallery in Barcelona, Spain; Galería Casa Lú in Mexico City, Mexico; Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center in Buffalo, NY; Oceanside Museum of Art in Oceanside, CA, as a part of Getty PST ART, formerly Pacific Standard Time); Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, LAXART, Human Resources, the Armory Center for the Arts, and OCHI in Los Angeles, CA; American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York; Elga Wimmer Gallery in New York, NY; Southern Exposure and the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco, CA; the Oakland Museum of California in Oakland, CA; and the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, CA. Forthcoming solo exhibitions include A.I.R. Gallery in Brooklyn, NY, in 2025. Breiding is the recipient of numerous awards including a NYSCA award, Switzerland International Film Festival Award; a 2024 Puffin Foundation Grant; a 2023 Flaherty Film Fellowship; a 2023 Hellman Grant; a 2021 TBA21 Ocean Space Fellowship in Venice, Italy; and a 2017 Rema Hort Mann Emerging Artist Grant. Their work has been featured in publications including *Artforum*, *Artillery Magazine*, *Bomb Magazine*, *e-flux*, *The Vassar Review*, *Hyperallergic*, and *Art in America*. *Belly of a Glacier* was published in 2023 by Nico Fontana Press. Based in Brooklyn, Breiding is an Assistant Professor in the Art History and Studio Art department at Williams College in Williamstown, MA. They are represented by OCHI.

Ohan Breiding:
Belly of a Glacier

February 1 – December 2025

Curated by Susan Cross, Senior Curator, MASS MoCA and Lisa Dorin, Deputy Director, WCMA

Ohan Breiding: Belly of a Glacier is co-organized by the Williams College Museum of Art and MASS MoCA.

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Front & back cover: Ohan Breiding, *Belly of a Glacier* (film stills), 2024. 32:35 min. Courtesy of the artist and OCHI

Interior flap: Ohan Breiding, Detail of *Belly of a Glacier (to dress a wound from that shines from it)*, 2025. Courtesy of the artist and OCHI