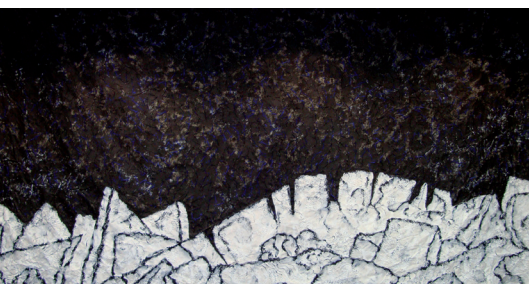


## Blizz Lines: Notes from a nunatak

STEPHEN EASTAUGH



My year on Ice is coming closer to an end. The frozen sea will soon slowly melt while above the sun will not set until mid-January. I await a helicopter to shuttle me over 600km of white-scape including the massive Amery ice-shelf, to Davis Station. There a small plane will fly me 1300km to Casey Station; then if weather permits I travel over ice for 3 hours up to the Wilkins Aerodrome on the blue ice-cap. Finally I fly for 4.5 hours in an Airbus A319 north to Hobart. My bags are packed and I am ready for fast extraction but am I ready for normal life? How burnt-out and alienated am I?

Polar winter depression can be troublesome in the far south as in the far north. The Inuits speak of *Perleromeq*, or 'the Burden', which sounds like no fun at all and is something I have luckily not packed. Reintegration back into so-called normal society can be problematic I am told. Will I feel any culture shock or 'green-out' (the intense sensation of seeing and smelling large amounts of green vegetation after a year surrounded by ice)? Living in a place with no rain, family, money, shops, police, grass, rivers, streets, animals, neon signs, crowds, sex, flowers, strangers, trees nor mobile phones, in a climate not designed for humans, may make slipping back into one of the busy continents rather bewildering. The long, woolly beard will have to go unless I wish to join some bikers' club from Humpty Doo.

I may look scruffy and weathered but I have been productive as I have 200 paintings, 150 works on paper and far too many photographs of ice and penguins with my cargo of experiences. This has been a most demanding residency, as was to be expected, so I did need a little extra self-discipline to get through this year without losing my focus and direction somewhere out in that vast, bleak whiteness. It is far from a dead place but life here really has to work very hard to live.

For over two decades I have lead a nomadic lifestyle, utilising the stimulus of new lands as visual fodder. Fuelled by wanderlust I construct paintings via a jumble of excitement and mystery. Antarctica can be visually and psychologically a feast and famine all at once but it certainly has fed me.

My plan upon arrival in Antarctica was to navigate through unusual colours, lines, shapes and textures in search of new views. I have spent this year turning strange into familiar or familiar into strange, with the intention of creating new territory within each work. The paintings produced in the studio here hopefully contain and balance feelings of both being lost and also finding something. Outside the window the conflicting and powerful Antarctic views seem both calm and lethal and have been challenging to absorb.

Nunataks, floating boulders on ice pedestals, auroras, sastrugi, moss, lichen, knots, blizzard lines, fata morgana, rafting sea ice, the dark winter time and the icecap were the subjects that strongly intrigued me. I have stitched and painted these elements with a desire to

comprehend this location; interpreting my experiences of being here simply with paint and thread. A type of closure was sought within each painting that is very difficult to describe. Some form of cerebral fermentation occurs that relies on visualisation and a distillation of ideas, experiences and images.

As an example, 'blizz-lines' are the rope-and-chain lifelines strung between all buildings on station, and hung onto during blizzards as aids to locate buildings in white-outs. They keep you upright and not lost, so my bond with them has grown over the year to the extent that I depicted many blizz-lines in large-scale paintings.

In the studio I also found myself attempting to shrink Antarctica to a manageable scale. Reducing the magical aurora australis displays in the upper atmosphere into little pictures and tiny digital images was not an easy chore. This wild phenomenon that is partly born in the sun and occurring over the ice-covered poles was almost too outlandish to even attempt to paint, but I did.

I will miss this unreal, icy lifestyle, cocooned in thermal underwear and surrounded by nothing but nothing. It is not easy to sum up this winter-over experience. This year has been more a charm than a hex; a long, stupefying intense spell that has been extremely demanding but extraordinarily worthwhile. Experiences are often very rich down here. In 1911 Captain Scott wrote in his final diary: 'Great God! This is an awful place!' I understand his dire predicament but these days the icecap is dotted with people armed with technology. Antarctica today seems not so awful but it certainly does generate lashings of awe.

Exhibitions of Eastaugh's Antarctic and other works during 2010 will be shown at the following galleries in Australia: Milani Gallery, Brisbane (June); Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Victoria (July); William Mora Gallery, Melbourne (July); Short St. Gallery, Broome (August); Turner Gallery, Perth (October).

Stephen Eastaugh has been the 2009 Australian Antarctic Arts Fellow at Mawson Station as part of the Australian Antarctic Divisions Humanities program. Eastaugh's prequel to this article was published as 'A.I.R. on Ice' in *AMA* #220, June 2009, pp. 49-51.

TOP RIGHT: Portrait of artist on Mt Horden at -25C with nunataks.

3/ *Knots and Nunataks 1*, 2009, work on paper.

1/ *Big beautiful dead place (Rafting sea ice)*, 2009, acrylic, thread, linen, 210 x 425cm.

4/ *Knots and Nunataks 2*, 2009, work on paper.

All images of work by Stephen Eastaugh. All images courtesy the artist.

2/ *Outlandish (Aurora over sea ice)*, 2009, acrylic, thread, linen, 35 x 35cm.