

EVERYSOMEWHERE

NOMADIC ARTIST STEPHEN EASTAUGH'S UNSTILL LIFE IS THE INSPIRATION FOR HIS PAINTINGS

By **LUCINDA SCHMIDT** Portrait photograph **ROBIN SELLICK**

Securing an interview time with a nomad is tricky. When I first contact artist Stephen Eastaugh, he agrees to a date and a time, but the venue in Melbourne is somewhat hazy. “I might be staying with friends ... don’t know yet. I’ll call you the day before,” he says from Hong Kong.

When we do meet it’s in a shabby-chic pizza bar on St Kilda’s Fitzroy Street in Victoria. Eastaugh – in jeans and a shirt, with a wispy beard and daypack – blends in perfectly with the slightly Bohemian surrounds. There is nothing to suggest he has no fixed address; his life is more about hotels and friends’ couches.

“I do not have a home,” he explains on his website. “This is odd and almost illegal in the modern world. Not having a home makes

me constantly in transit. I now confuse domestic with exotic and think airports are cosy. It seems I have a positive form of travel sickness.”

He says that he is drawn to the poles for “cold, cerebral order” and to the tropics for “hot, emotional chaos”. But for most of the time he is “pleasantly lost and at ease with my wayward way of melding art, travel and life.”

Eastaugh’s “unstill life”, as he calls it, has taken him to 80 countries in the past 23 years, averaging about three months in each place. He’s been on eight trips to Antarctica and set up more than 200 temporary studios in locations ranging from the Cite Internationale des Artes in Paris to a tent in Greenland.

His highlights include hitch-hiking across

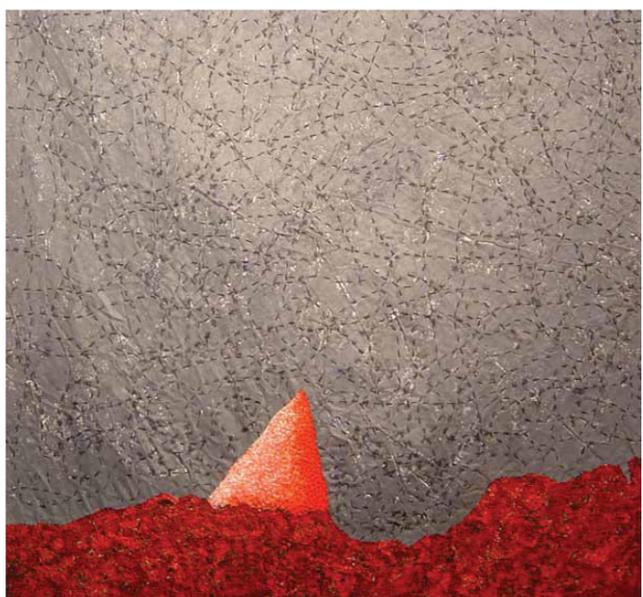
the Sahara Desert, setting up a summer studio at Australia’s Davis Base in Antarctica (the subject of a documentary, ‘AntarcticArt’, shown on ABC TV in 2006), travelling on a Russian ice-breaker to the North Pole and sipping dragon fruit juice in Phnom Penh.

His blog, ‘Intransit’, gives a sense of the dislocation that he thrives upon: “If it’s September I must be in Hong Kong”; “It looks like Tokyo out the window today”; “I found myself in Cairo for a week due to a surprise invitation from a French diplomat.”

He speaks only English, preferring to maintain the isolation and anonymity of not understanding the local language. The past 12 months has included stints in Phnom Penh, Amsterdam, Hong Kong, Buenos Aires, ►



ONE OF HIS FAVOURITE LATIN EXPRESSIONS IS 'SOLVITUR AMBULANDO' – LITERALLY, 'IT IS SOLVED BY WALKING'. THE 'IT' BEING, IN EASTAUGH'S WORLD, THE MYSTERY OF EXISTENCE.



ROOTED
facing page
SE: "This was done in Broome and plays with the idea of my geographic problems in staying still. It's of a mangrove tree, which has an extensive root system, whereas I have problems sinking roots. In a way, it's a family picture: Will I be rooted if I root myself somewhere, or vice versa?"
Artwork courtesy the artist and John Batten Gallery.



SHORT RANGE BALLISTIC MISSILE NIPPLE
top left
SE: "Taiwan and China are not really chummy – there are about 500 missiles on mainland China pointing at Taiwan. Which is strange because China sees itself as the Motherland. So it's a bit naughty that a mother wants to blow up her own child. A painting about geopolitics."
Artwork courtesy the artist.

PINE CONE AND DRUNKEN RAINBOW
bottom left
SE: "One of the unusual things I ate in Mongolia was steamed pine cone; it's a snack you find in the streets. Actually, it's about the only interesting thing to eat in Mongolia, the rest is awful f---ing mutton. I also saw a lot of rainbows. And a lot of vodka drinking, from the Russian influence, was required to get to know the locals."
Artwork courtesy the artist and Bellas Milani Gallery.

Patagonia, the Falkland Islands, Brisbane, Cairo, Tokyo and Bangkok.

One of his favourite Latin expressions is 'solvitur ambulando' – literally, 'it is solved by walking'. The 'it' being, in Eastaugh's world, the mystery of existence.

The usual trappings of modern western life – a house, car, furniture, possessions – are absent. Although, he does confess to having "a few depots around the planet" – friends' garages housing a few boxes. The rest he carries with him or discards. His constant companions are a laptop, digital camera, a few brushes and paints, and a Finnish hunting knife, all squashed into a grey and black rucksack.

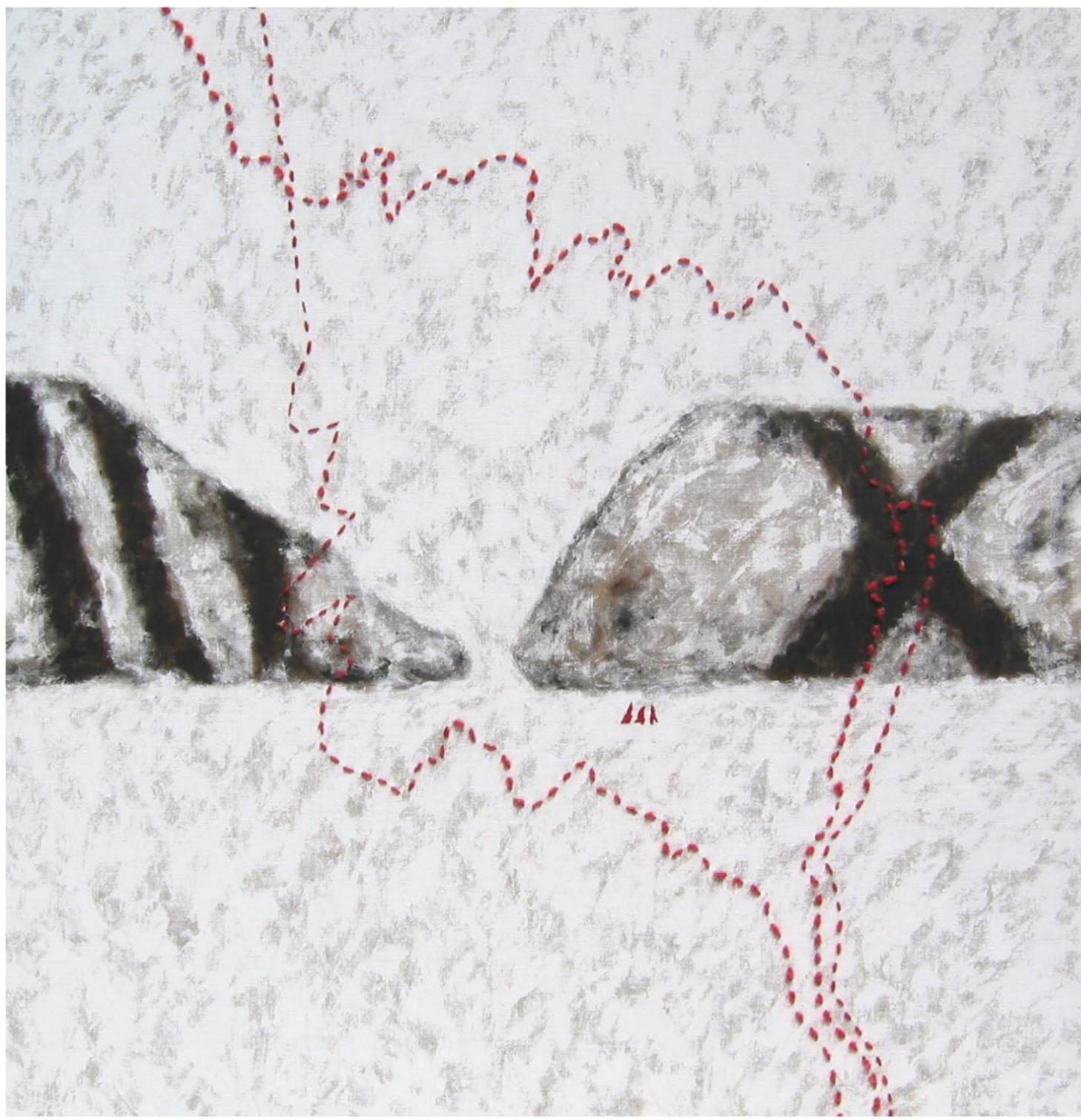
EASTAUGH'S NOMADIC adventures started in the early 1980s, just after he finished a fine arts degree at the Victorian College of the Arts. He says part of his geographic promiscuity came from his adoptive parents, who often took him camping around Victoria and developed his love of the bush, geography and maps. There may be a genetic influence too; Eastaugh's biological father, who now lives in Broome, came from a long line of Dutch sailors.

"Being an artist is a rather unstable life," he says. "I make it even more unstable in terms of having no real base, no stable studio and no routine."

Ask him which came first, the travel or the art, and he says the two are so closely intertwined for him they are inseparable. Certainly, his experiences of travel are the central theme of his landscape abstractionist paintings, in which strange, often invented shapes inhabit alien-looking lands.

It's never immediately obvious that he's in, for example, Antarctica, Vietnam or Finland, but there's always a fascinating explanation of how his location has informed the end result (see picture captions).

"I navigate through colours, lines, shapes and textures searching for a new view loosely based on location," Eastaugh says. "I call myself a landscape painter, and this is true because I am busy feeding off various terrains, but sometimes my gaze is directed inwards to the mindscape where I indulge in the exhausting business of being human." ►



There's often a three-dimensional textural element – perhaps hand-stitched cotton or wool over acrylic paint. Another hallmark is a limited palette, usually black, white, red and grey. His large linen paintings, measuring 1.5 metres square, sell for about \$12,000 in Australia, where he exhibits at William Mora Galleries in Melbourne, Brisbane's Bellas Milani Gallery and Broome's Short Street Gallery.

Overseas, Eastaugh is represented by the John Batten Gallery in Hong Kong, the Suzanne Biederberg Gallery in Amsterdam and the Galerie Baudoin Lebon in Paris.

At 47, Eastaugh recognises that he can't travel at such an intense rate forever. Indeed, this nomad took a step towards settling down last September when he married Carolina Furque, an Argentinian photographer and winemaker. But he still resists calling Furque's house, in a small village called La Consulta in the shadows of the Andes, a home.

"It's easier for me to call it a base rather than a home at this stage," says Eastaugh, who will spend the first five months of 2008 there, preparing for mid-year exhibitions in Melbourne and Broome. "The concept of home is very, very fuzzy for me." In any event, his new wife is almost a nomad herself, spending at least six months a year travelling. They have vowed to spend no more than three months apart at one time.

ALTHOUGH he blogs about his domestic phobia, and his addiction to change and displacement, Eastaugh does not condemn the rest of us in the 'normal' world. "Those that chase security and stability, reproduce, buy a house and collect possessions are doing what humans like and need to do," he says. "I acknowledge this as basically protection against chaos, change and the unknown. It is understandable behaviour and I may even adapt to this world view one day – but I'm not quite sure when."

Eastaugh is entirely comfortable with the lifestyle he has chosen, and is firm in his belief that a large view of the planet shrinks the globe. "I could have stayed in one place and discovered that the world is a harsh, beautiful and perplexing place, but by travelling you can confirm without a doubt that these qualities are both abundant and universal." ■

THE JOLLY
facing page

SE: "A jolly is an Antarctic term that means a short trip away from the main station. This painting is of the Vestfold Hills on the coast of Antarctica, which is a rocky outcrop with black markings called dolerite dykes. The meandering red line is explorer Thaddeus von Bellingshausen's route – I like to overlay historical cartography on an abstract landscape."

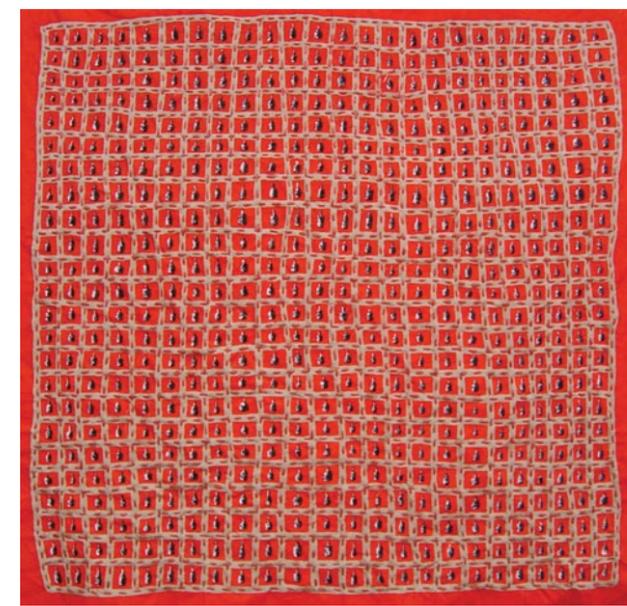
Artwork courtesy the artist and William Mora Gallery.



IMPEDIMENTA/BAGGAGE
top right

SE: "After blacking out three times in SE Asia I began to worry a little. The first time I was in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. I stepped into the hotel elevator to go up to my room when I blacked out. I went down as I was going up and still don't know why. Tired, dehydrated, sick? Too much baggage? An overload of stimulus?"

Artwork courtesy the artist and John Batten Gallery.



LONG LIQUID WINTER
bottom right

SE: "Drinks in the winter are common in Scandinavia. A lot of drinks. It's dark for months, so the population tend to drown the harsh winter climate with harsh strong alcohol. The bottles in the grid pattern may count the consumption of drinks over a winter or suggest addiction. A pattern of addiction."

Artwork courtesy the artist and John Batten Gallery.

