

# The Art Of Travel

*The photographic record of people and places frequently appears to lack emotion. This cannot be said of the work of the inveterate artist-traveler, Australian Stephen Eastaugh. His "views" of the places that he has visited during the past two-decades combines both his love of small things and his joy in close observation.*

By Jonathan Thomson

Matthew Arnold was one of the best known poets and sharpest critics of the Victorian age. His advocacy of liberal education and his notions of culture and a critical spirit profoundly influenced his own times and continue to influence ours. A review of his poetry suggests that it endures because of its directness, and the literal fidelity of his beautifully circumstantial descriptions of nature, of scenes, and places, imbued with a kind of majestic sadness which takes the place of music. Alike in his poetry and in his prose, which supplies in charm of manner, breadth of subject-matter, and acuteness of individual judgment, what it lacks in system, a stimulating personality makes itself felt.<sup>1</sup>

This account might also apply to the work of a latter-day Victorian, the artist Stephen Eastaugh who was born in Melbourne, Australia, in 1960. His work has an immediacy and freshness and his choice of subject matter is intriguing. In all his work we are aware of the personality of the artist. In another parallel, the first lines of the opening stanzas of Arnold's poem *The Future* may be viewed as an ac-

count of Eastaugh's life: *A wanderer is man from his birth. As what he sees is, so have his thoughts been.*

Eastaugh grew up in Melbourne and it is where he trained as an artist, but for the past 20 years he has wandered the planet making art. For 20 years, Eastaugh has rarely lived for more than a few months in any one place. He has been to more than 60 countries, setting up his studio in far-flung locations like Ulan Bator (Mongolia), Nuuk (Greenland), Nufa Alofa (Tonga), Phnom Penh (Cambodia),

Ushuaia (Tierra del Fuego), and both the North and South Poles.

Whatever its motivation, Eastaugh's wanderlust is inextricably linked to the ongoing discourse on tourism and the commoditization of cultural experience. Travel has long inspired artists and given rise to new ways of interpreting the landscape—from Claude Lorrain's classical Italian landscapes to the Reverend William Gilpin's walking tours through picturesque Britain and J.M.W. Turner's exploration of the sublime in the European Alps. Histori-

ans of 19th century art have examined how the tourist's gaze helped define the dominant middle-class representations of modern life. In his detailed study of art, leisure, and Parisian society, Robert Herbert explores in some detail how impressionism became the perfect expression of a culture of leisure. In a more specific examination of Monet, he examines how and why the artist constructs his pictures, and the choices he makes as to what to include or exclude.<sup>2</sup>

Historians of tourism have done most to articulate the terms of the debate. Sociologist Dean MacCannell's classic Marxist analysis uses the term tourist to designate actual



Stephen Eastaugh, *Travaillogue: Rooted, Mongolia* (detail), 2002, acrylic, cotton, wool, pastel and oilstick on cotton bandage, 30 individual pieces, each piece approx. 21 x 21 cm. Private collection, USA. All illustrations: Courtesy of John Batten Gallery, Hong Kong.



sightseers, mainly middle-class, deployed throughout the world in search of experience, and as a meta-sociological term for modern-man-in-general. He is particularly interested in the tourist's quest for authenticity and the supposed location of that in the working lives of others.<sup>3</sup> James Buzard is also concerned with class differentiation. He explores how greater accessibility of travel gave rise to new formulations about what constituted authentic cultural experience. Travel's educative, acculturating function took on a more competitive aspect as "travelers" sought to distinguish themselves from "mere tourists." At the same time, the authentic culture of places, the *genius loci*, or spirit of place, was represented as being located "off the beaten track" where it could be discovered by the sensitive traveler, not the vulgar tourist. Buzard notes that the criteria for the ability to separate the authentic from mere touristic experiences are a loosely defined set of personal qualities that amount to a superior emotional-aesthetic sensitivity. In this way, tourism has become an exemplary cultural practice of liberal democratic societies as it is seen as being at once both popularly accessible and exclusive.<sup>4</sup>

**A**s an artist who is constantly traveling, Eastaugh is clearly a part of this discourse. For most of us, tourism is a leisure activity which presupposes its

opposite, work. It anticipates a return 'home' within a relatively short period of time. But for Eastaugh, work is the journey and home is wherever he happens to be. Much of the tourism discourse paints artists in a rather pejorative light—as if their choices of what to represent are somehow dishonest or elitist or culturally imperialist. But the value of an artist's representation is precisely the personal perspective that they give to their work. Artists-in-residence programs recognize this. Artists are paid to work in particular places—everywhere from schools to factories or with specific communities of interest—from sex workers to commissions as war

artists in combat zones—precisely because the mind and eye of the artist is a powerful lens that gives us all another way of looking at the world.

Eastaugh's art is often inspired by small things and isolated instants. These traces of places, moments, and feelings may have as their initial impetus a personal *aide-memoire*, but in his hands they also come to have symbolic resonance. In the Southern Hemisphere summer of 2002/2003 Eastaugh was artist-in-residence for four months at the Australian Antarctic Division's Davis Base at Prydz Bay, Antarctica. A series of small works painted in oilstick and mixed media on found timber panels (off-cuts of the wooden pallets used to ship machinery and stores to the base) capture the visual impact of atmospheric phenomena. Each of these works has a strong

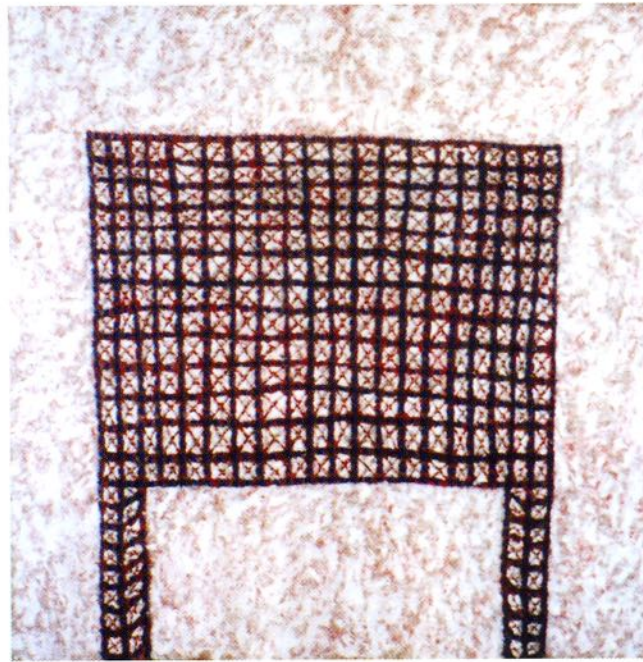
horizon line. Above the line, the sky varies from pale yellow to vivid orange. Below it, the foreground is an expanse of white that is given a rich texture by the rough grain of the wood panel. Even at night, which during an Antarctic summer may last no more than four hours, the whiteness of the landscape dominates. Each of these works is inscribed with the international radiophone code of the numbers from one to ten—unaone, bisotwo, terrathree, kartefour and so on—which are used in radio communications whenever language difficulties arise. The inclusion of text in this series of works alludes to the very real dangers that may be encoun-



Stephen Eastaugh, *Everywhere a Foreigner or Nowhere a Foreigner?*, 2004, acrylic, wool & thread on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Private collection, Hong Kong.



Stephen Eastaugh, *Antarctichinoiserie-scape*, 2004, acrylic, wool & thread on canvas, 143 x 150 cm.



Stephen Eastaugh, *Big Empty Sign*, 2004, acrylic, wool & thread on canvas, 140 x 132 cm.





Stephen Eastaugh, *Antarctic escapes* (one of three), 2001, oilstick & ink on wood, each piece approx. 10 x 30 cm.

tered and the tenuous presence of human habitation on the world's most inhospitable continent.

A large work from this same period is titled *Antarctichinoiserie-scape*. This work has an elevated or aerial perspective. However, unlike cartography, which is concerned with a codified set of symbols that are used to convey information in an unambiguous way, Eastaugh's work is concerned with dislocation, experimentation, imagined space and mystery. The work was inspired by the topography of the Antarctic ice shelf, and the terrible jumble of blocks and sheets of ice piled up hard against one another, but it also reminds the artist of the way in which Chinese landscape artists depict deep distance.

Another Chinese influence may be discerned in the artist's use of red woolen thread to stitch the outlines of the landscape forms. Chinese folklore says that there are red threads connecting a newborn child's spirit to all the people that will become important to them in later life. As the child grows, those threads become shorter to bring these people closer to-

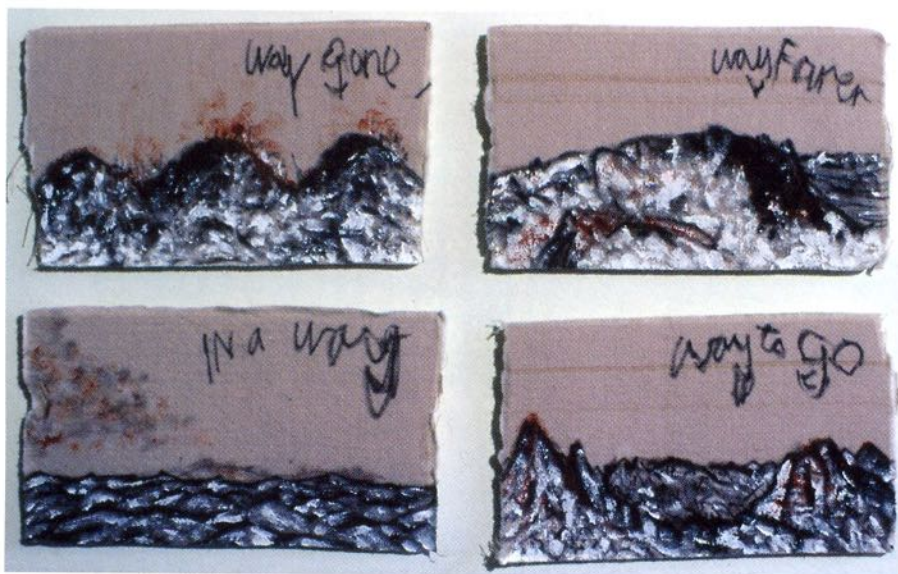
gether. For Eastaugh, the use of the thread may symbolize his spiritual connection with the landscape. However, he might have a rather more prosaic reason for using thread. With no permanent home and a lot of time spent in transit from one place to another he is often obliged to make his art from the materials he has to hand. Woolen thread is light and extremely versatile. The clearly repetitive, laborious evidence of his handiwork may also be a reference to his focus on the journey itself, rather than the destination.

**I**n a series of works called *Travailogue*, which is either an allusion to the French word for work, or a reference to the etymology of travel in the word "travail," the artist may be referencing his own dogged determination to keep moving from place to place or the pain and suffering of forced migration as people seek refuge from hunger or oppression. He uses bandages as the support for these works, both because it is light, readily available and convenient, and because of its associations with healing. In *Travailogue*, *Money for the Last*

*Trip*, he depicts a series of the braziers used to burn Chinese "hell" money, the imitation money which is burnt as an offering to the ghosts of one's ancestors to ensure that they are comfortable in the afterlife. In these works he depicts the different forms of brazier as a specific reference to the time and place where he made the work and refers to death as a release from the travails of life, the last journey we will ever make.

These works were made in Taiwan in 2004 during an Australia-China-Council-funded residency at the Taipei Artists Village. During this time Eastaugh also made a series called *Formosa (Beautiful Island)* which are small landscape paintings, loosely scumbled in black and white acrylic on raw canvas. The artist has again used red wool to stitch a variety of small motifs over the painted background. The motifs all have a particular cultural resonance and each are placed in the landscape in order to better locate them within their local cultural context. The motifs chosen by the artist include a silhouette of the world's latest tallest building, a brazier, an antique glass perfume bottle, and a Chinese-style cloud pattern. They are more akin to diary notes than any form of mass-produced souvenir. MacCannell makes the point that an authentic attraction can be experienced but not purchased and argues that while a souvenir references the attraction, it is always represented as a "fallen object" so as not to become elevated in importance to the point where it breaks its relationship with the attraction itself.<sup>5</sup> However, unlike a souvenir, these works are presented as unique objects that synthesize the artist's personal experience of the attraction and present it in an entirely new way. They deliberately set out to have, in their own way, an importance every bit as important as the attraction which inspired them.

A work called *Big Empty Sign* made in Bangkok indicates how the artist's eye is captured not just by the superficially sensational subjects of the tourist's gaze,



Stephen Eastaugh, *Wayward Ways*, 2002, ink acrylic on cotton bandage, 15 x 24 cm.





Stephen Eastaugh, **Domestic - Exotic (Beijing)**, 2002, oilstick, ink, metal on wood, 25 pieces, each 20 x 30 cm.

but by those things which have aesthetic resonance. Advertising hoardings are commonplace on the long stretches of highway between an airport and the downtown area. Other than messages of welcome at the airport, the style and subject of their printed posters are often the first visual representations of a culture that a visitor sees. However, in Thailand, what was interesting for Eastaugh was the structure of the hoarding itself. For him, the empty metal framework of a newly built hoarding that had yet to receive its poster was sculptural in its simplicity and its nascent communicative function more intriguing than any overt message it might later support.

**T**hrough his art Eastaugh also examines himself, not just the traces of the places in which he has been. *Packed*, a large work, is autobiographical in nature, and is made up of a grid pattern sewn in red wool. Each of the small rect-

angular cells so formed are painted with a small black suitcase on a white ground. The hundreds of suitcases symbolize the many hundreds of times that Eastaugh has packed his bags and moved on.

As travel becomes more and more accessible and the world becomes smaller, the process of international acculturation results in a more precisely defined hegemony of experience. It is refreshing then to experience the joy of small things and

the freshness of vision honed by an artist during more than two decades of travel and observation.  $\Delta$

#### Notes:

1. Stanley Kunitz (ed.) *British Authors of the Nineteenth Century* (H.W. Wilson, New York, 1936)
2. Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art Leisure and Parisian Society* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1988) and *Monet on the Normandy Coast: Tourism and Painting 1867 - 1886* (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1994)
3. James MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Schocken Books, New York, 1976)
4. James Buzard, *The Beaten Track: European Tourism Literature and the Ways to Culture 1800-1918* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1993)
5. James MacCannell, *The Tourist*



Stephen Eastaugh in front of **Packed**, 2003/2004, acrylic, wool & thread on canvas, 211 x 375 cm.

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