



S. by S.E.

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Stephen Eastaugh's nine separate journeys across the vastness of the Southern Ocean to the southern continent make him the world's most experienced Antarctic artist. A curious distinction and, it must be said, one not sought by many. Yet it is crucial to an understanding of the what and the why of his paintings of recent years.

They appear to be crude things, or raw, at least. Squares of unstretched linen are crushed and crumpled, the resulting network of creases looking like skin (a human palm or heel, or cold-chapped lips), like an aerial view or relief map of mountains or ice fields, like the drying cracks of mud, the crazing of frozen seas. In and over this primary surface Eastaugh floats soft-mosaic clouds or ice-floes of acrylic paint, a blotchy all-overness of thick opacities and rough scumbles and drags, occasionally relieved by contrasting small marks: stellar chroma, blinking lights.

These broad, barren, organic-geological expanses are contained and defined and brought into focus by traveller's craft, an itinerant's improvised running repairs in rough-sewn thread: hemmed edges, dotted line grids, scattered cross-stitch snowflakes. Paradoxically, the geometric discipline somehow humanises the work. For

this artist, the grid is not a means of hard-edge, abstract purification, of de-personalising the practice of painting, but rather serves to introduce notions of human invention and mensuration. There is something about the works that is quietly domestic, recalling blackwork napkins or doilies, or hand-made quilts, and there is something that is just as hand-made but boldly heraldic, like Fante *awafo* flags. The patterns of repeated squares seem to imply empirical-scientific apparatus and methodology: a net of longitude and latitude across which broken-line explorers' tracks meander erratically, a graph paper on which the artist's experiences can be plotted. They are the doors and windows of the station's jumbled Lego architecture, the zipper on the polar fleece jacket, the caterpillar tracks on the sno-cat.

Most of all, these pale, wobbly, Agnes Martin checkerboards signify the rows and columns and boxes of the calendar, the relentless passage of time which is both intensified and voided by the seeming endlessness of the Antarctic ice and snow, of the ice-blinking white horizon, the seeming endlessness of an expeditioner's long season, of the polar winter night.

In the eternal snows, in the eternal distance of very low aerosol optical thickness, in the eternal tedium of



cabin fever in the 'Wombat' hut which is his studio, the Antarctic anchorite hits the existential wall. In this meta-sublime 'everywhere', what saves him from madness and his art from blandness are close-up, tangible things: the knots of acrylic rope that hold structures down or together against the ferocity of the seventy-knot katabatic winds, or the concrete-filled forty-four-gallon drums which, laced together by 'blizz[ard] lines', enable safe passage through snowstorms, or what Eastaugh describes as the 'tiny trees' of Antarctic lichens, mosses and liverworts. Through such repeatedly and intimately experienced motifs – identifiable things on the cusp of becoming abstract glyphs, and vice-versa – Eastaugh locates and presents himself, both as experimenter and as observer, as wave and particle.

Unlike many one-stay, short-stay Antarctic artists, who revel in the grandeur of ocean and icebergs and mountains, Eastaugh has clearly had enough. As he puts it in the voice-over commentary in one of his short films, *Jolly*, there is 'lots of sublime stuff ... it stinks of stunning ... look, there's another fucking sublime bit over there ...' So the nine-timer looks down, holds on, goes inside, and paints a self-portrait. As an iceman. As ice.

1. The neologism is the name of the artist's website, and the collective title of an extensive body of nomadological art he made largely in Asia some years ago. At Davis Station, he had the word inscribed on a sign which, with four other tiny outdoor sculptures, made up the first sculpture garden in Antarctica.

This article was first published as one of two catalogue essays for the exhibition *An Awfully Beautiful Place: The*

Antarctic Art of Stephen Eastaugh, curated by Fernando do Campo (fellow essayist) and shown at Carnegie Gallery, Hobart, 7 June to 1 July 2012. The exhibition, opened by Tony Press, CEO Antarctic Climate and Ecosystems Cooperative Research Centre, and ex-director of the Australian Antarctic Division, included a screening of Eastaugh's documentary *Winterover* (2009) which exists as a 29-minute and 9-minute digital film, the shorter version viewable at: vimeo.com/user5023369/videos

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