

Art That Gives Chills

With Ice Sculptures and Vodka Shots, Showing Off a Purely Swedish Export

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The Swedes are justifiably proud of their lingonberry jam, hockey prowess and sleek, reasonably priced furniture. But more than that, they revel in the purity of their water.

Swedish water pride? We're about to be soaking in it.



With "Latitude 66 degrees, 32 North, 50 years," Lillian Ball uses water and light to make a statement about global warming, portraying the predicted shifts of the Arctic ice cap. (Photos By James M. Thresher -- The Washington Post)

In case we weren't willing to take their word for it, Sweden has decided to stake its claim to water fame by schlepping 20 metric tons of the country's finest water product -- Torne River ice -- to its embassy here this week.

This ice, harvested in Lapland and used to construct the city of Jukkasjarvi's famed Icehotel, has inspired a scene in the James Bond film "Die Another Day" and an ad campaign featuring Kate Moss and Naomi Campbell. It is, quite simply, exceptional H₂O.

It mocks the Anacostia; it pities the Potomac.

Ambassador Gunnar Lund touted the pristine blocks of ice that decorated the embassy's interior and grounds at a news conference Tuesday night before the opening of the House of Sweden's spring exhibition, "Water in the Environment." (The Swedes don't actually call their embassy "the Swedish Embassy"; they call it "the House of Sweden," so Americans feel more at home in it. *Hospitality.*)

Also welcoming was the bar, constructed completely of ice, topped with hundreds of glasses made of ice, into which servers poured infused vodka. Guests received linen napkins to prevent frozen fingers, but then, an etiquette dilemma: Leave the empty ice-glasses to melt into puddles on tables throughout the room? Or dump them in the embassy's reflecting pool? Most chose the latter.

"We are throwing a party to celebrate water, if you will, and water in the form it often takes in our country: ice," Lund said.

This is a country where municipalities compete to prove who has the best water each year. When most people think of prestigious Swedish prizes, they think "Nobel." Perhaps they should consider the Stockholm Water Prize, a \$150,000 award that recognizes individuals and organizations for their work with the liquid. (Last month the Americans scored a victory on this front, mercifully, when Stanford University's Perry L. McCarty won

the prize for devising ways to clean up contaminated water. Note to Swedes: With all this clean water, you risk being left behind in the water purification bonanza.)

So how do you celebrate your pure, pure ice? If you're the Swedish government, you commission four artists -- two Swedes, two Americans -- to head to the Arctic in January to carve sculptures that highlight the theme of water and the environment. And these are not artists you'd find chipping away at a swan for a wedding reception. Ingegerd Raman is Sweden's most renowned glass artist, while California-based Yves Behar designs everything from chic cellphone headsets to energy-efficient lighting.

The artists produced frozen sculptures -- on public display starting today until they melt -- of various sizes that are arresting for both their aesthetic appeal and political message.

Lillian Ball, an environmental artist based in New York, created a work titled "Latitude 66 degrees, 32 North, 50 years," in which she projects a shifting, multicolored map of the Arctic showing how its ice cover is projected to shrink over time due to global warming. It resembles an otherworldly hologram buried within a sphere of ice.

The ice underwent an arduous journey to Washington. After it was harvested 125 miles north of the Arctic Circle in the spring of 2006, Icehotel founder and CEO Yngve Bergqvist stored the ice until a month ago, at which point he packed it into a refrigerated truck and sent it to port to be shipped across the Atlantic. The ice made it to Baltimore on March 27, where it was trucked in a chilled container to the House of Sweden.

Minutes before the reception began, Bergqvist emerged from a

back room after finishing his task -- he was responsible for constructing the ice bar -- dressed in a fleece jacket and baseball cap. "I will go now and undress," he said. "It's hard work, with ice, but very fun."

Bergqvist even melted some of the ice, so guests could taste for themselves what they were missing by not living in Sweden.

"If I have only one thing to complain about in Washington," he said, "it's the water. It's not too good."

But Lund, ever the diplomat, saw the water as a unifying force, since the sculptures will ultimately pour into Washington's waterways: "When it melts, it will melt into the Potomac, and so in that way Sweden and America will meet."

Except for Ball's artwork. She's taking her water with her, driving the sculpture's remains to New York for use in liquid form in a Colorado art installation. So Coloradans, too, can experience the pristine glory of Lapland's water.