

# THE PUREVANT LIVING PODCAST: THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

with STEPHANIE KRUBSACK

## EPISODE 1: MICHAEL KIENITZ

Stephanie Krubsack 0:00

Hi, everybody. This is Stephanie Krubsack with the Purevant Living podcast. Today's guest we have Michael Kienitz, photojournalist for over 45 years featured in Life, Time, Newsweek, Audubon, Elle, Rolling Stone, and other major publications worldwide. His work has also been exhibited in museums and galleries in the United States and Europe. Thank you so much for being here today.

Michael Kienitz 0:24

It's a pleasure to be here.

Stephanie 0:26

We're excited to get started to learn more about what you do. Tell us a little bit more about your background as a photographer.

Michael 0:34

The way I got started was when I went to school at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. Almost daily there would be protests and I'd read about the protests the next day in the newspaper and I didn't even recognize what I had personally witnessed. So I thought I'm going to start carrying a camera and documenting these sorts of things. I studied political philosophy, so I was already interested in social movements and just political thought. From there, I did 10 years of war photography for news magazines and photo agencies once I graduated from college.

Stephanie 1:14

Oh, wow. Where were you taking those photos?

Michael 1:17

Lebanon, Afghanistan, Northern Ireland, a lot of work in Central America. There were a lot of revolutions going on then. All over the world.

Stephanie 1:30

Is there a certain location that impacted you the most that you witnessed?

Michael 1:35

I'm sorry, what was the word you used? The most something before the most impressed me.

Stephanie 1:39

Impacted you.

Michael 1:40

Oh, impacted me. I'd say it would have to be Afghanistan. It was like going back 500 years. The men ate separately from the women. There were just so many cultural things that seemed so different than our own culture. Not right or wrong. Just different. That was probably the most interesting country I've ever visited.

Stephanie 2:08

I've not been there yet, but we do share Madison in common. We talked earlier about how I was responsible for tearing down some of the old buildings built during war time.

Michael 2:18

Yes, one of the ugliest buildings on campus. Thank you very much for doing that.

Stephanie 2:24

Yes, Union South we're talking about. I know you talked a little bit about your experiences doing photography in Madison and different places overseas. Is there a specific experience that led you to be a photographer?

Michael 2:37

Really those I had mentioned on my way to class in Madison, but all sorts of experiences that I've witnessed. I've been pleased that I had a camera like documenting death squad activity in El Salvador, and now something that impacts everybody in the world, climate change. I think pretty much for the rest of my life, in some way or another, I'll try and work on that. Since not only is everybody impacted, but everybody in the world could probably do something to at least lessen what I think is probably going to be the inevitable end of the Earth because of our lifestyle and how unsustainable it is given what it does to the environment.

Stephanie 3:26

You're capturing that and letting us see that. What do you want people to take away from viewing your work?

Michael 3:34

This particular exhibition, I'd like them to go away with two things. One that Iceland is an unbelievably beautiful and multifaceted country. Then the other aspect is all of this beauty that people will hopefully come and appreciate here at Arts @ Large, I hope they recognize that because of the way we are living that it's rapidly vanishing. Just in 2018, a glaciologist discovered that the melt rate of the glaciers was as great in that year as the previous ten. So things are definitely accelerating.

When I first went there, they had predicted worst-case scenario by the year 2100. In less than 100 years at the time, it was 80 years predicted that there would no longer be glaciers in Iceland and people were very skeptical of that. Now as the models are updated because of the rapid melting, they're seeing that is more realistic than the previous assessment which put it at about 200 years.

Stephanie 5:00

Wow, so it's getting faster.

Michael 5:02

Yeah, dramatically so.

Stephanie 5:06

Your exhibit here at Arts @ Large is showcasing a span of five years.

Michael 5:13

Yes, I started in 2013. The reason I got interested in this was I was walking with a guide one day and we were near the glaciers on our way to them to walk on them. He said, "Wait a minute, let me show you this." He pulled out his iPhone, and he showed me the most beautiful ice cave. It was so stunningly beautiful. And I said, "Wow, where is this? How can we see that?" He said, "It's where we're standing. It was where we are standing right now, two years ago." All that could be seen when I was there were boulders and small rocks. The ice had completely vanished.

Stephanie 5:57

Wow.

Michael 5:58

That motivated me... that this was a very dramatic thing that, by using photography, could be communicated to a lot of people. It was kind of a... What I liked about it was, on the one hand, you're showing this incredible beauty that exists there. On the other hand, virtually none of it, none of what's pictured in this gallery still exists. In this period of time, we're talking about from 2013 to 2018.

Stephanie 6:31

Wow, that's really unfortunate. These photos are beautiful. All these ice formations... they're not there anymore. This is a way to preserve that.

Michael 6:43

One of the reasons I decided to print this stuff on aluminum... It's an archival process and who knows, in 80 years, these photographs will be around but the glaciers probably won't be. So children and the next generations will be able to see what a glacier looked like.

Stephanie 7:06

Oh gosh, like on the extinction list.

Michael 7:10

It's like in our own country Glacier National Park, at some point relatively soon, they'll be changing the name. There's no longer really glaciers there. They're just shadows of themselves, of what once was there.

Stephanie 7:24

Have you done photography there as well?

Michael 7:25

No, but a friend of mine took her children there a couple of summers ago and was telling me just how dramatic the things have melted.

Stephanie 7:34

I've not been there. I've been to Yellowstone, but not to Glacier.

Michael 7:38

I was in Yellowstone chased by a buffalo on my bicycle. I had a lot of fun.

Stephanie 7:43

That doesn't sound fun. But you survived, you're here today. That's good. A buffalo. Is there more to that story? Were you trying to photograph him?

Michael 7:51

No, I was just riding slowly admiring this buffalo and it was near a young buffalo. I guess the road passed a little too close. All of a sudden, a cloud of dust and this thing starts chasing me and I rode pretty fast.

Stephanie 8:10

Oh, gosh. I know you answered this a bit before, but how does your work impact the environment? By bringing awareness to everybody and things like that?

Michael 8:20

First and foremost, it brings awareness and I would like to think the beauty hopefully will help to motivate people too, in their own lives, figure out in some way, both at work and when they're not working, ways they can reduce the carbon footprint and the overall environmental degradation that's going on.

Stephanie 8:47

Are there certain things that you'd recommend for listeners to incorporate into their daily lives to help combat climate change?

Michael 8:52

Yes, look at your website!

Stephanie 8:54

My website?

Michael 8:55

I found it absolutely excellent. It had several great ideas. But so many of these things and one of the reasons why I think that, in the end, we're only going to be able to slow this process down, I think it's inevitable that the planet is just somewhat doomed. Look at the bird life. The insects... they vanished in 30 years almost by 75%. We just can't... there's cycles... there's things that are necessary in the overall food chain like pollination by bees, that's so rapidly declining. The bat population... I remember, as a child, you'd drive 20 or 30 miles and your car, the grill, the front windshield would be covered with insects. Now there's none almost all summer. The same thing with bats; I used to see so many of them flying at night. Now I don't see any because of that white-nose disease.

Stephanie 9:56

Hmm, oh yeah, things like that. I know a rhino is officially on the no longer existing list. I think another type of parrot I saw recently, so it's not good.

Michael 10:07

Yeah, the bird species... there's been a tremendous decrease in those. I read the other day that all the birds are now becoming a little bit smaller in size.

Stephanie 10:20

I did see that as well... really interesting. You mentioned your story about riding a bike being chased by a buffalo. Is that one of your primary means of limiting your carbon footprint?

Michael 10:32

I do ride a bike a lot. I used to actually race bicycles. I got a fat tire bike years ago for the winter.

Stephanie 10:43

I want to try that.

Michael 10:45

I was really impressed with the electric bikes that I used in Iceland to go through one of the national parks last year.

Stephanie 10:53

Which one?

Michael 10:55

Vatnajökull. It's the largest one. It's surrounding the glacier there which takes up, depending on who's doing the measuring, 8-11% of the entire country. It's massive. That's where all of these photographs are from and I got tremendous, because they were really behind the project, support from the park staff to fly my drone and do a lot of other things without permits. The permits were just open once they discovered what I was up to. In lieu of that, I give them these photographs to use in any manner they wish.

Stephanie 11:33

Okay, that's really great. For listeners that are not familiar with Iceland, where on the area of the country is this?

Michael 11:42

This would be the southeast coast. It's interesting. The southeast coast... the land because of the dramatic ice melt, unlike other parts of Iceland where the ocean depth is becoming a factor, here the land itself is rising. So the ocean is actually lower in those areas.

Stephanie 12:03

Interesting. Is that because the ice is melting and it's rising up?

Michael 12:08

Exactly. That's a good illustration of how dramatic and how much. Another thing that's very significant about Iceland is, under those glaciers, are volcanoes. And with less and less ice, the volcanoes scientists believe, will become more active because there won't be that containment of those tons and tons of ice and the cold temperatures.

Stephanie 12:36

Wow, I could just picture that. If the ice melts away, the weight's lifted and, oop, it rises. So they might have cliffs like in Ireland one day on the shoreline. I've only explored the Golden Circle of Iceland, so closer to Reykjavik. In that area that's where the black sand beaches are, correct? The southeast corner?

Michael 12:56

Yeah.

Stephanie 12:56

Okay. These photos are great. Would you mind talking about one of them?

Michael 13:02

Sure. Let's talk about some of them.

Stephanie 13:05

We're heading through the gallery, Arts @ Large. They're beautiful. Some of these are life-size.

Michael 13:09



I think these two over here would be good to start with.

Stephanie 13:13

Okay.

Michael 13:14

The first one here is the end of the glacier. These are pieces of ice that have broken off; they'd be referred to as icebergs. The process of actually breaking off is referred to as calving.

Stephanie 13:32

Calving. That's a new term.

Michael 13:36

This will dramatically change all winter long in color. In the summer, this beautiful blue becomes white because the ice opens up due to the air. That's why I liked going in the winter when you'd see the most dramatic blue color.

Stephanie 13:52

It's like a rock. It's so blue like a quartz. Wow, it's beautiful.

Michael 13:58

To the right here, we see this large mountain face. That's just rock now. That was once glaciated as well. As the glacier retreated from that, there's these very, very deep fissures that have resulted. They haven't allowed anybody to go hiking there now for a couple of years because they're afraid that whole side, the fissures as they get deeper, is just going to collapse onto this existing glacier. They've asked hikers to stay away. Recently, they've discovered that the fissures aren't going as fast as they thought they would into and deeper into that rock face. So they probably will allow hiking to once again happen there. Several movies were produced here.

Stephanie 14:49

Oh, really. Which ones?

Michael 14:50

The Game of Thrones. A lot of scenes were shot in this area. I'd often encounter them when I was going around Iceland doing my photography.

Stephanie 14:59

Very neat! Were you in any of the films?

Michael 15:02

No. Now this is a summer shot. It's taken at 3:40 in the morning...

Stephanie 15:12

It looks quite bright out.

Michael 15:13

...when the sun is rising. Yeah, even with the sun down in the summer, it's still perfectly light. You wouldn't need a flashlight.

Stephanie 15:24

What time of year does that happen again?

Michael 15:26

This would be June, July. All the hotels have very heavy blinds because you'd never be able to sleep because of how light it is. You have that 24-hour sunlight. Now, in the winter, when I like going more than the summer, you have the exact opposite. As I always like to say, I would rise early at 11:30 a.m. in the morning along with the sun.

Stephanie 15:33

Perfect for night owls.

Michael 15:54

Then I'd work all day until the sun set, which is at 3:30 in the afternoon. You basically had four hours to do your work, but the light was absolutely gorgeous because it just sat on the horizon the whole day.

Stephanie 16:10

You didn't have to worry about shadowing with the shifting...

Michael 16:12

Exactly. It was just beautiful, warm light the entire day. Even though it was just four hours of light, it was the most gorgeous light you could ever ask for as a photographer.

Stephanie 16:24

It's perfect. Yeah, this looks like...

Michael 16:26

What we have here is a massive piece of ice. This is calved; it has floated down a very small stream. The big lagoon that it floated down is called Jökulsárlón. There's a thin stream and now, after flowing all the way to the ocean, the waves or the tide have thrown it back up on shore. As massive as this is, it's about the size of a car, I photographed this, as I said, at 3:40 in the morning and by 10:00 a.m., it was gone.

Stephanie 17:00

Because it had melted?

Michael 17:01

Yeah, completely vanished.

Stephanie 17:03

Very interesting. This is at Jökulsárlón beach?

Michael 17:07

Yeah. The Jökulsárlón lagoon was, in the 1700s, an Aspen forest and a farmer's field. Now it's the deepest lake in Iceland because of all the glacial melting.

Stephanie 17:21

Wow, that's crazy. Wow. Yeah. A lot of trees. Aspen?

Michael 17:27

Yeah. We happened to find one in one of the entrances to one of the ice caves and they carbon-dated it to be 4,000 years old.

Stephanie 17:36

Oh my gosh. Wow. You never would have thought that because in Iceland there are not many trees at all.

Michael 17:41

Yeah. They've been completely wiped out largely by the glaciation. It's kind of ironic. They recently purchased a number of trees and, unfortunately, whoever put in the order to plant them all over Iceland didn't realize they were dwarfs. Dwarf trees, so they never grew very much.

Stephanie 18:03

Wow, that's another interesting fact I did not know. Should we move on to another one?

Michael 18:09

Let's talk about a couple of these where we have people actually in the shots.

Stephanie 18:14

I like this one.

Michael 18:15

This is an ice cave. There was only a front and back, so to speak, and we're looking at somebody, one of the guides I went with, ascending inside the cave. While we were in there, there was a massive avalanche outside...

Stephanie 18:36

Oh, wow.

Michael 18:36

...near where he is. Thank goodness, there was a very deep crevice between this ice cave and the rest of the glacier. Although we heard it and the rumble was incredible echoing through this cave...

Stephanie 18:37

Oh, I bet. Were you scared?

Michael 18:52

...it didn't affect us at all because it all went down into that very deep ravine that separated the cave from the rest of the glacier.

Stephanie 19:01

In what year was that?

Michael 19:03

This was just two years ago. Again, that area doesn't exist.

Stephanie 19:08

Really? It's completely gone.

Michael 19:08

Or it's so dramatically different, you'd never recognize it.

Stephanie 19:12

That's too bad. It looks massive and it's gorgeous.

Michael 19:14

It was a stunningly beautiful place to be in.

Stephanie 19:18

Did you have to do a lot of training to learn how to do ice climbing?

Michael 19:21

Yes, I didn't know a thing. I was lucky that, again, there were a lot of people in Iceland, particularly the guides, who were aware of this issue that I was trying to document, so we would trade services. I would give them or produce videos and photographs for them to sell their tours and things. Then they would give me what normally would have cost thousands of dollars to get to these places absolutely free, the trip.

Stephanie 19:52

Nice. That's great.

Michael 19:55

Here's another one where we see just one lone soul standing next to this very, very deep blue canyon.

Stephanie 20:03

Is that you?

Michael 20:05

No, that was another guide I was with. I was at the end of the canyon taking this picture. That's Siggy there. He was excellent. The thing I really enjoyed about him was that he studied glaciology. While we were hiking, he could explain some of the things that we were looking at. He was deeply involved with documenting how glaciers move. Notice this really black pumice color. That's a result of volcanic ash, which either just a few years ago or thousands of years ago, is now embedded in the glacier. When I was first having these printed at a lab in California, they called me and said, "Boy, we really have to do a lot of cleaning up here." I said, "No, no, no, please don't touch it. Leave the file exactly the way they are."

Stephanie 21:02

It doesn't even look real; it looks like a painting. It's just amazing. Yeah, but it's a photograph. It looks like he's standing in a perilous location too, not too far from the edge of the...

Michael 21:14

Yeah, but notice in his right hand, he has his ice axe and you...

Stephanie 21:19

Oh he's holding himself...

Michael 21:20

If he was to slide, you turn around and you just jam that axe and then you won't move an inch because it'll just go deep into the ice and that axe'll protect him. Plus, we used two-and-a-half to three-inch crampons on the ice, so we had a really good grip.

Stephanie 21:38

That's good. Wow. Yes, this one is gorgeous. How tall do you think... is the height of this...?

Michael 21:46

...that lagoon? It's a few hundred feet high.

Stephanie 21:50

Okay. Is this one still there?

Michael 21:54

This one is called the Blue Canyon. Yeah, it's considerably smaller, but I believe it's still there. I'll be going back probably next winter and I'll take a look. That's one of the other things about this work that I've done; I now have benchmarks on all of these places. I'll be going back to do photography for more or less the same place to show people how dramatic the changes have been.

Stephanie 22:21

Yeah, throughout the years. Sounds great. We're going to look at a series now that shows the melt changes.

Michael 22:30

This is the first ice cave I ever visited and probably one of my favorites. It's called the Waterfall Cave. One of the reasons why it's so memorable to me is not only this incredible, gorgeous ice and... by the way, the light comes through from what are called moulins, which are holes in the glacier that go all the way to the top of the glacier.

Stephanie 22:52

It looks like it's glowing.

Michael 22:53

So you get snow and the most gorgeous light and also very abrasive debris, rocks and things. Then in the summer, when the heavy rains come, there's erosion and these rocks etch all of this ice in that really wild way. That's why it looks like that. It's that abrasive debris that etches it primarily in the summer from the heavy rains. This is a series. This would have been taken in January 2016. Just that entire cave, a woman is looking up to that moulin. Then in the very next one, not even a year later, all that was left of that part of the cave is this. The cave itself was 75 to 100 yards long, and the middle of it completely vanished. Then there were just two segments. This would be the south end where we still see the water flowing and a little bit of ice, but not even enough for that woman to be standing in the cave anymore. This ice is so low.

Stephanie 24:01

Throughout the years before the climate has been considerably warmer, what is the average expansion/shrinking of the typical ice cave? Does it always vary or is it...?

Michael 24:12

It always varies and, again, you have so many elements besides just climate change. The primary one being volcanic activity, so you couldn't just give a flat rate. The way a glacier forms is through snowfall and the snowfall becomes compacted if it doesn't melt first. That compacted snow forms the glacier or adds to the existing glacier.

Stephanie 24:41

If there's not enough precipitation, then you don't have that growth in the cold months.



Michael 24:45

More and more in the winter... In fact, just the other day, there's pouring rain instead of snow now, even at high elevations. Moving along, this would be the north end of that. What was once that massive cave, all you can see here is just the arch. That's all that was left there. The water is still flowing through, but there's only an arch. Then the final scene is just the glacial melt after the whole cave had more or less vanished.

Stephanie 25:17

Wow, so all you have is the water.

Michael 25:19

It's actually even more dramatic than that because the actual cave was up here a bit. And it's pretty much rock and a little bit of ice. This would have been what's called a glacial toe. It's a very small extension of the glacier.

Stephanie 25:36

In the span of not even two years, it's completely gone.

Michael 25:40

Yeah.

Stephanie 25:41

Wow. It's quite sad. I'm glad you captured it so we can...

Michael 25:44

This was dramatically changed by an incredibly heavy rainfall. Lower than the glacier was positioned, was the main Highway 1 and bridges. Those were all washed out as well in that rainstorm. So it's very, very dramatic and heavy rain.

Stephanie 26:03

That was in 2016.

Michael 26:06

That would have been, I think, 17 or 18, even early 18.

Stephanie 26:12

Has it been repaired?

Michael 26:14

The bridge, you can still see the old one, and they have kind of a semi-permanent drive around. But the main highway, there was no access for at least a couple of months unless you had a vehicle with giant flotation tires and you could drive through the river.

Stephanie 26:34

Are there certain areas of Iceland right now that listeners could visit to see any of the glaciers?

Michael 26:41

Yes, there are and I strongly suggest that you go to areas where the glacial tongues are. The glacial tongue is the extension off of the main glacier. They're the most interesting to look at. They're the easiest to get to. If you come to the exhibition, you'll see a map or a description of the areas in southeast Iceland that I went. You can also email me at my website and I'll be more than happy to provide you information. It is shark-infested waters, my dear friends, when it comes to tourism in Iceland. There are so many ripoffs primarily emanating from Reykjavik. You want to go with a guide who lives in the actual area and daily is on the ice and knows what's going on. Not somebody who doesn't know anything about the area and just took a job as a guide to take people on a bus from Reykjavik to southeast Iceland.

Stephanie 27:42

That's fair. Good to know. Good tip. The exhibit is open through the end of December.

Michael 27:50

Yes, December 31 I believe it closes. There's also a book of all the photographs that you can also purchase for \$49.

Stephanie 28:01

We'll put a link to everything. I do have one fun question I'd like to ask you. You talked a lot about your background, what inspires you to take photos. Is there a mantra or personal theme song that gets you going to start your work for the day?

Michael 28:17

There's a couple. Those who do nothing make no mistakes.

Stephanie 28:24

That's a very good one. That's very, very true.

Michael 28:26

The other one is the unexamined life is not worth living. We've got to start examining the way we live in this country and around the world if we're at all concerned about the impact of climate change.

Stephanie 28:40

Yeah, definitely. I'm glad that you're sharing that with us so we can see what has been happening in Iceland, for one example.

Michael 28:46

Thanks very much for giving me the opportunity to talk about this exhibition and I do greatly admire what you're trying to do with your website, which is to help people recognize what they can do to kind of slow down the progress of climate change.

Stephanie 29:01

Definitely, any little bit helps. Thank you again so much for your time today.

Michael 29:06

You're most welcome.

Stephanie 29:07

Your work is amazing, so thank you.

Michael 29:08

Thank you.