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Cold, Hard Science

By Nathan Lee on May 1, 2009

The ice in "Ice People" is instantly compelling: endless white-on-white vistas, ethereal panoramas of cold. Culled from a four-month trip to Antarctica by the filmmaker Anne Aghion, this modest little documentary sets its lens on one of the most majestic and forbidding landscapes on the planet.

The people of "Ice People" take a while longer to come into focus. The movie, which runs a scant 77 minutes but feels four times as long, is so maddeningly slow to develop any sort of narrative shape that you begin to suspect Ms. Aghion of doodling. She is, as it turns out, a canny portraitist, and her patience in divulging the context of her project pays off as the movie sinks something of the feel (brr!) and routine of an Antarctic expedition into your bones.

Her companions are a group of academic geologists sifting through rock in search of fossils, though to what end isn't entirely clear. What's obvious is their tenacious, obsessive joy in work — which, to the outside observer, simply looks like a bunch of grubby people unusually committed to sitting in dirt.

The film's hesitation, lack of rhetorical inflation and commitment to humble observation generate a tough poetry. "Ice People" sticks in the mind.