

# The Australian

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## Wandering star

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Artist Stephen Eastaugh with his work, *Gambler On Maze* (Macau 2008) at the William Mora Gallery in Melbourne. Picture: Andrew Brownbill Source: Supplied

**EVERYONE** has a friend who brags about being well travelled, but artist Stephen Eastaugh is the real deal.

He has barely stopped since 1982, traversing the globe like a mad dervish. He has wandered every continent, exploring the far-flung regions of the globe from Kalaallit Nunaat and the Lofoten Islands in northern Norway to Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso; to Kashmir and the farthest reaches of Iceland; from the sweaty jungles of Laos to the cold of southern Ukraine.

Along the way he has wandered into a military coup, hitched across the Sahara and more than once had his life threatened, but among the most extreme of Eastaugh's adventures would be two sojourns in the Antarctic, the second of which ran through almost all of last year. Eastaugh had to undergo a rigorous military adaptability psychological test organised by the Australian Antarctic Division, which hosted his residency, to be allowed this long stay.

Eastaugh funds these adventures through his art and has been known to hold ad hoc exhibitions at the Foreign Correspondents Club in Phnom Penh and the Mawson base camp in the Antarctic to fund the next step. His travels are the subject of his artwork and its sustenance, and are the subject of an exhibition opening next month at Victoria's Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery.

Eastaugh's travels began in 1982 with a long journey through Africa, Asia and Europe. The search for new places became an obsessive addiction. Eastaugh received a bachelor of fine arts from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1981. As a young artist he was included in exhibitions alongside emerging names such as Dale Frank, Stieg Persson, Louise Hearman, Bill Henson, Mike Parr and Fiona Hall, but restlessness proved a stronger pull than capitalising on his early success.

In keeping with his nomadic life, Eastaugh exhibits at a diverse array of galleries including Milani Gallery, Brisbane; William Mora Gallery in Melbourne; Turner Gallery, Perth; John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong; Lalanta Gallery, Bangkok; Suzanne Beiderberg Gallery, Amsterdam; and Baudoin Lebon Gallery in Paris.

Eastaugh was born in Melbourne in 1960, and one explanation for his wanderlust may be that he grew up with foster parents, although he claims to have been in no hurry to seek out his natural family. "This is a possible reason, but I certainly did not consciously search for my biological parents," he says. "I was in fact quite happy with the mystery of my creation and did not look for my parents at all as I grew up with a fine family. My mother actually gave me a contact to locate my biological mother when I was 28. Of course I contacted [her] then out of curiosity, which was a great and exciting event, and then subsequently I located the biological father a few years later."

One of Eastaugh's longstanding friends says the similarities between father and son are uncanny. "They dress the same way, they have the same walk, the same eyes. It's amazing." Eastaugh agrees. "There are a great deal of similarities between my Dutch father and myself. This was surprising, as I had never met the man before. I now know why I adore eating pickled herring."

Eastaugh has another theory about his wanderings. "Biologically, there is a theory that, in each species, a few lucky or unlucky individuals get the job of reconnaissance. Meaning to wander away from the safe homeland to explore and possibly bring back information that may be vital to the family, community or species in the future.

"So the oddball penguin that strolls off into the icecap away from food and safety may have this strange gene that performs this biological role for the entire species. In most animals it's suicide to stroll far from the homeland, but certain individuals do. Perhaps I have this wanderlust gene.

"Also both my fathers were sailors so I smelled travel and heard about travel long before I actually travelled myself."

Eastaugh suggests he may suffer from some form of "travel sickness . . . after 29 years of rather hardcore travel, I really don't know what else to call it. Perhaps wanderlust fits, from the old German meaning 'a desire to hike'. In modern German wanderlust is obsolete and another word, fernweh, is used instead, I believe. Fernweh means 'an ache for the distance', so what a serious pain I must have. Art and my wanderlust or fernweh have led me to many places, people and textures. The writer Patrick White has stated 'art leads us to know what we do not know'. This seems true, but art has also led me to a dizzy smorgasbord of unpredictable and grounding experiences on many lands from meeting murderers to getting married."

In a move that for others would suggest a degree of settling down, Eastaugh was married in 2007 in Hong Kong to a woman from Argentina, but it hasn't slowed his adventures. When asked how she copes, Carolina Furque just rolls her eyes.

"My wife Carolina is almost as keen about travel as I am," Eastaugh says. "Carolina also makes art so she understands my dual passions. We have a sort of deal not to be apart longer than three months and this is fine. The year trip to Antarctica broke that rule, as it was the only way to experience a winter down on the ice. Carolina dislikes being the fisherman's wife waiting at home for the husband out at sea to return, but her patience and adaptability are far beyond mine, and if we survived the Antarctic separation it seems we are equipped to

survive as a couple even when we are apart."

The Antarctic stay was arduous physically and psychologically but, despite some decidedly bizarre emails he sent to friends towards the end of the period, Eastaugh says he never feared for his sanity. "No, not really. My self-discipline usually keeps my brain and emotions wobbling along in a steady manner." He calls the experience "stunning, stupefying and demanding".

Eastaugh's work has a powerful element of storytelling, a way of recounting his adventures. "The images I make are constructed from events, places, tastes and people that I meet on my travels. The story is remoulded and then physically translated into an artwork. As I use a semi-abstract form of image-making the story is not so neat, nor obvious, but a story it is. The road from idea, stimulus and experiences to creating an artwork is a long and difficult-to-describe journey, but I can see it as the culling, fermenting and distilling of input to finally present a new story called a painting."

He avoids mulling over where his career may have gone had he remained stationary. "Relocating, constant flux, finding space, beds, money and art materials while on the road is tiresome," he admits. "I have been told that travel and moving are rather stressful, so it seems I have made the stressful and unpredictable life of an artist even more unpredictable."

*Stephen Eastaugh: An Unstill Life, Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, July 7 to August 29.*

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