

EAST(augh), WEST, NORTH & SOUTH by Michael Wardell

Four years ago, Stephen Eastaugh asked me if I would write him a reference as he was applying for the Humanities Programme for the Australian Antarctic Division. He explained that they offer a berth only if there is a spare spot as scientists always get first preference. As it turned out, he was not successful that year and reapplied every year for the next three until he was, at last, offered a berth on the 1999/2000 Season, Voyage no 5, aboard the RSV Aurora Australis.

I recommended Eastaugh as the perfect artist for this programme as experience of travel has been such a central theme in his work and I was already familiar with the strange images that had come out of his visits to Turkey, Iceland, Norway, Scotland, South America, South East Asia, North & West Africa, Greenland, Bulgaria, The Netherlands and the outback regions of Australia.

In 1995 Eastaugh wrote an artist's statement for an exhibition in Holland: "After thirteen years of moving about the planet I have contracted the luxury of a non-stop cozy jet-lag disease. It seems I have turned into a cosmopolitan, which means I am either one of no fixed abode who is nowhere a foreigner or one of no fixed abode who is everywhere a foreigner. The first definition is far too utopian and romantic whilst the second is too sad and lonely. I try to live and make pictures on the border of these two poles."

Eastaugh's art is essentially about Being and like the Medieval Irish monks he is not content with hiding away in an isolated cell in order to find enlightenment but is compulsively driven to travel, to experience different cultures, different foods and different natural environments – the more extreme the better.

Because Eastaugh's muse is experience, his 'language' is a necessary hybrid of the familiar and the strange. Some images can be 'read' as signifiers of recognisable objects while others are abstract shapes that record and experience of thought that can not be pinned down to more universal signs. Sometimes these abstract shapes are even remembered images that are only recognisable to the artist himself. The painting *Drugs* 1990, depicts a red and white viscous blob against a black background, which records an incident in Peru when his drink was spiked at a café and as he collapsed into unconsciousness on the street outside he saw this image on the pavement – perhaps a stain on the concrete or the blurred outline of something else.

More recently, his travels have taken him to extreme climates – the

excessive heat of the Australian desert and the excessive cold of Greenland. Before heading off to Antarctica he spent about ten weeks in Broome producing a series of work that could be collectively titled "Hot". Before Antarctica, Eastaugh's most recent experience with the extreme cold was on a five week trip to Kalaallit Nunaat (Greenland) in 1993 which produced two very different series of works. A series of small landscapes on wood collectively titled *Kalaallit Nunaat Studies* and the most purely abstract paintings he has ever produced collectively titled *Ablutions*. These two series highlight extremes in Eastaugh's reaction to the visual phenomena of the 'alien landscape' while the second attempts to capture the effect the experience has on his head, his body and his soul. Throughout his travels, Eastaugh has fed his soul with as much passion and lax censorship as he has fed his body. Once he described his mouth as a corrupt immigration officer guarding his stomach and it is with the same non-judgmental quest for experiential knowledge (rather than merely to satiate a hunger) that he contemplates the human search for spiritual comfort. Sitting on a boat travelling up the coast of Greenland, he experienced a 'blankness' that had eluded him in his wide-eyed 'pilgrimages to dumb deities' around the world.

Perhaps his most purely self-reflective series of paintings, *Ablutions* consisted of wooden panels, sometimes minimally shaped and mostly with all over texture of predominantly white or black surfaces. While reminiscent of gravestones or commemorative plaques, each is an abstracted self-portrait and a palimpsest both hiding and revealing the ruminations of the soul before they are ordered by language.

An important shift in Eastaugh's art has occurred between Kalaallit Nunaat and his return to extreme cold seven years later. Before 1993, his paintings were visualisations of his stories, his personal dreamtime, mixing his experiences with stories told to him by characters he has met on his travels. While still personal, the 'narrator' was always a little removed from the 'narration'; a sightseer, a tourist in an endless tour of the weird and wonderful. The viewpoint of the narrator was outside looking in. Quirky humour disguised the artist's fear of the one territory he had skirted around but never fully explored. He started questioning himself as the nomadic voyeur and realising that he was collecting experiences like a tourist collects postcards.

A series of work from 1997, painted, stitched and drawn on tarpaulin, were first exhibited in an exhibition titled *Continuous Temporality*. This work is almost a mini retrospective of all of Eastaugh's previous 'stories' but here told from a more self-reflective standpoint. Works like *Religious Disaster Tours* 1997, not only speak about places he has visited and stories he has heard, but also comments on his own fascination for seeking out such places and stories. He questions both why the human population behaves in these various ways and why he, the artist-traveller, is so drawn to these places and stories. For the first time, the two extremes of his imagery are combined in one easily-rolled-up-and-carried body of work.

Having gone through this retrospective, self-reflective stage, Eastaugh was well prepared to face the new frontier of a land where the indigenous population were penguins and the 'squatters' were scientists removed from their natural environment and placed in this artificial outpost that is a cross between an old-fashioned frontier town and a futuristic space station.

--Michael Wardell, ***Curatorial Services Co-ordinator, Art Gallery of NSW.***

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