



Dreams of the High North

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Studio Art Professor Beili Liu delves into Arctic landscape and culture in Norway as the 2021-22 Fulbright Arctic Chair



Studio Art Professor Beili Liu conducts an onsite performance in Svalbard.

by Alicia Dietrich

Photos courtesy of Beili Liu Studio/Blue Way

When Studio Art Professor Beili Liu and her family arrived in Svalbard on April 18, they were told that day's sunset would be the last of the season. At that high north

latitude, the sun never dips below the horizon between mid-April and November. So Liu, her husband and her 8-year-old daughter headed to the shore of Adventfjorden to watch this last sunset, the horizon glowing in golden light with vivid pinks illuminating the snow-covered landscape.

“There are colors in the sky and on mountains I’ve never seen before,” Liu said. “I think that changes how I think about time and space, to where the sense of sunrise and sunset is not as concrete as we imagine. Things are so fleeting and fluid – the dark nights are really magical, especially in contrast with experiencing the ‘midnight sun,’ where light never leaves.”

Liu had arrived in Norway in January – the darkest time of the year, with near-endless night – as a Fulbright Arctic Chair, one of the Fulbright Distinguished Chairs programs, which supports an American scholar with a grant to do research and lecture at any institution of higher education or research in Norway. Liu is the first artist to be awarded the Fulbright Arctic Chair, and she spent four months in Norway to teach and conduct research for her project *Dreams of the High North: Between Survival and Belonging*.

A visual artist, Liu creates site-responsive installations and performances that address themes of migration, cultural memory, labor and social and environmental concerns. For her work in Norway, she conducted research for a sculptural installation and performance series that examine environmental and geopolitical transformations of Arctic Norway through the lens of labor, handcraft and the Arctic Indigenous people’s lived experiences.

Liu spent months reading and researching the region and its history before traveling to Norway. The Fulbright support enabled her to visit the heartland of Sámi culture, Kautokeino, Finnmark, and to engage with the Sámi reindeer herding communities and observe firsthand how these cultures are adapting to climate change.



Liu with Sámi community during the Sámi Easter Festival in Kautokeino, Norway

“It’s extraordinary to experience the Arctic,” Liu said. “The Arctic seems to be this abstract concept. We have this impression of what it looks like. When I was writing about my research plan, I was thinking about the pristine beauty of this landscape that looks like the most pure and wonderful place. Yet it amplifies the biggest concern that we’re facing collectively across the globe. It’s not just an issue of the Arctic, but there, it’s almost like they’re raising the alarm bell ahead of us. But are we listening?”

During her Fulbright Arctic Chair Fellowship period, Liu was hosted by the Academy of Arts, Uit, The Arctic University of Norway in Tromsø, where she served as a guest faculty member and taught undergraduate and graduate students. While she was based in Tromsø, in addition to traveling to the Finnmark region of Kautokeino, Liu conducted research travel to Longyearbyen and Svalbard, and she lectured in Stavanger and Bergen on the southwestern coast. She also spent time in Fiskars, Finland, where she contributed a new installation for the Fiskars Art and Design Biennale, supported by a Fulbright Finland Inter-Country Travel Grant.



Beili Liu installs *Still Winds* in Fiskars, Finland as part of the Fiskars Village Art and Design Biennale in May.

In January 2022, Liu was awarded the \$50,000 Pollock Prize for Creativity, a prestigious visual art award selected through an anonymous nomination process. While she was in Norway, Liu was named a 2022 Andrew Carnegie fellow, which came with \$200,000 to provide time and resources in support of her *Dreams of the High North* project. Liu is the first fellow in the arts selected for an Andrew Carnegie Humanities and Social Science fellowship, and she is only the third UT recipient of the fellowship.

For her Andrew Carnegie fellowship, Liu proposed building on her research in Arctic Norway and expanding it to the larger Arctic region, including Alaska, Greenland and Iceland. “I am called to visit the Arctic, a place that embodies the sorrows and hopes of our shared planet,” she wrote in her proposal. Using the universal language of visual art as a tool for “translation, transmission and

transformation of cultures,” she hopes to raise awareness of the human impact on the environment and the urgency of climate change through her work as an artist.

“Science is absolutely important, and it’s doing such essential work,” Liu said. “But it’s facing the challenge of presenting these books and numbers and findings, and communicating them with people. Perhaps art could come in to be a collaborator – to translate, to transmit and to allow this understanding that comes from the gut – the feeling, not just the knowledge.”

Liu didn’t have a studio space in Norway, so she pivoted her research toward onsite performances and photography and incorporated more video documentation into her practice. She often works with needle and thread in her installation and performance projects as an embodiment of women’s work and gestures of healing and activism. In the Arctic landscape of Norway, she sewed sheets of mulberry paper outside in the snow. In an Instagram photo she posted of the performance, Liu kneels in the snow, the mulberry paper draped around her, with evergreen trees behind her and snow flurries blurring the image. Liu is dressed in heavy winter gear with a fur-lined hood, but her hands are bare and exposed as she pulls the needle and thread in the cold.



Studio Art Professor Beili Liu conducts an onsite performance in Tromsdalen Valley, Tromsø, Norway.

She captured more than 20,000 images and hours of video from her time in Norway and returned to her Austin studio with a variety of found materials, including ocean plastic collected along the Atlantic shorelines, and slag stones, a byproduct of iron smelting from the foundries in Fiskars, Finland. Next up, she'll do a deep dive in her studio as she prepares for future exhibitions at Hå gamle Prestegard in Norway, scheduled for next summer; the Southeastern Center for Contemporary Art; and the Lafayette Museum of Art at the University of Louisiana. The Carnegie Fellowship will support Liu's future research travel to Alaska, Greenland and Iceland, as well as a series of solo and group exhibitions, accompanied by publications, artist lectures and educational events.

Since returning to Austin, Liu has been planning future collaborative projects with various research partners in scientific and educational fields, including the Arctic Sustainability Lab at the Arctic University in Tromsø, Norway, the Spitsbergen Artists Center on the archipelago of Svalbard, and the Arctic Green Actions at the University of Turku in Finland.

"The Andrew Carnegie Fellowship is an extraordinary encouragement, for not only this work that I have embarked on, but also the transformative power of the arts," Liu said. "We, as artists, have something to contribute in the most important conversations of our time. I am excited to join forces with science and the humanities researchers and to offer an artistic perspective as we tackle the pressing concerns that we collectively face, from social and geopolitical issues to the environment. I see art as the universal language that can transcend differences and forge connections. It is an effective tool for cross-cultural exchange, empowering the marginalized voices and building empathy for the well-being of all on Earth."



Liu visited the Longyearbreen Glacier in Svalbard, Norway during her residency as she explored the effects of climate change on local cultures in the Arctic Circle.

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