In May and June I traveled to Copenhagen, Greenland, and the UK. The focus of my travels was in Greenland, and my goals for the trip included developing my research practice, better understanding climate change from the perspective of Arctic inhabitants, and exploring the human experience in the remote, Arctic, natural environment. To reach these goals, I camped in a tent outside of small settlements while in Greenland. I collected anecdotes and thoughts from native Greenlandic Inuit on environmental issues, and developed a record of the daily experience by collecting data on physical, psychological, and environmental conditions.

Largely located within the Arctic Circle, with over 85% of the landmass uninhabitable and covered by the Greenland ice cap, Greenland is at the forefront of climate change debates. Climate is changing faster in the Arctic then anywhere else on Earth due to the lack of a major landmass at the North Pole that would otherwise impede warmer ocean currents from reaching the northernmost latitudes. Greenland is one of the most isolated regions on earth – the 15% of habitable land is rocky, treeless, and dotted with small settlements that are linked primarily by boats, helicopters, and small propeller planes. There is no road infrastructure in Greenland because the surface melting of the permafrost in the summer prohibits the building and maintaining of road systems. It is the least densely populated country in the world.

Prior to traveling I expected that isolating myself in a vast, bleak landscape, with 24 hours of daylight and far away from the built environment and routines of home would be an intense and direct experience with nature. I also anticipated that it could cause me to feel anxiety in the form of claustrophobia – feeling trapped away from familiar routines, with few sights and activities to fill the long days, and without means to leave or modify prohibitively costly travel plans.

My journey began in Copenhagen where I learned more about the political and cultural history between Denmark and Greenland, and explored the city’s art culture. Through conversations with Danish and a visit to the Danish National Museum I learned that the political and cultural history that link Denmark and Greenland is quite complicated, and manifests in many of the political and economic hurdles that Greenland faces today.

Following one week in Copenhagen, I flew to Greenland. I landed in Kangerlussuaq, a former U.S. military base and mid-size town in Greenland of about 550 inhabitants located just north of the Arctic Circle. From Kangerlussuaq I hiked to the Russell Glacier and camped at local caribou hunting grounds. I saw arctic fox, arctic hare, caribou, and muskox, and met three research scientists. The first was Wiley Bogren, a native Alaskan and current PhD candidate at the University of Oslo. Wiley is an ice scientist, studying the chemical composition of ice at the Summit research station, located at the highest point on the ice cap, at about 11,000 feet. Research scientists Jeff Kirby and Michael Avery, both PhD candidates in ecology at Penn State, were collecting data on the effects of warming temperatures on caribou calving patterns and insect populations. I shared a campsite with Mike and Jeff for two nights and ventured out with them on one of their daily trips to understand their routine and the context of their research.

While camping in Greenland, I found ample time for reflection and observation. Living in a tent, cooking with few items and utensils, and wearing the same clothing items day after day reduced the number and complexity of daily decisions to the essential minimum. Simple daily routines emerged – collecting snow to keep food items cold, pumping water from spring melt-water streams, stuffing my sleeping bag with the sum of my clothing items to create insulation at nighttime, and walking to travel from one place to another. I also witnessed a dramatic change in seasons. With significant increases in sunlight, snow that had accumulated over months of
winter melted in just a few days, and grey frozen lakes fractured to reveal opaque turquoise bodies of water. Mosquitos appeared in swarms and plant growth developed at a noticeable rate. These environmental indicators made me aware of the extremes of light and dark, and the subsequent rapid shifts in seasons that take place in the Arctic region.

In conversations with Greenlandic Inuit I became aware of how inhospitable the Arctic environment has been to human existence. Up until about 60 years ago the Greenlandic Inuit lifestyle remained largely unchanged. The Inuit lived in stone and turf huts, heated only by stoves fueled by whale blubber through long, harsh, cold, dark winters. They relied on hunting and fishing, but hunting required kayaks, which could only be made of driftwood, a rare find in a treeless environment. Agriculture did not exist and imports were rare and unreliable. While Greenland is now networked with a few European grocery chains and prefab homes are common in settlements, the Inuit face new dangers. Alcoholism and depression are common, especially in larger, modernized settlements. In more remote areas where cultural traditions persist, Greenlandic Inuit are facing higher occurrences of hunting accidents due to thinning sea ice. Two dogsled teams and drivers were lost to the ice this last winter near the town of Aasiat. For one area, in one year, this number is high.

Midway through my travels I spent a week near the town of Ilulissat, situated in Disko Bay at the mouth of the Sermeq Kujalleq ice fjord, a UNESCO World Heritage site. While there, I spent many hours documenting the 50 km long iceberg choked ice fjord. The icebergs that calve from the inland ice cap 50 km west of Disko Bay are caught in the deep fjord due to a narrow stretch of comparatively shallow sea floor located where the fjord opens out into Disko Bay. The icebergs remain packed together until the tide is either high enough or pressure builds up such that the bergs break over the lip of the sea floor. The result is tremendous sights and sounds – a vast craggy desert painted white, and spontaneous, thunderous disruptions in the ice. I focused on documenting the movement of ice; while imperceptible when sitting and watching, the iceberg movements become evident over longer periods of time-elapse photograph documentation. I hiked along the fjord for a few days and stayed in a one room hunter’s hut located on a winter dogsled route, situated on a small inlet opening out onto the fjord.

Ilulissat is also home to one of Greenland’s few art museums, a modest building primarily devoted to works of the Danish painter Emanuel Petersen. The museum hosts visiting artists, and I was fortunate to spend several evenings at the museum with the current artist, Naja Abelsen and several local artists who gather bi-weekly to make work in the museum space together. It was a great opportunity to hear stories from locals and gain a better understanding of the Greenlandic culture and social dynamic. I quickly learned that while the Greenlandic are initially quiet and closed-off to foreigners, when given an opportunity or entry, they are warm, hospitable, and eager to share and ask questions.

My last week in Greenland was spent in Uummannaq. Located in the fjord just north of Disko Bay, Uummannaq is a small island and home to the Uummannaq Children’s Home and Uummannaq Polar Institute. I was a guest at the Uummannaq Polar Institute, and visited with UPI founder and director of the children’s home, Anne Andreasen. Anne and her husband, Ole Jorgen Hammeken, are important figures in Greenland, and host media groups and scientists that come to Uummannaq to study the fjord and nearby calving glaciers. Anne and Ole Jorgen have been involved in a variety of impressive projects, with scientists and artists, the most recent being an independent film by a French filmmaker, titled Inuk. The film is a compelling glimpse of Greenland today.
After my travels in Greenland, I spent ten days in and around London, where I visited several museums, galleries and gardens. The return to a densely populated, built and stimulating urban environment was familiar but not comfortable. Highlights of the time in the UK were visits to some exceptional exhibitions, including Ernesto Neto and Spencer Finch at the Hayward Gallery, the Tate Modern, and an Antony Gormley installation at the White Cube Gallery.

In contrast to my expectations of feeling trapped or uncomfortable in Greenland, the reality was a calm and unburdened travel experience that helped me to develop an acute awareness of my surroundings, and take time for observation and reflection on the space and environment I was in, and how I perceived time during the 35 sunlit days and nights. I have already begun to further explore concepts and perceptions of space, time, environment, and shifting landscapes in my creative work. I give credit to this exceptional travel experience for the raw material and motivation that is moving me forward, and for helping me to more clearly define my creative goals as I work toward my thesis project. Thank you to the School of Art + Design and the Smucker-Wagstaffs for the support that made this trip possible.
Sermeq Kujalleq ice fjord
Ilulissat, Greenland

Boat ride in Disko Bay at midnight.
A single iceberg in Disko Bay – three photos over 24 hours.