



Antarctica is an awe inspiring landscape with its crystal glaciers that reach up to the sky and across the horizon for kilometers. However for textile artist, Zoe MacDonell, it is the smaller details that captivated her attention and led to the creation of her beautiful series of oil on linen paintings titled, 'Antarctic Separation'. MacDonell has been the recipient of a number of residencies including the Royal Over Seas League Visual Art Scholarship (UK), which she received in 2010 to travel to London and Scotland for two months. She also spent time at Arthur Boyd's Bundanon property and Artspace Visual Art Centre (Sydney) studio in residency programmes. MacDonell was also guest artist of Mawson's Hut foundation in association with the Australian Antarctic division enabling her to travel to Antarctica in 2009. In 2006 she received a 'New Work Grant' as an emerging artist, from the Australia Council for the arts. Her works are held in public collections in Australia, such as Art Bank and Art Equity; as well as overseas in Rockingham North Carolina Municipal Building.



Zoe MacDonell



'I went to Antarctica for about a month which was incredible and I think that a lot of work will come out of that. ...When I was there, I went for long walks and discovered, imbedded in the ice, these small fragments of organic matter that had been frozen. They were just so exquisite, striking- very strange looking. The series of paintings that I have done are representational of what I saw in the ice. I thought the pieces seemed quite alone, they had this sense of separation from everything else and they're full of colour and texture, unlike the glaciers and ice surrounding them.'

Because of the extremely cold temperatures, oil paint is impossible to use, so MacDonell made a number of sketches and works documenting these frozen artifacts so that she could translate them later into oil paintings when she got back to Australia.

'The first body of work that I have made is a series of oil on linen paintings, which I made after the trip. When I was there, it is very difficult to paint with oil because of the extreme cold, so I had a number of gouash on paper and canvas boards; and I took lots of photos and made many sketches. I compiled a visual diary, creating all of these resources so that when I came back to the studio environment I could make a body of paintings.'

MacDonell's works frequently feature details, considered detritus- both organic and man-made that people would generally overlook. Her works enlighten their audience about their surroundings. Her environment, is



therefore an inherent part of her works.

'I tend to come across details in the landscape and found objects, and interesting textures that a lot of people probably wouldn't look at. ...they are smaller fragments of something much larger. All of the imagery that is featured in my work is drawn from the landscape, whether it is organic, or man made. Their variety also depends on the landscape that I have found myself in. I do a lot of artist in residence programs particularly because my work draws from specific environments that I have been placed in. So in a residency, you respond to an environment that you are within, and that influences the body of work that you do- so you end up making work that you wouldn't have made otherwise because you wouldn't have come across these influences.'

MacDonell has portrayed Antarctica as a frozen cabinet of curiosities- displaying organic and artificial debris frozen in pockets of ice. The organic matter remains crisp, perfectly intact, their colours as rich as the day of their preservation.

'The objects are dead but remain looking perfect because of the ice...they look so warm in surroundings that are so cold. The poles of life and death, detail and abstraction. These things interest me. I am also interested in how man-made objects can resemble organic forms [when taken out of their functional context].

I asked MacDonell if she went looking for these fragments.

'I do in the sense of a residency. It will provide the visual vocabulary that is necessary for making a new body of work. I really like the adventure of exploring a new place and being by myself somewhere unexpected and new. ...the ice in Antarctica is unlike any ice that I have ever seen. It has jewel-like textures. It has clear areas that reflect these vibrant, almost unnatural blues, greens. I spent a lot of time looking at the different textures.'

MacDonell's interest in art and seeing beauty in the small details of her surroundings, began as a young child.

'I grew up in England. My parents always took me to lots of galleries- I had lots of trips to the Victorian Albert Museum. And my parents were always pointing things out to me, and particular objects and shapes and fragments, and precious elements and that became part of how I was looking at the world around me. And when I finished high school, the only thing that felt right was to go to art college.'

MacDonell's studies at the NSW College of Fine Arts, centred on painting and drawing but in her final honours year, her work shifted to incorporate multi-media processes and textiles, where she created a silk paper series of works which had embossing and drawing, using different kinds of techniques. After graduating she won the 'Object Award for Studio Based Practice' (2002), which is a national graduate prize for design and applied arts.

Although she has a love of textiles, painting is a prominent part of her art practice. Her paintings are enhanced by the choice of fabrics which she paints on: namely silk and linen. In creating her 'Antarctic Separation' series, MacDonell





used linen because of its texture- it is perfectly smooth and unhindered by any roughness, allowing her to affect the qualities of ice. But she also just likes fabric.

'I choose a smooth linen as it embodies a quality that reminds me of the silk I also work on. The painted imagery is also fine in detail.'

In terms of her approach to art, paying close attention to the intricate details of every form in her paintings; as well as her interest in alternative techniques, her contemporaries would certainly include Fiona Hall. Another artist she mentioned in our interview as being an inspiration to her work was the late Louise Bourgeois who also used textile practices and techniques in her work.

'When I saw Louise Bourgeois's work, I really responded to it. They are really exciting to me and they still make me want to make work and to make textile based work. And it is really exciting to see those kind of processes done so beautifully in prominent galleries and museums. I am particularly drawn to artists who use methods and techniques in an innovative way and I think that in Australia when I saw Fiona Hall's work, I thought that was very beautiful because she is drawing on all these different processes, and a lot of them from textiles.

Page 24: Top: *Ceramic Fragment (2)* Photography, hand transfer on silk, final print on German etch paper 112 x 88 cm 2008

Bottom: *Text Photography*, hand transfer on silk, final print on German etch paper 112 x 88 cm 2007



Page 25: Top: *Penumbra*, Pastel and pencil crayon on paper, 90 x 65 cm 2008

Bottom: *Shifting Spaces*, Pastel and pencil crayon on paper, 76 x 56 cm 2008

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