

What matters

On the sidelines of the annual Bruges ice sculpture festival is *(Ant)Arctic Matters*

EMMA PORTIER DAVIS

There's a feverish excitement at the entrance to the grand marquee outside Bruges station as hundreds of punters wait for the doors to open on this year's ice sculpture show, featuring the lovable Ice Age movie characters. But I'm here to see something with a little less commercial appeal.

Just the other side of the road is a series of non-descript white shipping containers placed in a circle. I'm led there by world-renowned Flemish polar explorer Dixie Dansercoer, who's chattering away eagerly about the show and how he hopes it'll bring an important message about the fragility of our environment.

He's already told the throngs of guests, who have finally been allowed to descend on the adjacent exhibition, to make sure they come and have a peep inside these containers afterwards, adding that it is "not too late" and it is "absolutely up to us to take action – not for ourselves, but for our children" to save the climate.

Meanwhile, he tells me how he was inspired during a contemplative moment on a previous polar expedition to use art as a call to action on climate change. "We never have time in our daily lives to just sit and think. Only then is there maximum creativity. When you see all the pristine snow, it forces you to respect nature and Mother Earth."

But the message on climate change is already out there so much so that people are despairing. "We are constantly bombarded with so much information and worrying prognoses, that people are just giving up," says Dansercoer. It was time to find a new way of reaching out to the masses about the perils we face if we don't take action.

Dansercoer commissioned a series of Flemish artists to make a display in each of the containers to highlight the beauty of the polar regions. "We want to reach the soul of people and touch them in a significant way so they take one image, one

"When you see all the pristine snow, it forces you to respect nature and Mother Earth"



Flemish explorer Dixie Dansercoer takes measurements of snow cover and brings back scientific samples from both the north and south poles



Art installations bring polar cap emergencies to the public's attention in *(Ant)Arctic Matters*

sound, or one line that makes them willing to change and do something."

The exhibition, dubbed *(Ant)Arctic Matters*, will move to Brussels next year for the European Union Green Week before touring Europe for five years, notably Eastern Europe, where, it's safe to say, environmental action has yet to gain popular momentum. Next port of call is Prague where I wonder out loud if Dansercoer will meet hard-line climate sceptic president Vaclav Klaus. "In Belgium, it's much easier," he admits wincingly.

During this tour, Dansercoer and his team, including his wife Julie Brown (also an ardent polar explorer who cheerfully told me it was too

sunny in Belgium and she needed to be back in the snow), will attempt to meet decision makers to persuade them to sign a charter to reduce their environmental footprint. There's one for regular citizens and one for companies.

Dansercoer has already lobbied Bruges mayor Patrick Moenaert to adopt the charter that calls for measures such as a 10% reduction in an organisation's carbon footprint, and sourcing goods and services from environmentally sound suppliers. Individuals are asked to avoid unnecessary emissions, source goods locally, recycle waste and lobby governments.

But what average citizens want to know is: what can I do? "Everyone knows what to do," Dansercoer replies. "You turn off the faucet, you consume less. It's the next step that's needed to use all that readily available information and put it into practice."

After the first visitors arrive, fireworks are set off and the containers I have been itching to explore are finally opened. I enter one and crunch along fake snow to a pair of boots on skis. As I stand by those looking at a tent blowing in the noisy breeze, I suddenly imagine myself as a polar explorer and wonder how many kids will get inspired by such an evocative scene. Another container has beautiful sculptures of Inuit peoples, indicating their precarious existence, and another is in darkness with just echoing sounds of the polar regions.

The next one can only be seen by generating energy: turn a handle at the side of the display and peer through an old-fashioned viewfinder (reminiscent of my youth) to see stunning photographs emerge. My favourite is the penguins, brought into focus with the help of a small visitor who was clearly having the time

of his life with this simple demonstration of sustainable energy. That's before this grownup played on the energy-generating bicycles.

With its serious overtones and stark warnings woven into the text introducing each container, it might not be as accessible as cartoon figures made of ice, but there's plenty to learn for both kids and adults and fun demonstrations with a clear message about how we can lead more environmentally sustainable lives.

The exhibition is open just ahead of negotiations in Copenhagen for a global deal on climate change. Dansercoer said his biggest wish for these crucial talks that are meant to reach an international agreement on cutting global warming gas emissions is that everyone respects it. He noted wryly that with the economic crisis on everyone's minds, "treaties are not top of the list." ♦

Until 3 January

Koning Albert Park
Bruges

→ www.antarcticmatters.org



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