



# DRAWN TO THE SNOW

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A pristine frozen lake in the snowy Alps is the perfect blank canvas for the artist Simon Beck. Amid the grandeur of the mountains, he creates enormous land artworks that are beautiful products of his skills and stamina, combining draftsmanship, mapmaking, and orienteering with the inspired creativity of an artist

A sweep of virgin snow has an irresistible appeal. Children might throw themselves into it and create snow angels, dogs bound gleefully over it, skiers' pulses start to race when they see it, and artists..well, not all artists are moved to set up their easels. Simon Beck, for instance, reaches for his snowshoes.

The 65-year-old British former cartographer has so far created some four hundred huge works of art in snow, with at least 61 of them on the frozen Lac Marlou near his current home in Les Arcs, in France's Alpine Savoie region. Art critics assessing Beck's works might quickly note their consistency: each shares grand scale, the use of repetition, and intrinsic transience. Something critics may not immediately appreciate is the sheer physical toil that goes into creating each piece: Beck takes thousands of steps through the snow at a solid trot to outline and fill in his minutely measured patterns, part of a process he calls a "performance."

And then, after the artist has worked for many hours at a stretch, sometimes into the night and even the following day, the work eventually disappears, though not, ideally, before several good photographs have been taken. "If the works weren't ephemeral," Beck says, "I'd never be able to use the same site again. But if I didn't capture them, I'd be really annoyed. The pieces would be wasted."

It's not surprising to learn that orienteering has played a big role in Beck's life. The sport requires a compass, a map, map-reading skills, and physical fitness, so that the participant can navigate between points, either for personal satisfaction or in timed competition. Beck, whose lean physique and ruddy complexion attest to a life spent enjoying high-altitude sun, wind, and snow, was 16 years old when he won the Under-17s British Orienteering Championships. Later, after studying engineering science at the University of Oxford, he worked as a cartographer, producing orienteering maps for people who shared his early passion.

"To make a drawing in the snow, the skill of map-making is reversed. Instead of reproducing the ground on paper, the drawing on paper is reproduced on the ground," Beck explains. His artworks are usually geometric designs, though sometimes he accepts the challenge of moving away from fractal drawings. The complex repetitions of simple shapes that are found in nature in, for example, crystals, ferns, pinecones, seeds, and snowflakes are, he admits, not too far removed from the doodles that he made when he was a child.

But the Calatrava cross that Beck produced on Lac Marlou for *Patek Philippe* magazine was unlike anything he had done before. "There actually wasn't much measuring to do," Beck says. "I printed the outline, made measurements, then had a good think. Any small error would be noticeable." At 460 ft between opposite points, the work took about 25,000 steps to complete in sub-32°F temperatures over seven hours, resulting



Especially for *Patek Philippe* magazine, the artist Simon Beck created a Calatrava cross in the snow on top of the frozen Alpine lake, Lac Marlou. On this page he is shown "drawing" the design and then creating patterning within it, all with only snowshoes, a compass, and a paper plan. The finished artwork is shown on pages 18-19 and 21-23, seen from above and from the surrounding mountains, to be enjoyed by onlookers for as long as it lasts

in a comparatively small piece of almost perfection. Many of Beck's creations take much longer to finish.

Beck's first step is to measure his "canvas," equipped with a prismatic compass. This type of compass uses a prism to determine direction, waypoints, and bearing of travel, and is often used for land surveys. He then draws on paper the design he has in his mind's eye. The next step is marking out the lines – using nothing more sophisticated than some rope and perhaps an item of clothing dropped onto the snow as a marker – and then the fractal boundaries. Next comes the "shading," where Beck fills in the boundaries with snowshoe prints to create the textures that differentiate one area of the design from the next, again and again and again.

An onlooker might consider this process the height of British eccentricity. Beck tramps rapidly backward and forward, alone, humming along with the classical music he often listens to, sometimes panting in the



high-altitude atmosphere, and sometimes muttering to himself under his breath. But he isn't concerned about what other people think. "When you're being paid to work, you often have to make compromises. The Sistine Chapel is a masterpiece because Michelangelo didn't have to make too many compromises. He wasn't forced to fit in with other people." And while Beck isn't comparing his genius to Michelangelo's, he is matter-of-fact in analyzing his particular art form. "What I do in Les Arcs is art for the sake of art," he says, "and it is the best art of its kind in the world."

But Beck wasn't always an artist. In fact, he didn't even start creating his drawings until after he'd bought a home in Les Arcs, nearly 20 years ago, to concentrate on spending as much time as possible in the mountains that he loves. "It all began when I first thought, 'Let's take another look at this virgin snow.' I made a simple star drawing and when I saw it from the chairlift the next day, I thought it looked good."

Beck kept at it. In 2009, he decided to give priority to the drawings over skiing. Only a year later, he was working on commissions in addition to his own designs.

## "TO GO FROM GOOD TO VERY GOOD, YOU MUST BE PREPARED TO GO THE EXTRA MILE"

"My work is good because of my uncompromising attitude," he says. "To go from good to very good, you must be prepared to go the extra mile. To go from very good to perfect, you have to put more time into it."

Now, with his art garnering admiration, he has been asked to create pieces in the snow in Japan, Canada, South America, and China. He has also worked on beaches, so far completing more than 180 drawings in the sand of southern England. Beck applies the same principles, but instead of using snowshoes to form the design and create shading, he uses a rake. The main difference with this medium is that time and tide wait for no one; he has to work faster in sand than in snow.

Beck seems proud and happy to have found himself where he is at this point in life. Thanks to his commitment to his art, he is able to combine the skills and pleasures that give him satisfaction, and his creations are appreciated by others. "Give me a big frozen lake and good conditions to produce good results, and I'll enjoy myself," he says. "There's no reason why I shouldn't do this until the day I die. This is the first time in my life that I feel people value what I do." ❖

