



## A.I.R on Ice

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I AM UNSURE HOW MANY temporary studios I have set up over the past twenty-five years but it must be well over one hundred scattered across fifty countries. I recall a tent in Greenland, a bus in the Sahara desert, a rooftop in Thailand, a cabin on a nuclear icebreaker at the North Pole, formal artist residencies in Paris, Melbourne, Sydney and Taipei, a barbecue room in Argentina, a five-star hotel in Beijing, a no-star hotel in Burkina Fasso, a squat in Amsterdam, apartments in Hong Kong, Yangoon and Phnom Penh, a shed in Broome, a shack in Tonga and a donga in Antarctica one summer. Now I am back in Antarctica for about ten months in order to experience a winter on the 'Ice'. This residency could be seen as some form of chilly *Big Brother* experiment, thankfully without the youthful wannabes and pathetic live broadcasts of 'rumpy-bumpy' antics. Mawson Station is far from TV land; far from a lot of places actually.

As the first artist to winter-over on an Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) station, I see this fellowship as two trips, very much intertwined. The first is the obvious thrill of

collecting and translating visual data into art. This is the external trip of an artist moving through the wild climate and alien ice-scape gathering views and ideas and working in the studio; of physically getting to the studio, being there and creating. The second trip is internal as I swim through the tricky terrain of coping with isolation, the tiny village politics, the pressurised social behaviour found in this temporary and very artificial society lacking family, babies, teenagers, elderly folks and TV! There is also self-imposed celibacy, bouts of hut fever, loneliness, existential hiccups and finally facing 'Stephen', that strange character in the mirror with the chaotic beard and cracked, weathered lips. Of course there is a great deal of Antarctic camaraderie, exhilaration, freedom, fifteen interesting and supportive characters on station, feasts and fun as well. Both trips so far are going very well.

The last Australian artist I believe to winter on the continent was Frank Hurley in 1915 whose photographic works from that expedition – iconic images of human 'Endurance' – are now stamped securely into the heroic era of this white continent. Ninety-four years later, I found myself heading south on a 177-metre-long Russian icebreaker as an Australian Antarctic Arts Fellow. The fellowship is primarily designed to inform and entertain Australians about the Ice with the desire of generating interest, understanding and support to those that do not speak the language of science. A lot of scientific activity does occur here, though over this coming winter it is mainly the routine collection of climate-related data, and wildlife monitoring with remote sensors. I along with everyone on



Page 49: An aurora australis over Mawson Station; Page 50, TOP: Stephen in the 'Wombat' studio 'looking a little polar rabid'; ABOVE: Stephen Eastaugh, *Rumdoodle rock study*, 2009, acrylic and thread on linen, 40 x 40cm; Page 51, TOP: Stephen Eastaugh, *Spaces and places*, 2009, acrylic and thread on linen, 140 x 140cm; BELOW: Wombat studio (left), turbine and shed, Mawson Station. Images and photographs courtesy the artist.

the station play a similar role: to facilitate the extraction of this globally important scientific data from this brutal and beautiful place. The time-scale differs between the chef cooking up a storm to feed expeditioners, a builder making new sleeping quarters and myself exhibiting Antarctic works in galleries over the coming years, but all this activity combined enables scientists to work on the Ice.

## Making space a place at 67° 63'S – 62° 52'E



Sir Douglas Mawson mapped this area on the BANZAR expedition of 1929 which was largely funded by a Mr MacRobertson of the chocolate empire fame. Hence Mawson Station sits on MacRobertson Land. I am roughly 3000km east of the famous Mawson Hut (or 'Home of the Blizzard') but I look out my window and see a lot of void – 'the nothing that is not there and the nothing that is ...', to quote Wallace Stevens.

Each morning I get up at 8am, do a hundred sit-ups, drink coffee and then dive into the studio. I usually work ten hours each twenty-four hours in the studio, send emails AND fantasise about seeing my wife again. Friday nights I drink a little homemade beer with a shot of vodka or rum, watch films in the mini-cinema, or occasionally play chess with my computer that speaks in an evil female robotic voice (she ALWAYS wins so I often reply with ribald language). Some mornings, if there is no blizzard obscuring the view, I say good morning in Spanish to the impressive ice plateau. I have yet to resort to combing my beard with a fork at the dinner table, luckily, as this is an Antarctic taboo and totally frowned upon. Occasionally after a good stint in the studio I indulge in a clove cigarette in the smoker's donga, play loud, odd music and dance like an Indonesian grandmother would to hypnotic gamelan music after far too many cups of rice wine. Everyone copes with the strangeness and intensity of this place in their own peculiar ways.

It is an outlandish, space station-like existence where blizzards howl as the sun spits solar magnetic plasma flares at our upper atmosphere, forming dazzling, dancing aurora australis lightshows. Antarctica is an extremely daunting environment and simultaneously a stunning space to inhabit.

The geographer Yi Fu Tuan talks about the concept of turning a space into a place. This occurs by familiarity and understanding. Antarctica in most people's minds is still very much a space and alien to most. After all human activity down here is really not much more than a century old. I have made nine trips down south in order to get an understanding of this rather inhuman locale, and here I am now in my own small way busy turning this white, icy space into a place. The Ice gets into your blood, they say, and it can be hard to satiate this illogical hunger for a space that is difficult for humans to be in.

My hunger for Antarctica is mirrored by my diet here. In one way I have shrunk – belittled by grandeur and killer weather – but I have physically grown. I have transformed the four meals a day of station food into winter blubber as my mind believes that I need it just in case the heating stops. Ironically chocolate is rationed down here in MacRobertson Land because if any emergency surgery is required, it is more difficult for a single doctor and

<p>Theodore Penleigh Boyd <i>Jamieson Valley</i> 1922 oil on canvas 45.5 x 70.7cm</p>		<p><b>A NEW WORLD: AUSTRALIAN PAINTING 1840 – 1940</b></p> <p>Highlights from the Cbus Collection of Australian Art</p> <p><b>Latrobe Regional Gallery</b> 2 May – 30 August</p> <p>138 Commercial Road Morwell Victoria 3840 Tel: (03) 5128 5700</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;">   <div style="background-color: black; color: white; padding: 5px; text-align: center;"> <b>LABROBE REGIONAL GALLERY</b> </div> </div>
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untrained nurse to slice open a chubby expeditioner than a fit, lean one. I take note of my intake but I will still not be a pretty sight at the beach next summer. Think albino elephant seal.

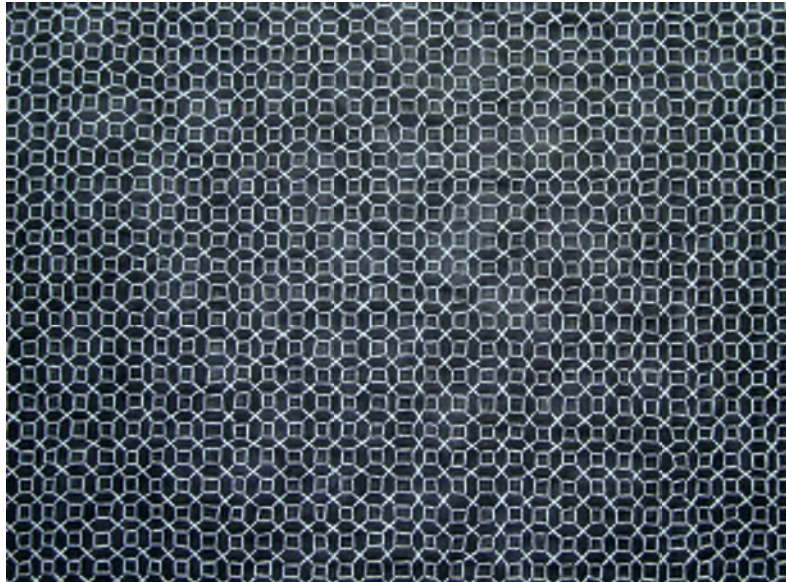
## Unstill Life

Why do a residency and, especially, below 67 degrees south? All the residencies I have done share positive elements of fresh stimulus and raw data – exciting, daunting, unpredictable and in-your-face. All A.I.R. programs are simply working holidays. You leave home to taste new sights and possibly add these to your palette.

Some artists need only the town they were born in to feed their creativity; others look further afield. I'm a geographical glutton. The difference between a short stroll to the studio shed in the backyard and a round-the-world sojourn is just the number of steps or kilometres. How long you stay there is another matter. For me travel is habitual and, oddly, I find dislocation to be positive. In fact I feel a bit queasy if I stay in one place longer than a few months. This stay at Mawson Station will be the first time in twenty-five years that I have settled longer than six months. Serious wanderlust or is it something else?

Apparently someone has to test the borders and see what may be over the hill just in case 'home' is suddenly swept away by some natural force. This may explain the psyche of the explorer or the wanderer, why a few individuals are innately driven to move further afield. Artists are usually not explorer types but we do explore the visual world with great passion then navigate through ideas in order to create new two, three or four-dimensional spaces. I find my messy, innate, organic and visceral methods of planning and making art not too easy to decode into words. I am able to operate as a type of cultural ambassador waving the Australian Antarctic Territory flag but in fact I simply attack, devour and sniff about this massive experience then translate this into my particular form of art, as I do anywhere on the planet. My art does not directly communicate scientific activity but it is my hope that through its exhibition the public gain insights into Antarctica (along with intrigue) and that the politicians are reminded of the importance of funding scientific pursuit down here.

Residencies facilitate a unique type of zeal, exploration and wanderlust. Personally, they remind me that things change, that there is always more, that we are all just excitable life forms on a pretty unusual planet. I am bludgeoned by this fact every time I walk out of this particular studio door, grab onto the blizzard line, dive into a katabatic wind and catch a glimpse of the monster icecap behind the station. Each time I step outside I instantly become a minuscule, gaudy dot on a massive white canvas. Not a bad space, or place, to be at all ... as long as I can stand up.



In the December 09 issue of *AMA* we track the tail-end of Eastaugh's ten-month residency, by which time he can lay claim to being a 'burnt-out winterer'.

**Stephen Eastaugh** is a painter born in Melbourne who has been in transit the past two decades. His exhibition, *Displaced Mats*, is currently showing at Urban Dingo Gallery, Fremantle, until 6 June: [www.urbandingogallery.com.au](http://www.urbandingogallery.com.au)



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Image Evert Nijland, Riflessa, bracelet, glass & silver, 2007



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