



Ice People

by Andrew Schenker

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In *Ice People*, director Anne Aghion locates the banal amidst the beautiful solitude of the Antarctic landscape and finds the beauty that emerges between the banality of the routine tasks of the polar explorers who work there. Following a group of four researchers—two professors and two students—as they dig for ancient fossils beneath the icy terrain, Aghion juxtaposes a series of HD still lifes of the isolating landscape with observational views of the scientists going about their daily lives. Moving from carefully composed images of the explorers framed in extreme long shot against a desolate backdrop, set off against a single rocky outcropping like an iced-over Monument Valley, and impressionistic snowscapes with the group's tents the only dots of color among the overwhelming gray, to more intimate, loosely shot footage of the men and women pounding away at the unbending terrain with pickaxes, *Ice People* alternates smoothly between an isolating sublimity and a workmanlike banality. But even if it's the second mode that principally defines the experience of the modern polar explorer, Aghion still allows plenty of room for a sense of awed discovery as she observes the scientists toiling silently away.

Intercutting interview footage among the purely observational moments, Aghion films one of the men waxing poetic about the curiosity that defines his profession and his need to understand how the world works. Soon after, that scientist makes the film's major discovery (a leaf fossil that may be millions of years old), justifying countless hours of dogged labor. Still, most of the rest of the interview material serves a rather deflationary purpose: that same explorer discussing his own filth or one of the students explaining the tedium of living with the same three people for months on end. There are no profiles of outsized Hezogian personalities or glamorously quixotic pursuits on display in the film, even though Aghion's explorers, like their counterparts in *Encounters at the End of the World*, seem to be seeking something they can't find in the "civilized" world. Instead, *Ice People* offers up four ordinary people carrying out their self-appointed tasks with a stubborn determination. This orientation toward the banal may mean that, despite the always present splendor of the surrounding landscapes, the film can't hope to provide the same satisfactions as a work that prefers to traffic in a romantic exoticism, but it does offer what probably qualifies as a more representative view of the contemporary Antarctic experience.


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Director(s): Anne Aghion. **Cast:** Allan Ashworth, Andrew Podoll, Adam R. Lewis, Kelly Gorz, and Jena Ferrarese. **Distributor:** Milestone Films. **Runtime:** 77 min. **Rating:** NR. **Year:** 2008.

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