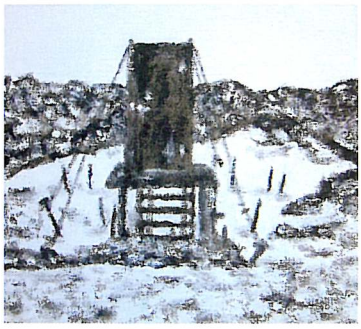
Seeing in Motion

William L. Fox

Taken singly, the paintings, sculptures, collages, and other artistic endeavors by Australian artist Stephen Eastaugh seem to present images about individual places. Eastaugh is perpetual motion personified, transferring himself every three months or so to a different location in one of the 80 or so countries he's worked in since 1981. While I'm writing this, he's finishing a residency in Iceland and shortly off to Scotland. In recent years he's worked in, among other places, Greenland, Argentina, Cambodia and, somewhat ironically, in his birthplace of Melbourne. While each of his works deals with the specifics of wherever he is temporarily in residence--a hut in the Antarctic, a temple in Bali, a bus in the Sahara--taken altogether you realize that his overarching inquiry is into the nature of how we experience place. And that is a preoccupation--as much performative as image-based--that is strongly related but very different from turning space into place through art.



Wilkesland series (detail)
2000
Acrylic, eyelets, jute
40 cm x 40 cm each

Eastaugh is a painter on a grand tour not of idealized views, as were the artists of the 18th century, nor of scenic climaxes, the subject of 19th-century painters in search of the sublime, but rather of extreme environments and circumstances both exterior and interior. He's not seeking to sit at the center of human culture, but rather to walk its edges and peer around. Wherever Eastaugh travels, he absorbs local customs, slang, and material eccentricities, often using the latter as the stuff from which he literally and figuratively makes his art. The Polar Regions are not just the ends of the Earth, but the terrestrial extremity for such a working practice, and Antarctica the prime locale. Eastaugh has travelled within the Antarctic Circle for six residencies aboard ships and lived at three separate land stations, often for months at a time. He is one of only a handful of artists to have wintered-over, a physically and psychologically demanding nine-month residency, an accomplishment that could perhaps be exceeded only by flying to Mars. As I said, he's looking both outward from the edges of the physical world, but also inward into his cognitive processes.

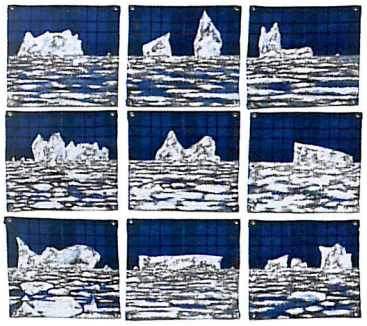
Wilkesland series (detail)
2000
Acrylic, eyelets, jute
40 cm x 40 cm each

Often the way an artist navigates his working practice as a traveller is to assemble typologies of what he or she sees. In the Antarctic this began in 1773-74 with William Hodges, the British painter accompanying James Cook on the captain's second great circumnavigation of the Pacific. Hodges, an artist in the classical European tradition of historical landscapes, was trained aboard ship to be a strategic topographical artist--how to record accurately the places Cook landed for the future benefit of Her Majesty's Royal Navy. As such, he painted coastal profiles, native watercraft and architecture, and the peoples encountered. Hodges expeditionary work is fundamental to the tradition carried on throughout the 20th century by most artists visiting the Antarctic, who tended to focus primarily on enormous landscape panoramas with the occasional human structure in the foreground to provide scale. Eastaugh has a greater and more contemporary versatility of eye.

Everywhere a foreigner or nowhere a foreigner (Taiwan)
2004
Acrylic, thread, Belgian linen
150 cm x 150 cm

When Eastaugh painted his Iceburgs [sic] in 2000, he catalogued what floated in front of his eyes, but the misspelled title of the typological nine-part grid also evokes a city; furthermore, he painted it with acrylic on blanket fabric, a material found to hand that echoes warmth to the cold of the ice. The puns are both abstract and embodied, the series a trope for itself, a high degree of metaphorical transformation beyond the ability of most artists on the road. Another example would be a larger grid of common vertical forms found on the horizontal and isotropic ice, Travailogue--Posts, Poles and Aerials (Antarctica) from 2007. "Travail" is a close cognate of "travel," and the acrylic is painted on a material Eastaugh often carries with him, bandages. Travel is trouble and the wounds incurred require existential treatment as well as binding with cloth.

Eastaugh will sometimes focus his attention down to the smallest synecdoches of his experience, as in his 2009 series Knots, intimate yet powerful forms painted on linen and enhanced with threads tied throughout the linen. Prominent among such studies is the 21-part series of Wilkes Land from 2000, portraits of Australia's Casey Station painted on 40-cm squares of grommeted jute; they encompasses everything from the icescape to storage containers and vehicles. Each time you look at it, your mind assembles a slightly different experience of the science outpost from Eastaugh's first Antarctic residency.

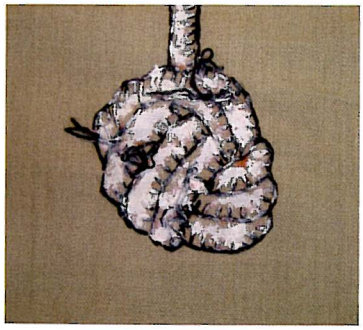


Iceburgs x 9
2000
Acrylic on blanket
40 cm x 40 cm each
Kerry Stokes Collection
Perth

Everyone who has ever visited the Antarctic would fit inside a small football stadium, and fewer than three hundred artists have actually worked on the continent since people first set foot there in 1895. The primary task of the artists, funded by science agencies of their respective countries, has therefore been to bring into our cultural context the most difficult and remote space on the planet. They were supported in order to bring the Antarctic within the imagination of a populace that would, in turn, then continue to support science projects there with tax dollars. This outreach effort has required making literal pictures of Antarctica: maps, topographical drawings, landscape paintings, panoramic photographs (and, yes, endless anthropomorphized images of penguins who stand in for the native peoples who have never lived there).

That early artistic tradition was exemplified by the artists of the Heroic Age of Antarctic exploration, such as the science officer and artist Edward Wilson (who travelled with Robert Scott on his expeditions), as well as the early photographers Herbert Ponting and the incomparable Australian Frank Hurley. It wasn't until the mid-20th century that it became possible for artists with a more interpretative mindset to travel to the ice, and many of them were Australians. Nel Law visited in 1960, Sidney Nolan in 1964; both produced deeply expressionistic interpretations. Jan Senbergs, Bea Maddock, and John Caldwell advanced things further in 1987, when they deployed their individual styles during a collaborative trip to forge a looser and more intimate relationship with the continent, as did the printmaker Jörg Schmeisser in 1997.

Knots series (Antarctica)
2009
Acrylic, thread, Belgian linen
23 cm x 23 cm each



Knots series (Antarctica)
2009
Acrylic, thread, Belgian linen
23 cm x 23 cm each

Opposite Page

Wilkesland series (detail)
2000
Acrylic, eyelets, jute
40 cm x 40 cm each

Stephen Eastaugh, by virtue of his peripatetic life and practice, has taken things yet a step further. He is a painter with an expanded practice, a traveller with no point in mind and one for whom everything is the point. Motion is his stimulus, remapping the world his method of processing it all. In 2004 he imposed a white thready figure suspended in space over a heavily scumbled dark background, an abstracted self-portrait revealed by its title, his identity asserted not as a statement but as a question: Everywhere a Foreigner or Nowhere a Foreigner? Eastaugh, standing far out on the circumference of human experience, has posed a question central to what it means to be human at the beginning of the 21st century: how do we know what the world is when we now walk everywhere upon it.

Sources

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