

Drift and Flow

Max Delany



Space and Place (Antarctica)
2009
Acrylic, thread, Belgian linen
140 cm x 140 cm

Wanderlust and lebenskunst

The self-ascribed condition of 'wanderlust' is the pathology that artist Stephen Eastaugh has nominated to account for almost thirty years of incessant travel and adventure in the quest for art, life and identity. Having lived and worked in over eighty locations across seven continents, Eastaugh is nothing if not peripatetic, with a restless urge for discovery and exploration that has extended to all corners of our chaotic, teeming globe. Eastaugh's 'geographic promiscuity' is registered in equally promiscuous artforms – paintings, sculpture, photography, narrative journals, and much besides, not to mention the practice of social relations itself.

Eastaugh's modus operandum might be considered a form of 'Lebenskunstwerk': The art of living, and the making of life into art. Inherent in the artist's life and work is an existentialist imperative: the idea of life as an unremitting journey, a work in progress, and a romantic longing to find oneself in relation to others.

Travelling for the sake of the search, and improvising his way in the world, Eastaugh has constructed a life to serve the dictates of art, and an approach to art that forcefully imposes itself upon life's experience. Based upon perpetual travel, encounter, endurance and reflection, Eastaugh's art is one of passionate subjectivity and individual experience. And yet, by situating himself in the company of strangers – in unknown cities, foreign lands, extreme conditions – Eastaugh's practice is dedicated to the art of encounter, to confrontations of self and other that encourage forms of empathy and witness.



Slots and Peaks / Sexy Danger (Antarctica)
2005
Acrylic, cotton, Belgian linen
190 cm x 350 cm

Nomadism and the unstill life

In Unstill Life we see the artist moving between states – national and subjective, interior and exterior, lucid and absurd. We see patterns of migration and mobility, atmosphere and geography, translation and cross-cultural communication. Accordingly, the artist has developed modes of drawing, painting, writing, notation, stitching, assemblage, collage, photography, mapping and cartography that are nomadic, agile and open-ended, establishing relations between cultures of here and there, images of self and other, experiences of near and far.

Everysomewherever (Sign) 2003 is a sculptural marker that encapsulates the existential contradictions, mysteries and ambitions embedded in Eastaugh's life-work. A road-sign embedded in the ground at Davis Station in east Antarctica – in a



Travaillogue - Personal plans in Phnom Penh
2004
Acrylic, thread, medical bandage
20 cm x 20 cm



Impedimenta / Baggage (Vietnam)
2006
Acrylic, thread, Belgian linen
140 cm x 140 cm

'sculpture garden' established by the artist at the end of the earth – serves as a marker of place, a stake in the ground, and yet it inevitably points to somewhere, anywhere, everywhere else. Evoking an enduring dilemma – should I stay or should I go? – it points in all directions 'towards an answer that just keeps moving'.¹

In paintings such as *Impedimenta – baggage (Vietnam)* 2006 the floating image of a traveller's case, set against a bloody yet cosmic ground, dramatizes the asymmetrical relations between the village and metropolis, the individual and the world at large. A similarly dynamic tension between place and possibility, groundedness and flight, is apparent in the companion painting *Rooted (Australia)* 2006, in which large mangrove roots anchor the figure to a specific place and history, whilst a budding leaf shows the promise of a new generation taking flight.

The contradictory conditions of line and point, of local and global, of smooth and striated space abound in Eastaugh's work. The painting *Slots and peaks / sexy danger (Antarctica)* 2005 is one such example of measure and flow. Its organic open-weave grid extends laterally and diagonally, ostensibly without end, elaborating a space without hierarchies, through which the viewer proceeds with optical and sensory ambiguity. This graphic patterning – derived from the isotropic horizon line and crevices of the Antarctic landscape – establishes the complex spatial conditions of the nomad. Its un-stretched, informal state also allows the painting to be wrapped and transported, like a tarpaulin or mat, offering cover and shelter for the roaming itinerant (whilst conferring a symbolic dignity upon its carrier). Or it might be laid out, to establish a sense of place around which to gather among friends.

The nomad is of course a figure who moves across space, who resides between points, who exists in the 'intermezzo'. For Deleuze and Guattari, nomadism is a way of life that eludes the organising principles of the 'State'.² For Achille Bonito Oliva, the idea of nomadism serves as a model for open, shifting and peripatetic modes of practice and being, and just as surely, paintings such as *Lost cartography (Antarctica, Broome)* 1999-2000 or *Space and place (Antarctica)* 2009 register such transient sensations, boundless states of being, and the idea of 'time as relentless flow'.³ As a cultural nomad on a global scale, always in-transit, you get the feeling that Eastaugh too has largely elided any sense of containment or subjection to authority. His itinerancy constitutes a radical disavowal of everyday norms related to work, leisure or commitment to home or place. Instead, escaping home, refusing humdrum, slipping between cultures, he revels in acts of translation, and the embrace of extreme conditions. He seeks out the ineffable and miraculous, understanding that art is an attempt to overcome systematic forces. His work acknowledges the incidental, the unclassifiable, and the inexplicable.

¹ Stephen Eastaugh, email correspondence with the author, 22 May 2011.

² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, (trans. Brian Massumi), University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, pp.24-25.

³ Achille Bonito Oliva, *Transavantgardia: New Subjectivity*, Castello di Rivoli, Turin, 2003, accessed at: http://www.worldofartmagazine.com/Woa6/6woa_OLIVA.htm

The humble materiality and meandering line in a painting such as *Travaillogue - Personal plans in Phnom Penh (Cambodia)* 2004 works against a sedentary point of view. Tending towards the provisional – away from the monumental – Eastaugh's works register memory and experience, with the nuance and fragility of subjective impulse. The tactile and time-based materiality of his work – of fabrics, stitching, staining – serve to emphasise the experiential and haptic experience of the participant, over and above the more strictly optical perspective of the observer.



Rooted (Australia)
2006
Acrylic, thread, Belgian linen
140 cm x 140 cm
Private collection Singapore

Inexpressible things

These motifs – of the elusive participant, sidestepping stasis and authority; of time and history in flux; of polyglot communities in a globalised network – are critical to Eastaugh's project. But so too are the philosophical conditions of love, humour, the body and language, which appear repeatedly as motifs in Eastaugh's work. Add to this the thrill of the chase, the pitting of the individual against the elements, awe-inspiring encounters with the sublime, and absurd exchanges between strangers. And then, in the *Outlandish – Aurora Australis* series of 2009, we bear witness to the hallucinatory optical effects of 'auroras, fata morgana, nacreous clouds and other inexpressible things', rendered in Technicolour hues from a far-out place.

As this breathtaking record of an *Unstill Life* attests, Eastaugh's travels have taken the artist from polar white-outs to equatorial sunsets, from Bulgarian mountains to wet Fijian hills, from ancient stone cities in Petra to the bustling metropolis of Rio, from the mega-cities of Mexico to the casino temples of Macau. Documenting landscape, architecture, human habitation and social mores, as well as the delirious economies of social and capital transactions, Eastaugh's work throws up serendipitous records of enchantment and wonder, fear and danger, degradation and despair. In texts, drawings, journal entries and travelogues, we are subject to the confrontation of modernity and tradition; science and religion; sex and death; wilderness and domestication; mortality and the sublime.

The artist is 'everywhere and nowhere a foreigner'. Does he travel 'to forget things or to learn and remember?'⁴ It is a question for us all. The title of a work from 1989, *Slippery food makes you forget, and sticky food makes you remember*, suggests a quietly paradoxical, questioning mind, and the role of observation and memory, sustenance and intoxication, as essential elements of life's pleasurable adventure. The search for one's identity, knowledge and place in the world is both a romantic and melancholic quest – driven by a sense of longing and desire. Eastaugh's work reminds us to escape the mundane, to seek knowledge and experience beyond that which has become 'commonsense' (that most mis-used of terms).

⁴ Stephen Eastaugh, 'Beijing' and 'Rarotonga' *Unstill Life*, p.96 and p.82



Davis Station Sculpture Garden
2003



Outlandish - Aurora Australis over cane line (Antarctica)
2009
Acrylic, cotton, Belgian linen
35 cm x 35 cm

Psychogeography and drift

Perhaps Eastaugh's art constitutes a contemporary, expanded form of psychogeography and drift, conducted on a global scale? Developed by the Situationist Internationale in Paris in the 1950s and 60s, psychogeography was an experimental mode of behaviour involving analysis of the 'laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals'.⁵ Giving themselves over to the ambience of the city, to chance encounters related to architecture and urbanism, the Situationists developed the technique of the *dérive* – or drift – a 'playful-constructive behaviour' which involved setting aside work, leisure and other motives, and losing oneself in the city, in order to engage in new, authentic experiences.⁶

The idea of the drift, as Sadie Plant has noted, was to 'cultivate an awareness of the ways in which everyday life is presently conditioned and controlled [and] the ways in which this manipulation can be exposed and subverted'.⁷ To drift was indeed to 'go with the flow', and at the same time, to encourage a critique of the conditions of everyday life, and a concern for the environment in which we live – something that Stephen Eastaugh has practiced at a planetary scale.

Margins and peripheries

Once assigned the subservient position of provincialism, it has more recently been argued that, with the advent of globalisation, Australian art is no longer provincial, but still peripheral.⁸ Intensifying this condition in extremis, Stephen Eastaugh's art and life abounds on the peripheries. Lingering in the margins, and attesting to the vibrancy of local forms and idioms, his radical wanderings to 'terrestrial extremities' – as William L. Fox describes elsewhere in this volume – are a form of physical and psychological endurance, a means of exploring limits, annihilating a fixed identity, an appointment with oneself, involving the experience of others.

Eastaugh's itinerant and nomadic habits might also be seen in solidarity with those that traverse all sorts of borders, as a result of globalisation, cosmopolitanism, migration, or flight from regimes of domination and control – not to mention the boundary-riding and border crossing associated with sexuality, gender and costume.⁹ As a devotee of the drift, a follower of multi-directional flows, and a traveller through time and space, Stephen Eastaugh's life and work offer proof of the possibility of poetry and freedom in a more and more standardised world.

⁵ Guy Debord, 'Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography', *Les Lèvres Nues*, no.6, 1955, accessed at: <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/2>

⁶ Guy Debord, 'Théorie de la dérive', *Internationale Situationniste*, no.2, Paris 1958, (trans. Ken Knabb), accessed at Bureau of Public Secrets: <http://www.bopsecrets.org/SI/2.derive.htm>

⁷ Sadie Plant, *The most radical gesture: The Situationist International in a postmodern age*, Routledge, London, 1992, p.58.

⁸ See Terry Smith, 'The Provincialism Problem', *Artforum*, vol. 13, no. 1, September 1974, pp.54-59; and Anthony Gardner, 'Post-provincial, still peripheral: Australian art on the global stage, 1980-2009', in Jaynie Anderson (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Australian Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2012, pp.231-247 and 338-339.

⁹ Stephen Eastaugh, 'Papeete' *Unstill Life*, p.144