BEYOND WOOP WOOP

BEYOND WOOP WOOP John Kelly in Antarctica

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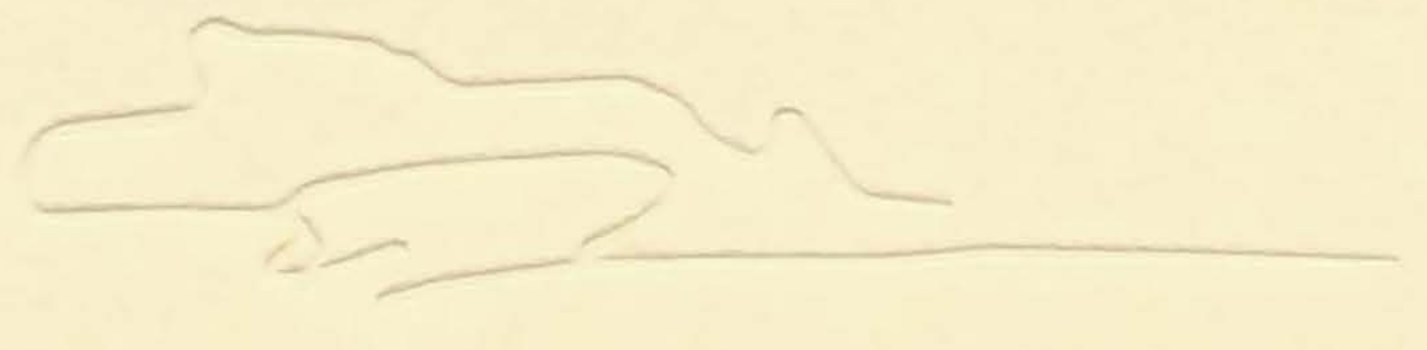

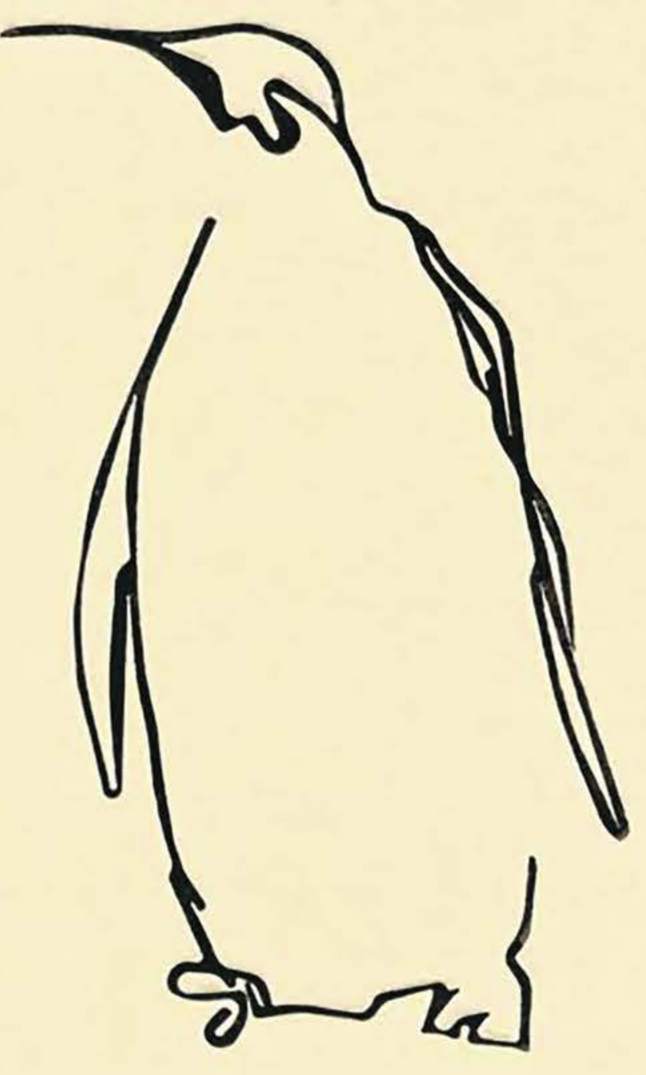

'AUSTER'

Kelly 2014

Beyond Woop Woop: John Kelly in Antarctica

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This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australian Antarctic Arts Fellowship.
This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition Beyond Woop Woop, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 12 June - 20 September 2015 in association with Dark MoFo 2015.

All paintings by John Kelly www.johnkellyartist.com

Edited and Designed by Gina Lee, What Gina Did Next

Colour Processing by Splitting Image, Melbourne

Printed in China for Australian Book Connection, Melbourne

Published by What Gina Did Next, Melbourne

ISBN: 978-0-9943184-0-4

Acknowledgements

John Kelly would like to thank the Australian Antarctic Division, Kristin Raw (AAD), The Guardian, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, Jane Stewart (TMAG), Leigh Carmichael, Gina Lee, the photographers, especially Justin Chambers and Richard Youd, all the crew aboard the Aurora Australis and fellow Summer 2013 expeditioners, everyone who contributed to the crowd-funding campaign, his family and most importantly Oscar and Christina Todesco-Kelly for letting him go on an amazing adventure.

Gina Lee would like to thank John Kelly, Carolyn Elliot from Australian Book Connection, Rod Davies from Splitting Image, all the photographers for making it so difficult to choose just some of the many fabulous shots, all the Pozible supporters, Sonia Payes, Laura Harwood, Annette Harwood, and her cat Mink.

John Kelly Auster 2014 deboss and relief print on Indian rag paper edition of 99 38 x 56cm

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Foreword

Gina Lee

In 2013, John Kelly was awarded a fellowship from the Australian Antarctic Division. There was some trepidation about getting on a boat to spend three months in the harshest and most remote place on earth, but some words of encouragement from respected senior artist Jan Senbergs, who had embarked on the same mission decades earlier, steeled Kelly's resolve and he was soon making preparations to undertake his most serious adventure yet.

Since *Cow up a tree* was exhibited on the Champs Elysees in 1999, Kelly has established an international career and become well known for monumental sculptures of cows in compromising positions. In recent years, inspired by the country where his father was born, he has re-discovered a love of painting, especially plein air landscapes, enduring the icy Atlantic winds that whip the Irish south coast. Kelly was in training, conditioning himself to paint in the cold, and pushing himself to produce new work. In Antarctica, his limits, both mental and physical, would be tested even further.

This book documents the 57 paintings Kelly produced whilst in Antarctica. But it is more than a catalogue of artworks - it is about the artist's experience. Also reproduced are a series of insightful blogs Kelly wrote for The Guardian, and to give context to the whole experience, there are some amazing photographs taken by fellow expeditioners. Of particular note are the stunning contributions made by Justin Chambers, a classically trained chef stationed at Mawson, and Richard Youd, Senior Communications Technical Officer and serial adventurer, which capture so many aspects of the wild and complex environment.

Kelly's own paintings reflect a rawness that comes from confronting a new continent head on. He was not reticent in accepting all the experiences Antarctica had on offer, and the results are honest, open, harsh and beautiful.

For further information on the artist and full bibliography, please visit www.johnkellyartist.com.

John Kelly: Antarctic paintings

Jane Stewart
Principal Curator, Art
Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

Before leaving for Antarctica, John Kelly purchased a folding easel that would fit within a case also containing paints, brushes, and self-made canvas boards. These he would carry through ice and snow in one of the world's most extreme and remote environments for it was Kelly's desire to paint *en plein air* in Antarctica.

The Antarctic and the Arctic have intrigued artists since antiquity, but never more so than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when exotic narratives flowed from the many global exploratory expeditions originating in Europe. The first drawings of the Antarctic ice shelf by William Hodges, the official artist on Captain James Cook's second Pacific Voyage (1772-75), along with reports from the southern scientific voyages and whaling missions during the early nineteenth century, instilled a sense of awe in those observing from afar.

The frozen lands were envisaged by artists with the aid of published engravings and written reports by expeditioners. Most famously, in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein,* 1818, the manmade creature fled to the Arctic seeking profound solitude and distance from the horrors of his European existence. In the painting *Das Eismeer*, 1823-24, Casper David Friedrich conjured colossal splinters of Arctic ice crushing the dwarfed ship, The Hope. Long fascinated by avalanches, storms, mist and snow, John Mallord William Turner based his small series of whaling paintings, 1845-46, in the Arctic and the Antarctic, the ice and inky sea an alluring background for thrashing whales and defiant whalers.[1]

Despite nearly two centuries of exploration and discovery, Antarctica is often thought to be the Earth's last frontier and the ice still captivates. The wildly inhospitable climate prevents permanent habitation, or even human ease or comfort within the landscape. In recent decades, the United States, Britain, New Zealand and Australia have fostered an Antarctic culture through government-funded artist-in-residence programs. These acknowledge the historic relationship between exploration, science, cartography and art while also embracing the contemporary perspective of artists in a field dominated by science. In 2013, John Kelly was the Australian Antarctic Division's Antarctic Arts Fellow.

Kelly began writing about his experience from the ice-breaker the Aurora Australis in October 2013. Published online by The Guardian, the blogs read as a travelogue that tracked his activities, observations, mental wanderings and reading material (fittingly Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*, 1851). The first entries are written while trapped on a vessel seesawing through the Southern Ocean. The text is both reflective and anticipatory and it is with true Romantic sentiment that Kelly claimed: "I no longer want to be in that white cube that deposits you under an ice cold fluorescent with walls padded with art made in its confines ... An artist's journey should include risk and adventure, preferably to find geology and history that is still a mystery. Antarctica might have all that."[2]

Two weeks into the journey, Kelly was revelling in "that whiteness of the berg, that iridescent purity, that opaque and semi-opaque glass cathedral-like structure that soars out of its close but common relative to create something truly wondrous."[3] He spent ten days painting the seemingly endless field of bergs and floes that encircle the southern continent, working quickly from the ship's deck to capture the moving vista and to stave off the sting of the freezing air.

While ship-bound, Kelly was able to experiment with different ways of picturing the alien environment. Paint was applied in thin and lusciously thick layers, scumbly and sometimes slippery, the orange undercoat gently exposed to bring luminous definition to the white environment. In these works, the bergs are brilliant, crystalline forms emerging assertively from the flatter surfaces of surrounding sky and water.

Fellow artist Jan Senbergs also acknowledged the importance of the slow ship journey to his Antarctic venture in 1987.[4] The expansive view, transforming environment, camaraderie, and the time to acclimatize as an artist to the visual language of ice are each enriching experiences. Many painters would value the 'idle' hours for taking notes, photographs and sketching in readiness for their return to the studio. For Kelly, however, each minute of the journey was a precious opportunity to create a finished painting. His mission to paint Antarctica *en plein air* left little room for preparation and meant mastering the depiction of ice head-on and without hesitation.

Potent, visible brush strokes harness the energy required to work outdoors in a place where the conditions are infamously erratic and predictably dangerous. Once Kelly was on land, the sublime forces of magnificence and fear came into play. The horizon was no longer a focus of the paintings given its frequent interruption by fog, snow, cloud or the looming mountains and glaciers. The viewpoint became lower, the grounded perspective positioning the artist within the landscape he painted. One feels diminished before the vastness of Kelly's painted ice plateau, the sky and the jagged mountains. While small in scale, these paintings are exhilarating evocations of Antarctica's incredible, inspiring beauty.

Within these Antarctic landscapes human presence is sometimes suggested by way of sticks, rock paths, or residue signage. They are a reminder that companionship is an inescapable part of the contemporary Antarctic experience. One is not free to move far alone and the cooperation and understanding of others is necessary to be at once still and outdoors for an extended period. While Kelly revels in the majesty of the white world, he is also candid about the reality of living in such a place, depicting the machines and man-made structures as if they are almost a natural part of the landscape. In such images, the domed shape and mask-like detail of an accommodation pod uncannily mimics the mountain behind, two quad bikes are nearly camouflaged with nearby rocks, and there is playful confusion between bergs, ships and floating bottles. The images describing human habitation establish a broad picture of Antarctica. They address the difficulties inflicted by the harsh climate and the need for buildings and heavy machinery if people are to inhabit one of Earth's most pristine and faraway places.

Kelly first considered traveling to Antarctica in January 2012 while he was painting outdoors in the frigid wintry conditions on the west coast of Ireland. Working *en plein air* was a new undertaking, an exciting reaction to the studio-based paintings produced throughout his successful twenty year career. For years, Kelly had serially referenced Australian artists and, more generally, the complex relationship between artists and bureaucracy. Although landscape had been ever present in his art via quotation of artists such as William Dobell, Fred Williams, and Sidney Nolan, he had always painted indoors without direct observation of the land being represented.

Kelly's enduring interest in Nolan would influence his interest in Antarctica. He was aware of the monumental series painted by Nolan after an Antarctic visit in January 1964, fifty years before. Notably, both artists had relocated to the United Kingdom after establishing their careers in Australia, and it was from the northern hemisphere that they organised their Antarctic journeys. As often happens, distance brings new perspective. In this case it opened up the expatriate view of the southern hemisphere and provoked curiosity about Australia's southern neighbour.

Almost without exception, Nolan's paintings express Antarctica as a treacherous and enigmatic place, reflecting his "fear at the first sight of it", the feeling "that it would annihilate one" and the simultaneous "sense of wonder in it".[5] Typically for Nolan, the paintings dwell on Antarctic history, representing the mythic landscape and its early explorers who are portrayed as torturously weathered figures with sunken eyes and hollowed cheeks.

Kelly's Antarctic paintings are a gleaming antidote. There is no myth-making, heroism, or deep anxiety but instead a lively realism that comes hand-in-hand with the directness of painting outdoors. For Nolan and other Antarctic painters, the leap in time and distance from site to studio allowed for a purposeful shift in response, making way for large scale, composed visual statements. Of course, the contrary reactions expressed by Nolan and Kelly must also reflect the advancements in technology that have ensured Antarctica is a much safer destination today than it was in Nolan's time. Half a century has furthermore faded the harsh reality of the gruelling polar expeditions that took place in the early to mid-twentieth century, and which were prominent in Nolan's thoughts.[6]

Kelly's series is a unique contemporary portrait of Antarctica as a transcendent yet evolving environment. Together, the 57 paintings might be viewed as an uncontrived visual diary that records the artist's timely responses to the foreign land: its natural forms, variable weather patterns, peculiar light, and the daily goings on. In this respect, the canvases are a twenty first century equivalent to the sketches made by expeditionary artists such as Hodges centuries before. They are responsive, rapidly conveyed, and imbued with the excitement of being there. Painting outdoors in subzero conditions, with the added pressure of being unable to revisit sites, left these artists with little time to appraise or edit their work and demanded surety and skill. For Kelly, this confidence is united with his intuitive translation of the mood of the place into the visual. The inimitability of Kelly's Antarctic suite lies in their immediacy. While their vigour and vitality is driven by sheer necessity, it is a necessity that is initiated and embraced by the artist.

1 See http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/turner-hurrah-for-the-whaler-erebus-another-fish-n00546
2 KELLY, John, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2013/oct/14/capturing-a-continent-a-painters-journey-to-antarctica
3 KELLY, John, http://www.theguardian.com/culture/australia-culture-blog/2013/oct/30/blinded-by-the-white
4 SENBERGS, Jan, 'Voyage Six' *Antarctic Journey; Three Artists in Antarctica*, Australian Government Publishing Service Canberra, 1988, p.13.
5 JAMES, Rodney, *Sidney Nolan: Antarctic Journey*, ex. cat., Mornington Peninsula Regional Gallery, Mornington, 2006, p.8, quoting transcript of 2FC radio broadcast, 22 March 1964.
6 As above, p.16

Capturing a continent: A painterly journey to Antarctica

Early in Moby-Dick, Herman Melville studies a dark, brooding painting, barely discernible in the dim light of a tavern. He describes the painting as being of the 'black sea' and after careful interrogation comes to the conclusion that it depicts a whale impaling itself on the broken masts of a Cape-Horner. 'It's a Hyperborean winter scene, it's the breaking-up of the icebound stream of Time.'

Moby-Dick is the book I am taking on the Aurora Australis which leaves Hobart for Antarctica on Tuesday. The plan is to sail for 12 days across the Southern Ocean, following the migratory route of that leviathan, the southern right whale, so named because historically it simply was the right whale to hunt.

Our journey across the roughest, most dangerous ocean in the world will eventually be stalled by the sea ice. We may even be given the Shackleton Endurance experience – that is, get stuck – as a precursor to slowly moving on to the pristine but daunting white continent of Antarctica. Twelve days might at best be a guess; however, as I won't be seeing home for three months, I have some leeway.

In looking at that painting, Melville humorously hints that he is about to talk at great length, for he finds it in the Spouter-Inn. As the artist in residence with the Australian Antarctic Division for this voyage, I intend to keep you informed of my journey south.

My intention is to create a series of paintings, with the work done *en plein air*. It is an enormous challenge to confront the blank page, the white canvas and the white continent simultaneously. How is one to be creative in the remotest, coldest, windiest and bleakest continent on earth? I suspect that standing in it will be akin to a microbe traversing the weave of several metres of stretched Irish linen, pre-primed in oil white of course.

Moby-Dick might help. A white whale is a beautiful metaphor for an artist confronting his own creativity, hunting it, chasing it, knowing that even if he catches it, he will be returned to that blank white page. Maybe that is why Moby-Dick does not die, but eventually stoves in Melville's wooden desk, leaving the author bobbing on the rough sea, clinging desperately to Queequeg's coffin.

We all have that fear of the whiteness that lurks under the type, that space where everything is possible but does not yet exist. Moby-Dick is a fabulous sea adventure but it is also about the art of writing. They make good companions: sailing on the Aurora towards Antarctica, and on the Pequod across the flatness of the white page.

I open my coffin. Not a literary coffin like Queequeg's, but a sporting one, which cricketers use to carry their bats and pads. Inside is my complete field studio. The lid clicks open and an easel emerges, followed by paints, canvas and brushes. This coffin will travel with me to Antarctica so I can paint.

I no longer want to be in that white cube that deposits you under an ice-cold fluorescent, with walls padded with art made in its confines. It's like playing indoor tennis. An artist's journey should include risk and adventure, preferably to find geology and history that is still a mystery. Antarctica might have all that.

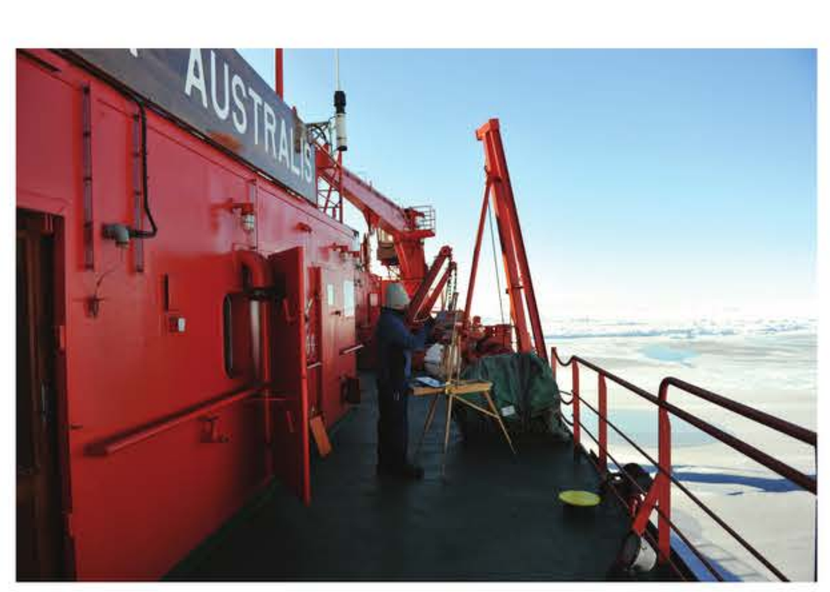
The Aurora Australis is a super icebreaker, weighing six and a half thousand tonnes. When I asked what the difference between an icebreaker and a normal ship was, I was told that on an icebreaker the hull is filled with concrete, with holes to let the seawater transfer horizontally through the ship.

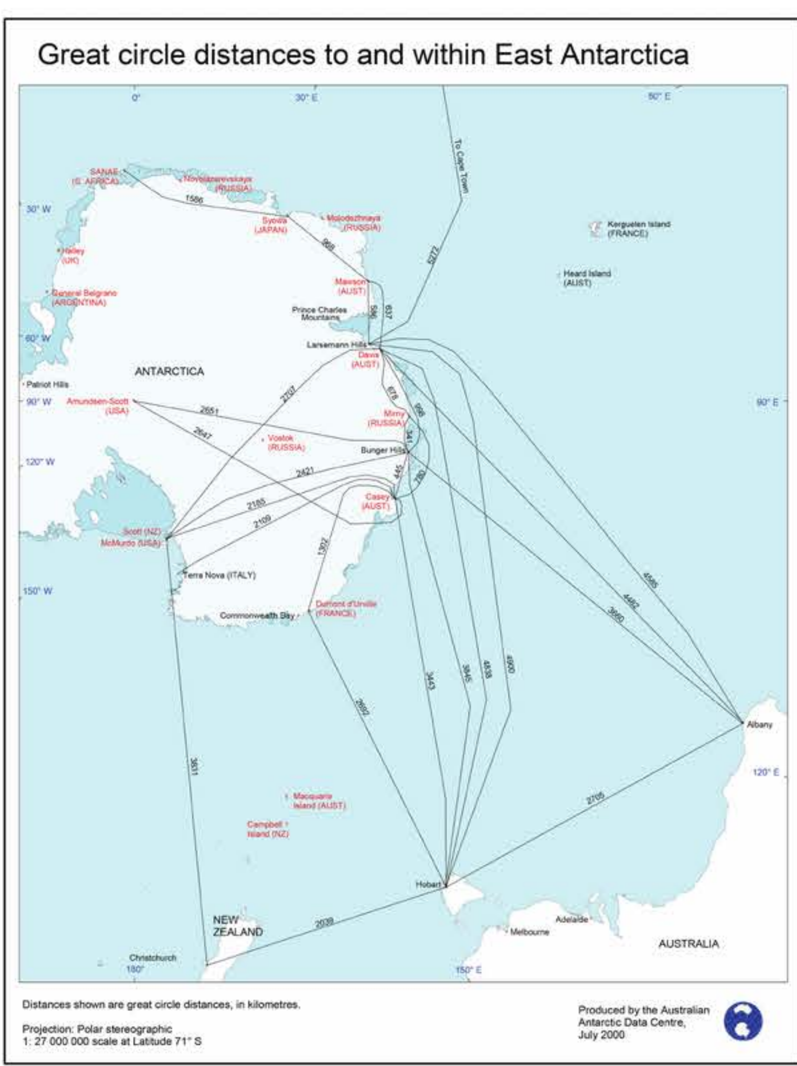
Great, I thought. I'm stepping into the biggest concrete shoes in the world, on a boat with holes in it, in order to sail across the most treacherous ocean! No wonder the fisherman back in Ireland, where I now live, looked at me strangely and suggested I get my sea- sickness tablets in Skibbereen. I forgot to, of course.

John Kelly

First posted Monday 14 October 2013 14.47 AEDT
The Guardian

AURORA AUSTRALIS


AUSTRALIS


Great circle distances to and within East Antarctica
To Cape Town
Kerguelen Island (FRANCE)
Heard Island (AUST)
SANAE (S. AFRICA)
Syowa (JAPAN)
Molodezhnaya (RUSSIA)
Halley (UK)
General Belgrano (ARGENTINA)
Mawson (AUST)
Prince Charles Mountains
Larsemann Hills
Davis (AUST)
ANTARCTICA
Patriot Hills
Amundsen-Scott (USA)
Mirny (RUSSIA)
Vostok (RUSSIA)
Bunger Hills
Casey (AUST)
Scott (NZ)
McMurdo (USA)
Terra Nova (ITALY)
Commonwealth Bay
Dumont d'Urville (FRANCE)
Macquarie Island (AUST)
Campbell Island (NZ)
Albany
Hobart
NEW ZEALAND
Christchurch
Adelaide
Melbourne
AUSTRALIA
Distances shown are great circle distances, in kilometres.
Projection: Polar stereographic
1: 27 000 000 scale at Latitude 71° S
Produced by the Australian Antarctic Data Centre, July 2000

Blinded by the white of Southern Ocean's majestic icebergs

I get on the bike and my mind is riding the roads of Union Hall, crossing the narrow wooden bridge, opposite the colourful fishing fleet, turning right towards the harbour where the two islands of Adam and Eve guard the entrance. But I am well outside the safety of Glandore Harbour in Ireland, instead on the Southern Ocean at 60 degrees latitude, sailing on a westerly heading.

On the exercise bike there is a strange sensation: it feels easier to ride uphill and conversely harder to go down as the ship pitches and rolls. The clock swings on the wall, still keeping exact time but going back by an hour every couple of days, and the wails and internal screams of the ballast tanks pierce the gym's walls, sounding like a distressed whale.

The Whiteness of the Whale, a chapter in Moby Dick, is dedicated to the history of that colourless ''colour''. Herman Melville explores its mythology, its science and its meaning. By coincidence I am reading this chapter lying on my bunk – a regular occupation given the equivalent of aeroplane turbulence that marks every minute of the day – when the first officer announces that our first iceberg has been sighted off our starboard bow.

I am not prepared for just how beautiful an iceberg is, emerging from the mist and the indigo – set against a sky that, without the berg, might be regarded as milky-white. Its crystalline structure glows like sunlight breaking through the clouds of a Rembrandt etching, that pure white of light.

That whiteness of the berg, that iridescent purity, that opaque and semi-opaque glass-cathedral-like structure that soars out of its close but common relative to create something purely wondrous.

What is pure white? Is it 'that' white light that some say we reach for as we die? How many words might describe white?

Melville has his own definition:

> In essence whiteness is not so much a colour as the visible absence of colour; and at the same time the concrete of all colours; is it for these reasons that there is such a dumb blankness, full of meaning, in a wide landscape of snows – a colourless, all colour of atheism from which we shrink?'

On the bridge of the Aurora ice also has a plethora of technical names: icebergs, of course, but also growler ice (for the noise it makes), brash ice, floebergs, floebits, shuga, grey-white, frazil and many more. My favourite is bergy bits – so technical!

I have prepared my canvas in a studio on board. It is a lab really, usually reserved for scientists and their experiments while sailing south. I often lay an under-colour, usually something warm such as a red or orange, much as Goya did. It is a traditional technique to rid oneself of the whiteness of the canvas.

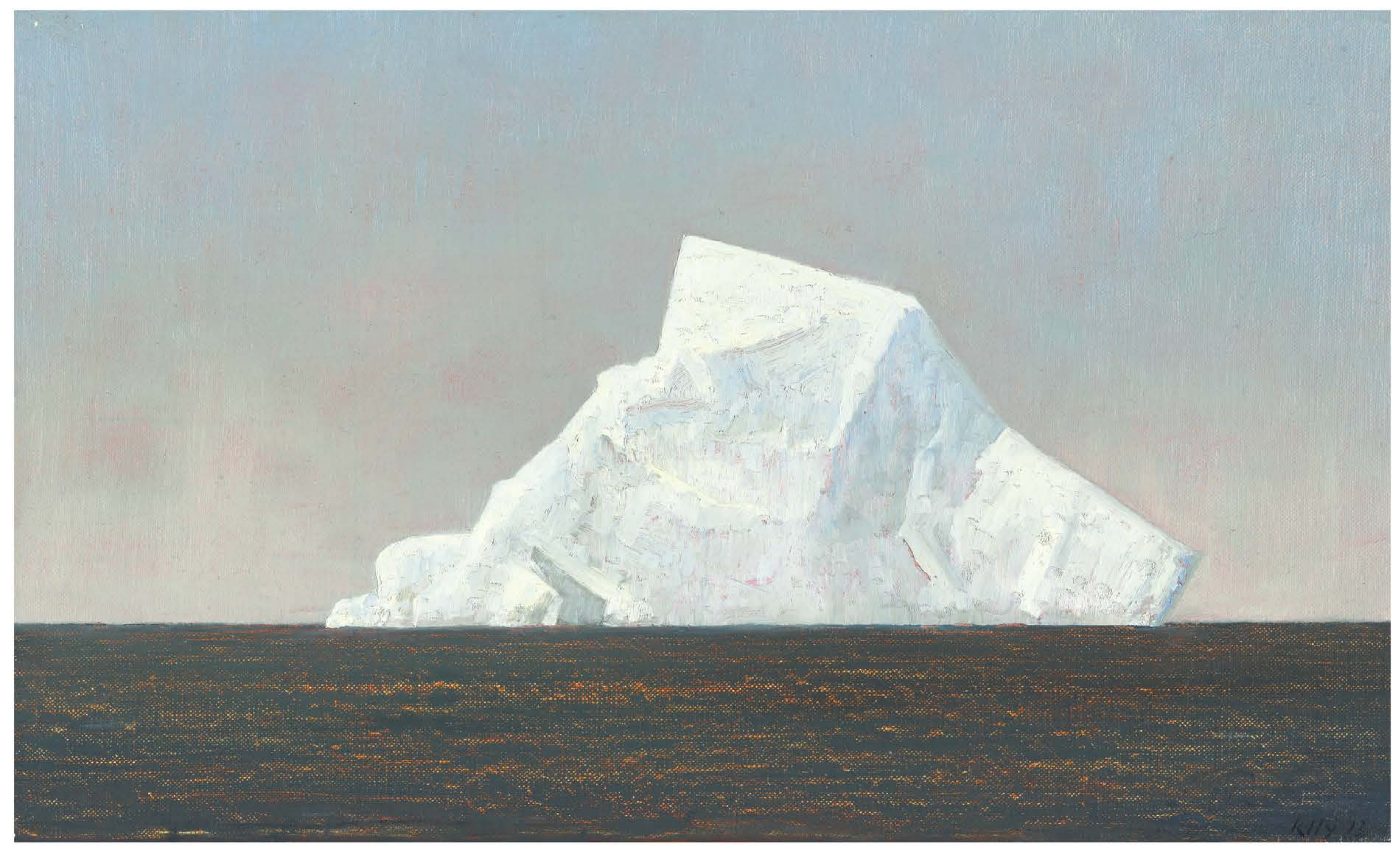
The paint I am using is a tube that reads Australian Red Gold, which is unimportant except the iceberg was spotted on a longitude of 129 degrees and 39 minutes, which puts our ship directly between Antarctica and the Nullabor Plain. Between the red-gold desert and the white continent at 60 degrees south, where circumpolar currents navigate their way around the great white continent. Between the desert and the greatest reservoir of fresh water on Earth, between my red-gold oil and the white landscape.

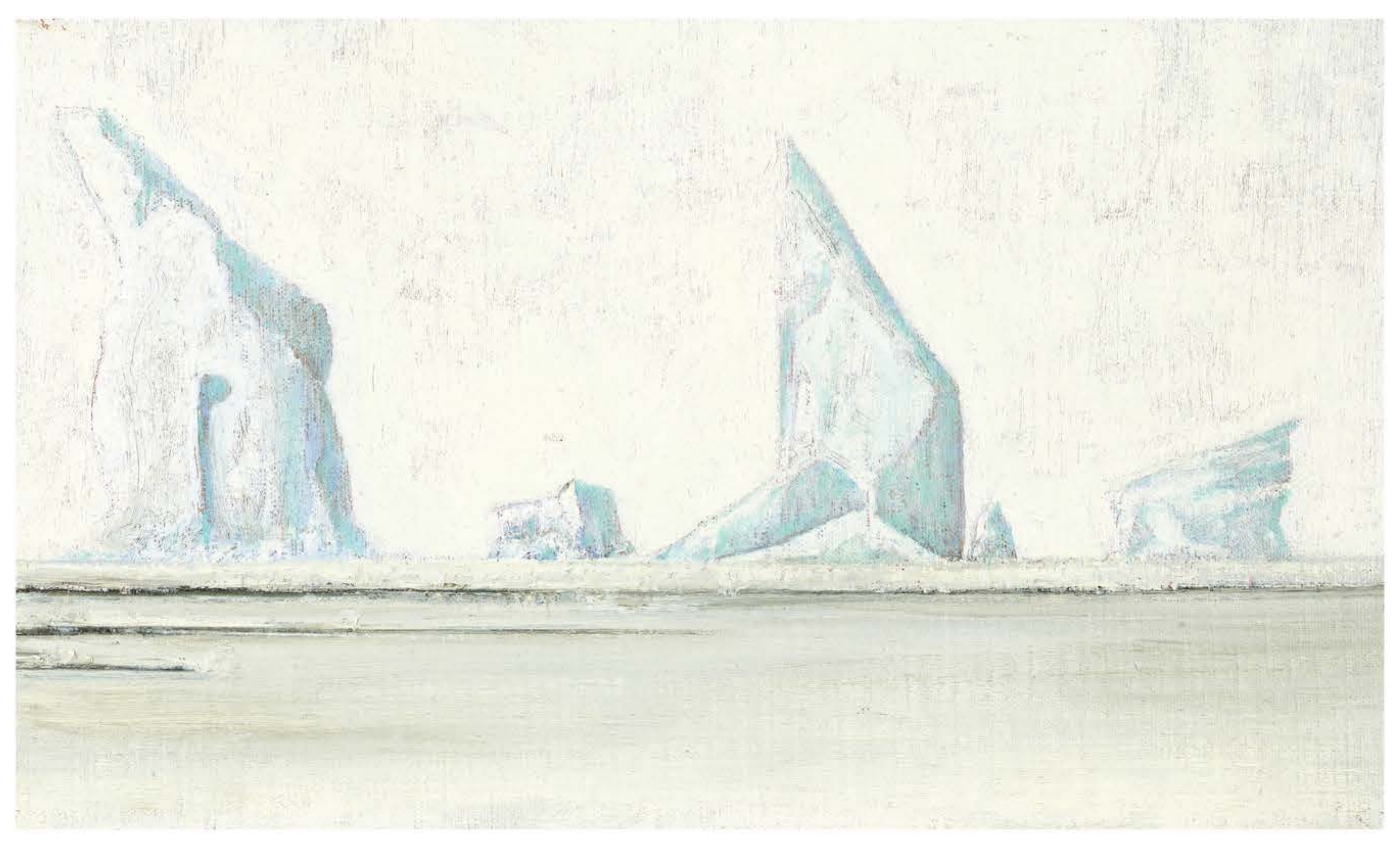
The bergs are sparse, rogue, isolated and temporary; they calve as we look at them. The ship is travelling too fast to paint them, ploughing head-on through the waves, creating explosions of white spray that crash over the forward cargo deck and throw my body forward and then back. A quick sketch as the berg retreats off the stern and I descend to the bowels of the ship, to F deck. Down to where the bike is – closer to where the ship's intestines seem to whistle and belch as it pitches and rolls.

In my bunk my thoughts turn to home, to Union Hall, where some months ago a trawler was lost at the mouth of our usually safe haven; five men lost. A wild and stormy night to be sure, but Irish fishermen see plenty of those. But to be lost so close to home, to run aground on an island named Adam, when the comfort of Eve was so close, makes one acutely aware of the dangers of being on a ship as icebergs the size of these islands pass by.

John Kelly

First posted Wednesday 30 October 2013 15.20 AEDT
The Guardian





Painting Antarctica: how to capture the beauty and majesty of ice?

The Southern Ocean is one of the primary environmental cogs on Earth, influencing the oceans' currents and the weather. It is the cold store of the Earth.

Where phytoplankton lives, those micro-organisms that live off light, starting the food chain under their home, the sea ice.

It is also a place where original form itself has been created, like an architect's office where polystyrene and white cardboard models are precursors to built structure. Over thousands of miles of flat white seascape – think Monument Valley en blanc – an architectural and sculptural retrospective is taking place.

Is that the London Shard over there? The SCG? Are those the sails of the Opera House on the horizon? There are pyramids, the Colosseum with arches and columns, castles with turrets, and sports stadiums. Each massive iceberg emerges out of the sheet ice as if it was a precursor to the history of building itself; beautiful to the point that no photograph captures their essence.

There are also more expressive, interpretative sculptural forms, like the raised middle finger and a molar that looks like it was extracted from a giant. Others are just pure white abstractions, ephemeral designs that will eventually melt back into the sea. For gallery goers there is also the white cube.

I can't remember when exactly we became surrounded by ice. Days have now passed, going backwards and forward, east and west, north and south to try to find a way through the white blockade. Channels open but, more often than not, they close and we go around again.

Several hundred metres off to starboard, five Emperor penguins are huddled together, along with a seal who struggles to hold his head above some lumpy ice in a desperate attempt to look at the orange alien spacecraft rumbling through his white home.

The penguins begin to make their way over to the ship. They waddle at first before dropping to their bellies, sliding effortlessly to the edge of the ice to satiate their curiosity. One takes the lead and then is caught by another. The first stops and drops its beak to its chest; as if scolded by the others for being so daring. Have they ever seen a massive orange icebreaker before?

I begin to draw and the ship pulls away. A few minutes later the ship is backing up. The noise and thrust of the reverse makes the ship growl and vibrate as it churns the water, depositing krill up on the broken ice that has been turned over to reveal the brown phytoplankton at work. The penguins retreat to a safe distance, diving off the ice shelf and disappearing only to reappear at their original meeting place in the distance.

The ship rumbles up to the ice floe with a thud and shudder, and then comes the scraping and scratching of the ice on the steel hull as we make inroads into our frozen barrier. Ice breaking is brutal. The ship pushing its shaped bow up on to the ice shelf, allowing the immense weight to descend, radiating massive cracks forward and sideways. The vibrations spread through the entire ship.

The process is repeated until we get through to a less inhibiting icy sea and a few minutes of unimpeded movement. Even when you are at rest on your bunk it jerks and shudders you to attention, or gently tilts you up at an odd angle.

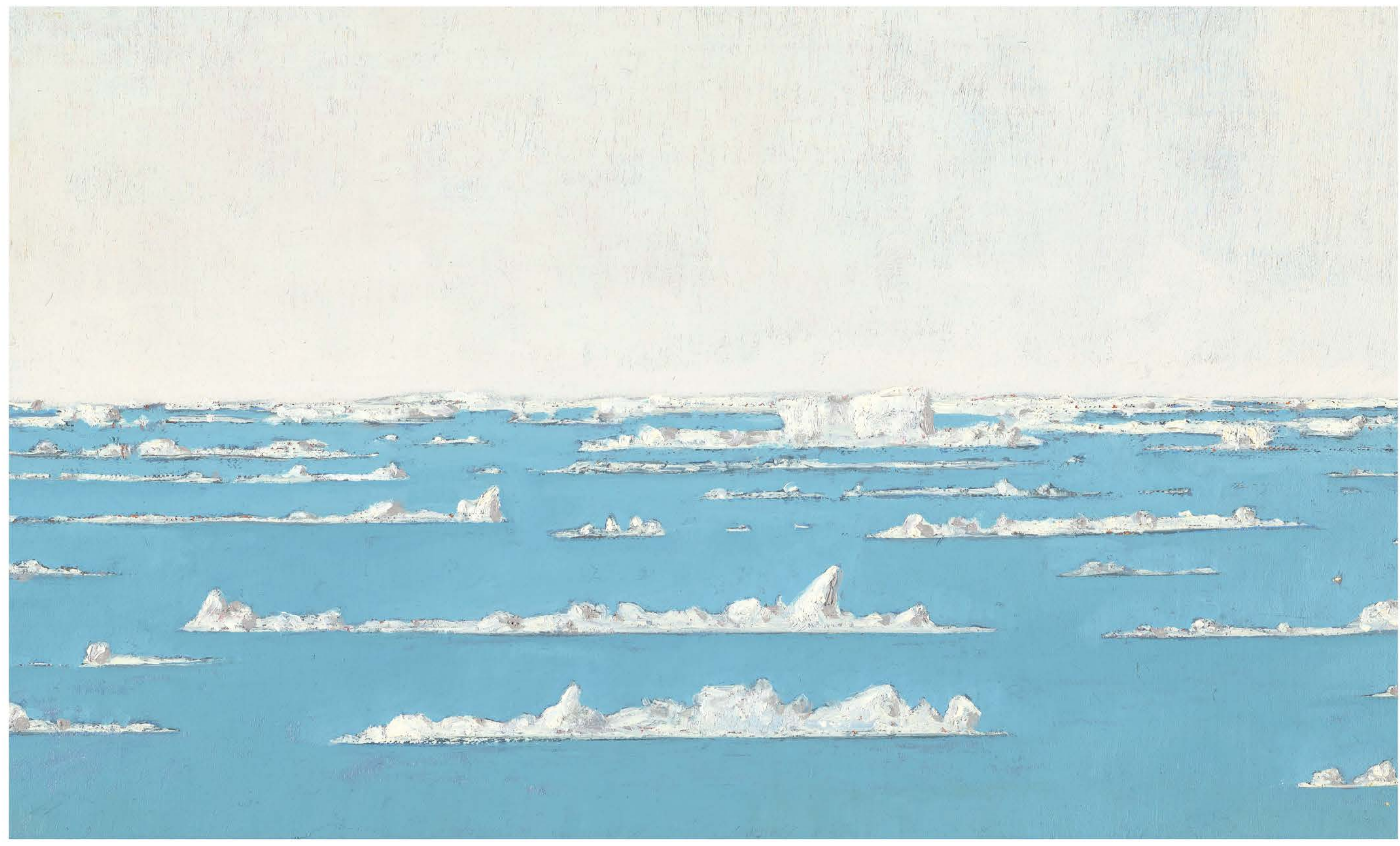
The tracker monitor reflects our movement, back and forth, in circles, sideways as we battle to find an open path to Davis Station several hundred kilometers to our south. A Bassler aircraft is sent out from Davis to help locate a clearway. It flies low over the ship, our first connection with the rest of humanity for more than two weeks. We look for the dark grey in the clouds on the horizon that is a sign of open water reflected on the white sky. Fleetingly it appears.

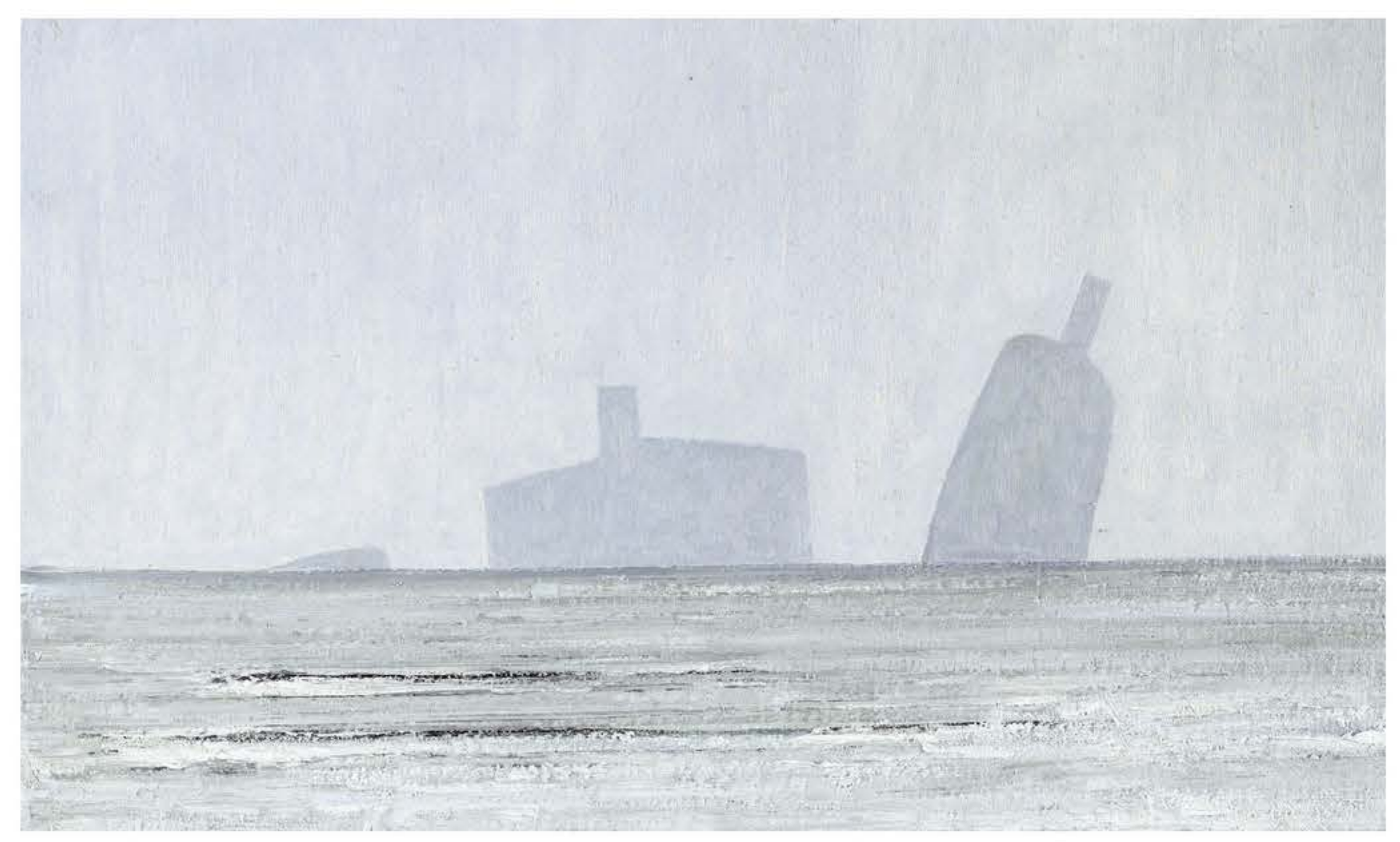
Where water does break the monotony, ice coalesces into something akin to Monet's waterlillies drained of colour. How do you paint it? I stand on the Trawl Deck as the ship reverses. The noise is deafening and the wind whistles across the field easel and we sway and judder with the ship. I paint what I see tonally, even if it is moving. The ship comes back to the same spot over and over again as it tries to break the stubbornness of the ice.

Eventually, 15 degrees penetrates my thermal clothing and it is time to retreat. However, I have begun to engage that whiteness, that cold store of form, that first link in the food chain heavy with significance.

John Kelly

First posted Friday 8 November 2013 11.51 AEDT
The Guardian





WOOP WOOP DOMESTIC TERMINAL

AURORA AUSTRALIS

BECHERVAISE ISLAND PENGUIN

BAFFIN

Antarctica, where blue ice buckles and cracks, and mountains float in the sky

I am standing on the blue sea ice with a green pillowcase on my head, holding hands with a French glaciologist, searching for a throw bag. We are practising how to find somebody in a blizzard, somebody who may be only metres away but invisible in a whiteout. Our lost soul is the throw bag. Eventually we find it and remove our pillowcases.

We are greeted by a spectacular sight. Jagged and broken white forms crevasse off the plateau and fall on to the edge of the sea ice, which buckles and cracks. But my eye is lifted to the dark jagged peaks that seem to float in the air high above Mawson station, here at the edge of the Antarctic plateau. Ice smoke billows off the mountain peaks for miles in a long horizontal line. It is like existing in a René Magritte painting, so surreal is the vision.

Our survival instructor informs us of the deadly dangers emanating from the blue and green crystals sparkling under our spiked feet. The entire day has been spent walking on ice, survival packs on our backs, practising the GPS, map reading and communications training we undertook on board Aurora Australis. Now it is for real: get lost here and survival is unlikely. Even on the base, ropes connect the buildings; in bad conditions walking a few metres can be risky.

While the Katabatic winds that flow down from the plateau are relatively predictable, other winds are not. And danger lurks below – there is only a metre or so of ice between our feet and the 70 metres to the sea floor. Within weeks this sea ice will break up, become unstable or be gone altogether.

It has been an intense and dramatic voyage to get to the big Red Shed, our living quarters at Mawson. Yesterday I was settled on the Aurora Australis, with the thought it would be another week before arrival. It happened quickly: the ice lessened, the ship was able to move unimpeded through the night and reach helicopter distance of Davis station. It was decided that the few of us bound for the base at Mawson should depart for the ice runway where the Basler DC-3 awaited.

Within hours we were packed and ready to go, leaving wet paintings in the lab to make the sea voyage back to Hobart. The helicopter lifted off the green deck over the orange ship, now once again frozen in the thick ice, and I gained an aerial view of ‘iceberg alley’ where the Sørsdal glacier spawns its offspring. At Mawson the wintering crew greeted us warmly after 10 months of isolation.

Back out on the sea ice beyond the nearby West Arm, a rocky outcrop that forms the horseshoe bay at Mawson, we move to where an iceberg has broken in half. As the instructor talks, I look into the middle distance as a ute drives past, followed 10 minutes later by a couple of quad bikes, and then by two penguins – all traveling the same route out to the coloured banners that demarcate the runway. I do an imaginary radio traffic report – busy on the airport road today!

Our final exercise is to dig our beds for the night – just beyond the three graves of former explorers who did not make it home. As I shovel the snow out of my trench, taking out the blocks to build a windbreak, I get the feeling I am digging my own grave. I place a bivvy bag inside and dive in. Unrolling the sleeping bag I feel utterly cosy, thanks to three layers of thermals and fleeces and a bar of chocolate to eat. It would be nice if I had a pillow to go into the pillowcase.

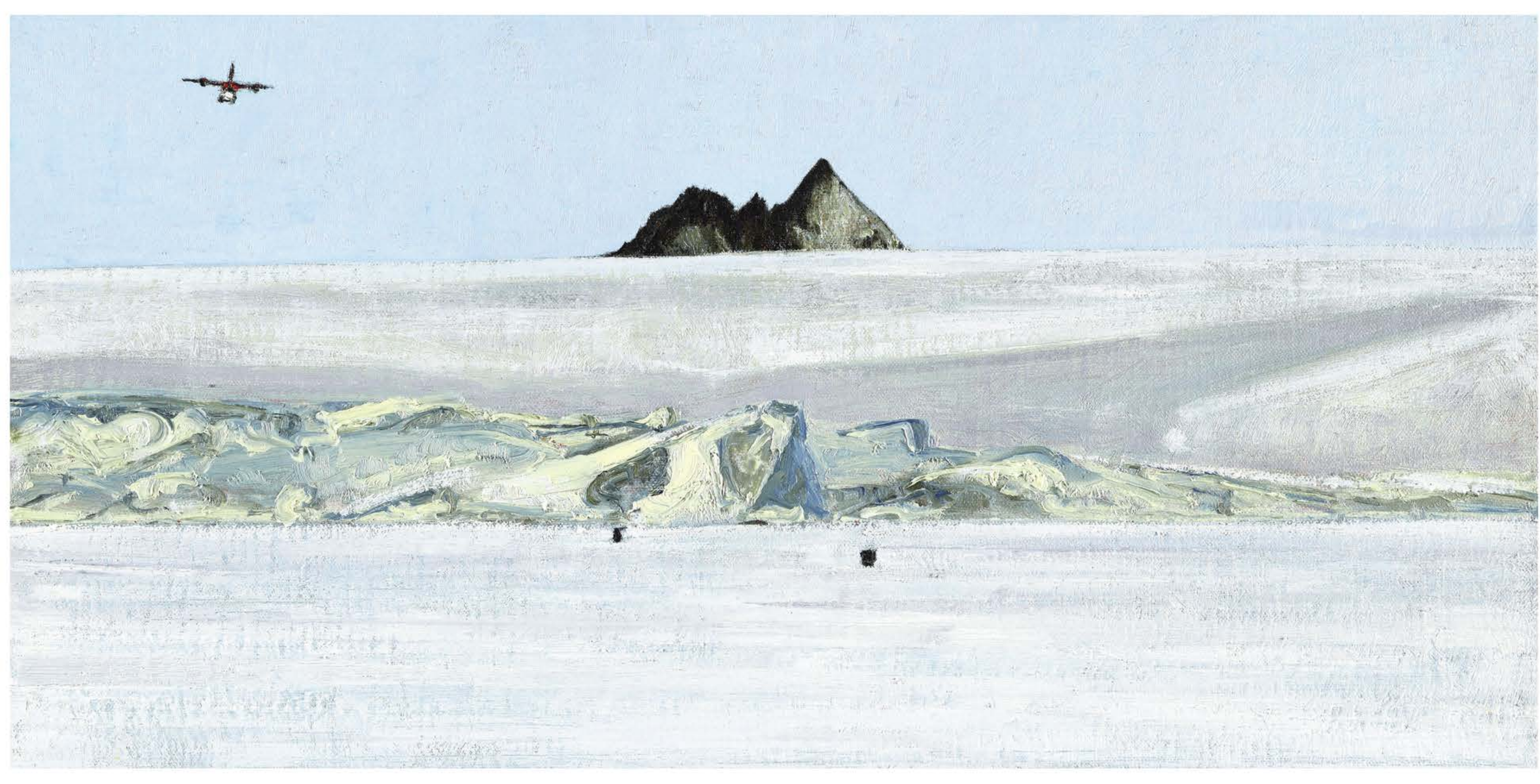
I quickly drift off to sleep. Awaking during the night, I poke my head out to see a large crescent moon hanging over the nearby mountains. It’s a beautiful sight in the short Antarctic night; the moon and mountain again reminding me of Magritte.

I pull my head in out of the cold. After 22 nights on a rolling ship in ice, I am now sleeping in an icy grave surrounded by mountains that float in the sky, thinking about Surrealism and the pillowcase on my head. Maybe that was the Magritte trigger?

I begin dreaming of the crisp sheets on a warm bed in the Red Shed just over the West Arm, about 500 metres away. Tomorrow night – maybe?

John Kelly

First posted Wednesday 20 November 2013 15.04 AEDT
The Guardian



Beautiful Antarctic landscapes belie a hard edge to life lived on the ice

We are on our way to Rumdoodle. Not the mythical mountain of W E Bowman's 1956 humorous book, but the dramatic nunatak in Antarctica, close to the Australian base at Mawson, that is named after it. We set out with a cast of characters who uncannily resemble the fictional Rum Doodle team: we have scientists, photographers and characters with names such as Cookie and Fossil, the latter busy setting up an Ebox, a temporary shelter, to allow me to paint en plein air out on the sea-ice.

In Bowman's book, the scientist whose name is Wish is obsessed with measuring the boiling point of snow and experiments on the ascent at every possible opportunity. The scientists with me have a similar obsession with measuring the lift in the earth's crust; it seems that ice shelves cause the Earth's crust to displace, and therefore one might detect the depletion of the ice by measuring the shift in the bedrock using GPS. I learn a lot about their project in the Katabatic Bar where the icy clink of glasses allows more bedrock to move.

Rumdoodle is high up on the icy plateau; an incredible, serene landscape that reveals what Antarctica can be. I look across the glittering blue ice littered with rocks that seem to float, their radiant heat having created a moat around the base. In the distance is Fang, the sharp incisor of a peak that identifies the David Ranges, and I am lost to the world as I paint the day away. I ponder the horizon, an iridescent blue-green stretching out to infinity as the sun lowers. The mountains fade from a distinct and sharp dark tone back into a misty vagueness. I change canvases and focus on a large rock sitting proud on its icy plinth. Has Sisyphus been freed of his obligation to push it back up the mountain?

Behind me the photographer lays down in the snow as the beautiful white Snow Petrels flirt overhead investigating the alien species below. The day is bliss! Cookie, the station leader takes us to a frozen lake on whose edge the Snow Petrels bathe in the snow. It's a beautiful moment watching nature enjoy itself in a white world made of ice.

But nature always has an antidote. In this case it is the Skua. The ever-present lurking danger, ready to transform these beautiful dove-like creatures into Angel Wings. They strike dramatically, descending on the birds and, using their sharp beaks, penetrate their prey's skull in mid-flight. The Snow Petrel drops from the sky and quickly all is devoured except for the wings, which are left, frozen, protruding out of the snow.

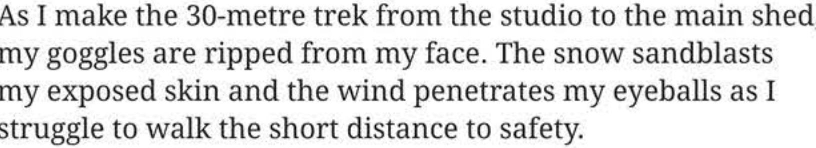
We head back down in the Hag, past Hendo, the mountain that dominates the station, imitating the top half of Australia with Cape York creating the peak. We follow the same strict route home using GPS waypoints, identified by canes stuck in the snow. Coming down from the sublime, one encounters the void not more than thirty metres off the track. We stop and are shown how to identify a crevasse, then a poke and a hack with an ice axe and one is able to stare down into crystalline blue that seems to go on forever.

Looking out to sea we can view the icebergs that glitter and litter the coast. A few nights earlier I painted from the Henderson Hut as the summer sun, the one that never sets, lights up the bergs that sparkle like jewels off the coast. About 17 kilometres out to sea a number of them form a semi-circle of shelter where the Emperor Penguin colony of Auster can be found. Each year the penguins congregate and form a rolling line, which gradually moves around the sea-ice while eggs are laid, then hatched and the young are reared. The older penguins are curious, willing to investigate and approach me while I draw them.

Back at Mawson I begin to paint the station in my 'Ebox', a three-metre sea container that has been staked into the ice a few hundred metres off shore. It is comfortable and pleasant with the door open and the unobstructed view of the multi-coloured boxes that make up the station, bookended by the two wind turbines with the tip of Mount Henderson peeking over the plateau.

After an hour the wind strengthens and I congratulate myself on having kept one door closed. I place my easel behind it and continue to work, as the wind grows stronger. I begin to think it might be hazardous to attempt to walk the several hundred metres back to base on the slippery ice. But I am also wondering just how secure this box is. Should I stay or should I go?

I am pleased to see a colleague's vehicle pull up. With some difficulty the heavy door is closed and I am returned to base, where a sturdier studio, with the wonderful moniker, Wombat RSL is waiting. Later the winds rise from the 70 knots I encountered to the blizzard strength of 98 knots.

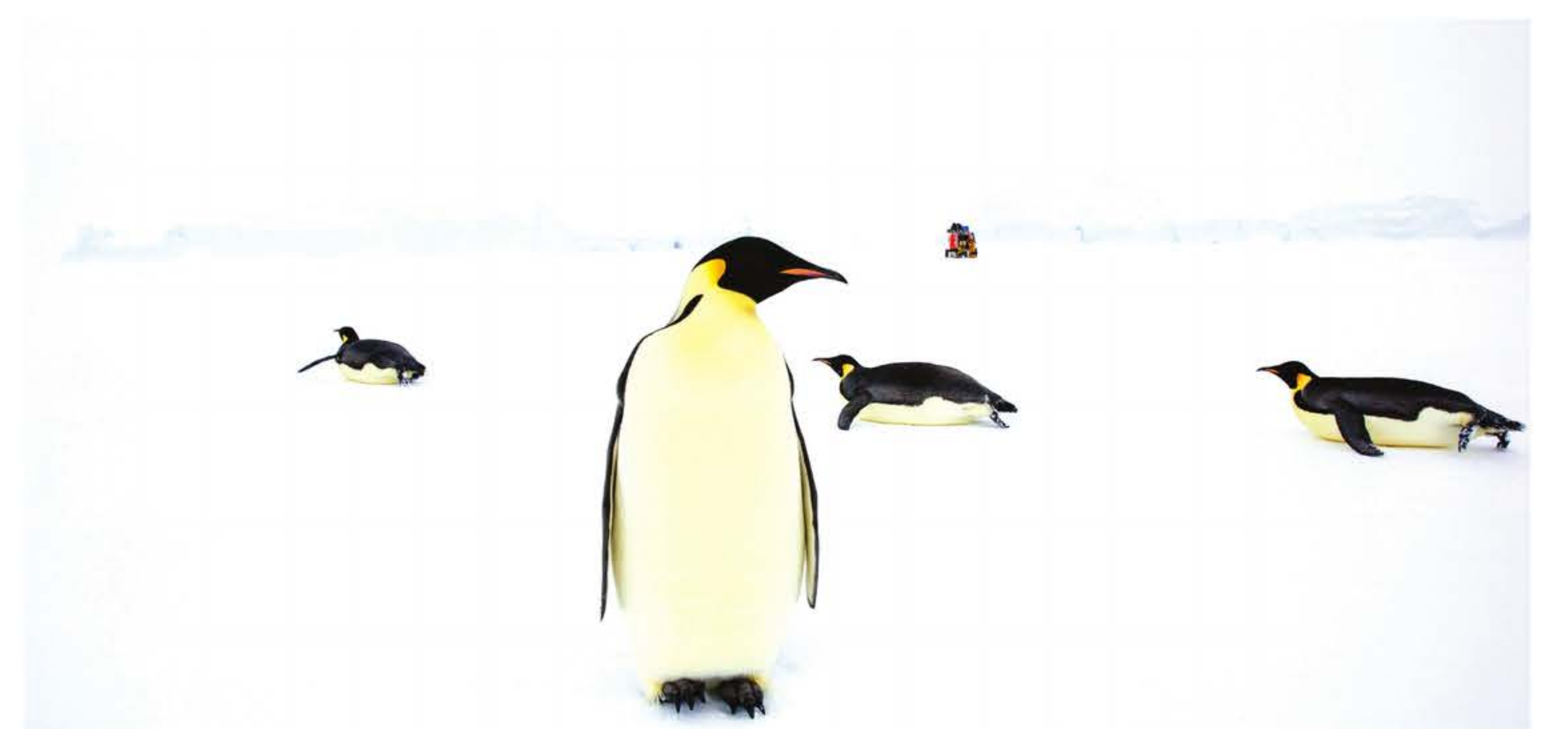


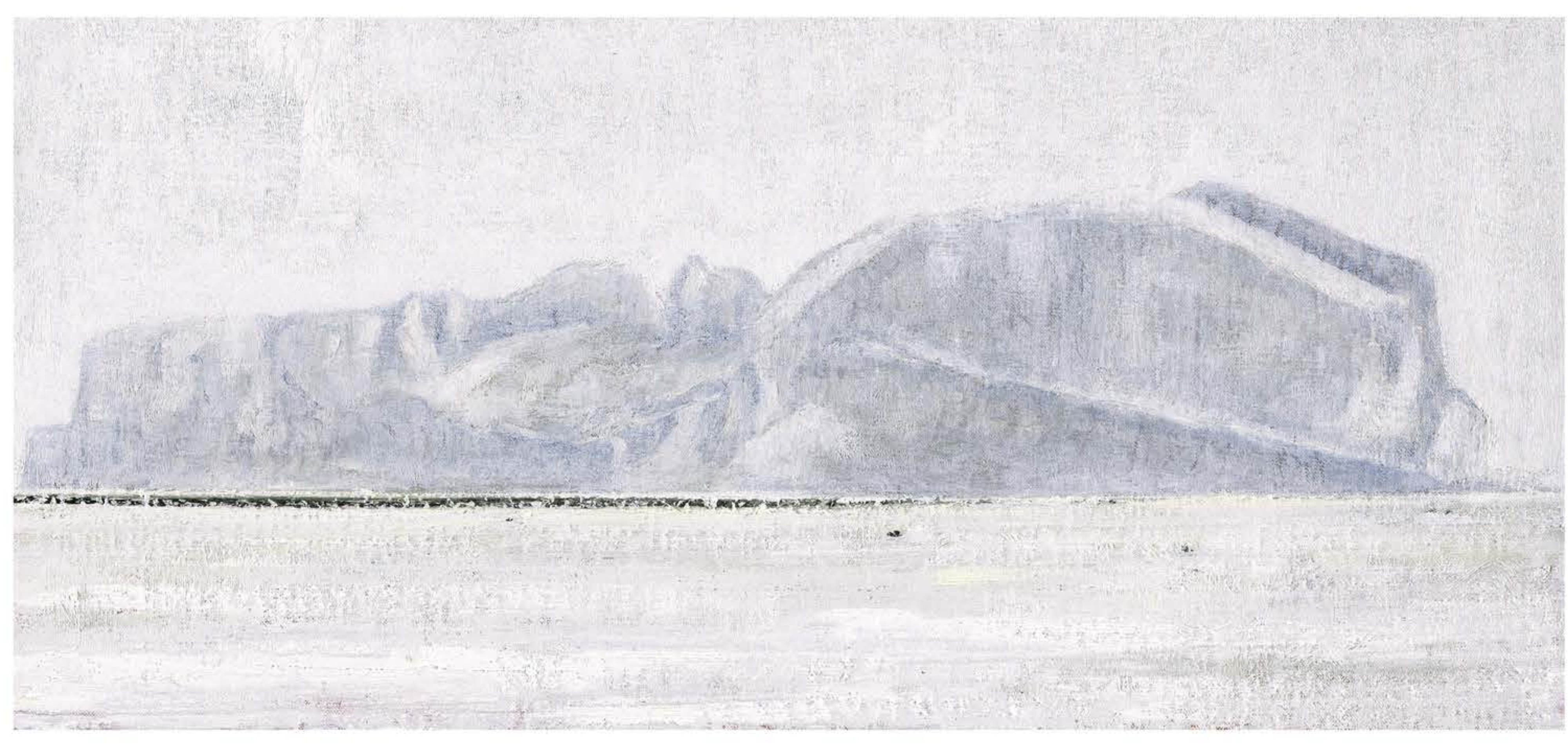
As I make the 30-metre trek from the studio to the main shed, my goggles are ripped from my face. The snow sandblasts my exposed skin and the wind penetrates my eyeballs as I struggle to walk the short distance to safety.

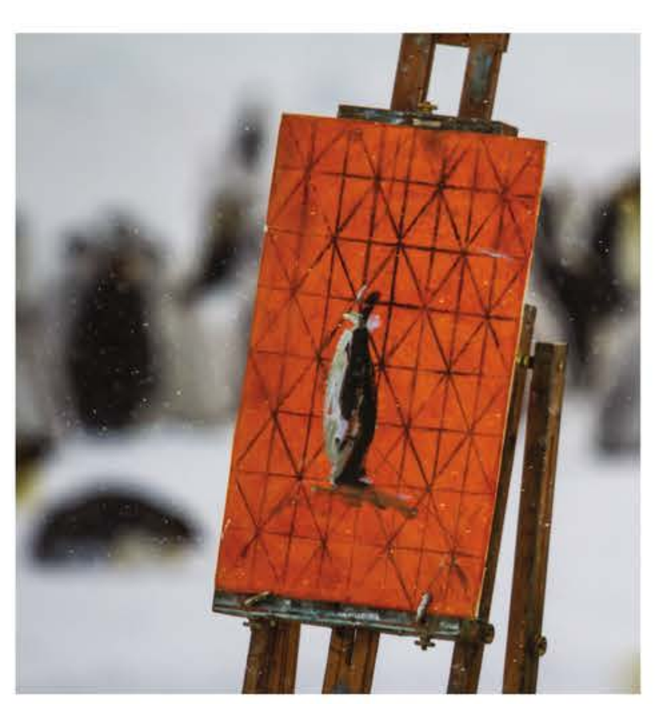
The next morning, with the winds now subsided, we discover the portable studio missing from the ice. It's found several kilometres away on an island, its doors ripped off and the floor punctured. When Antarctica rejects you she lets you know it.

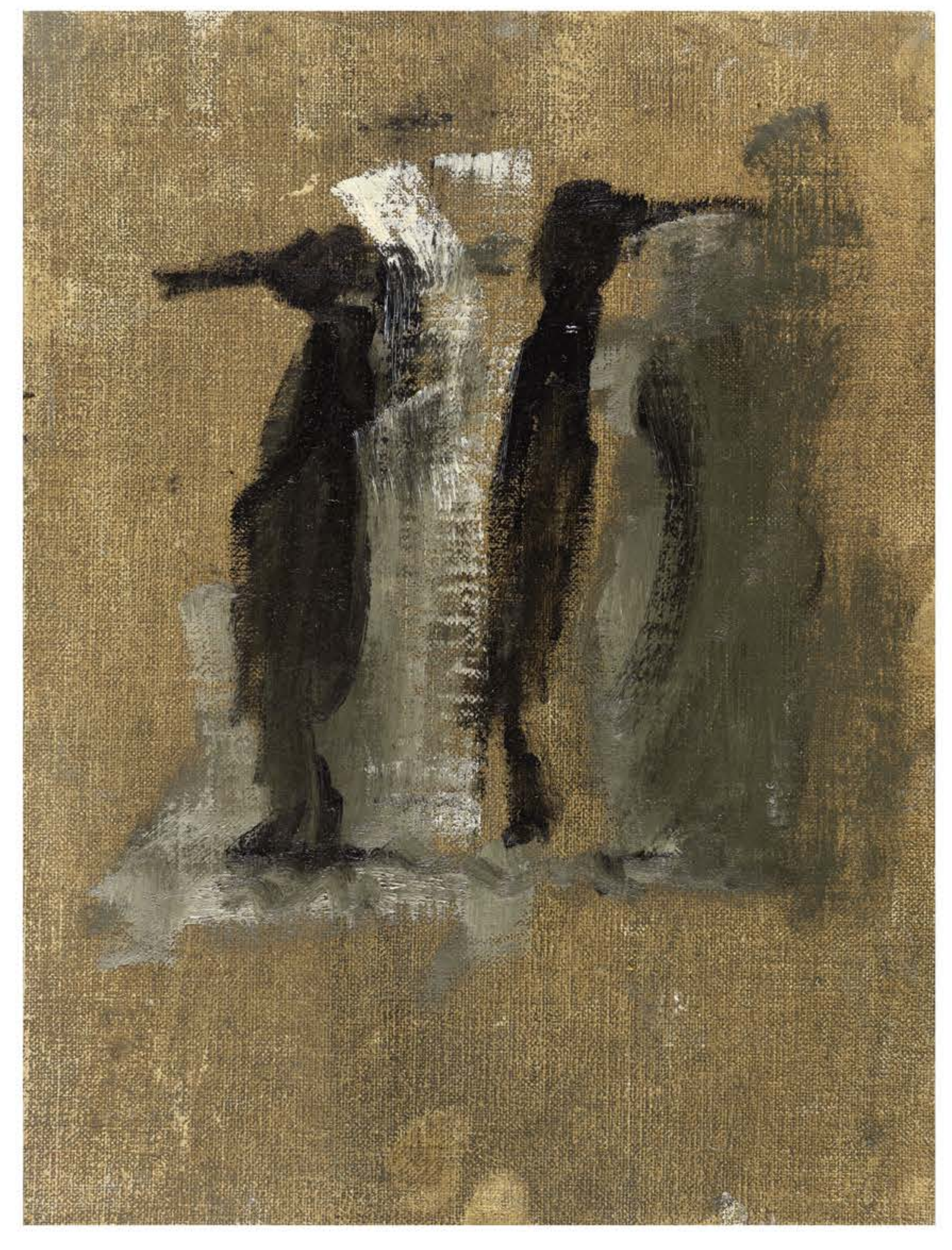
John Kelly

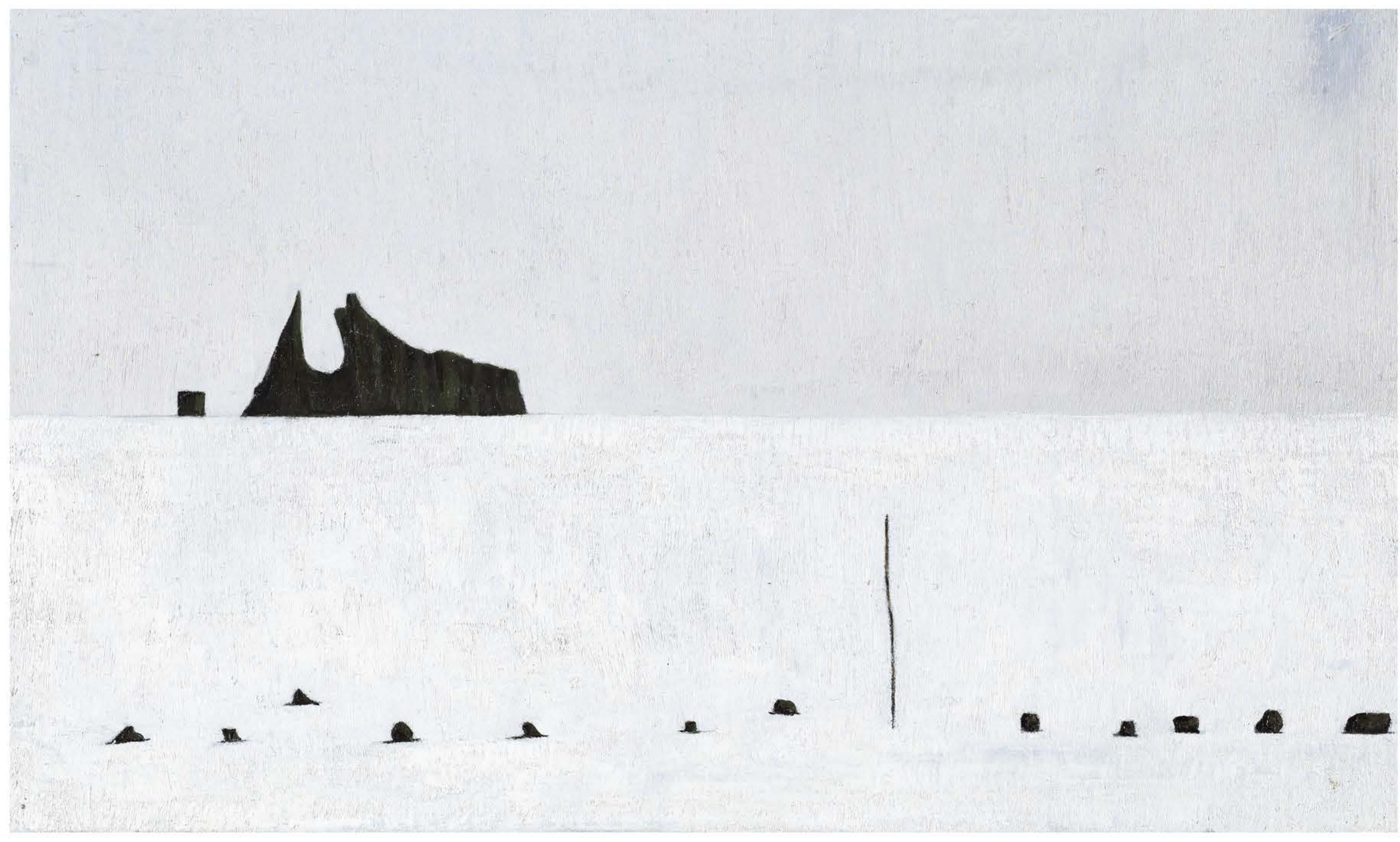
First posted Monday 9 December 2013 10.28 AEDT
The Guardian

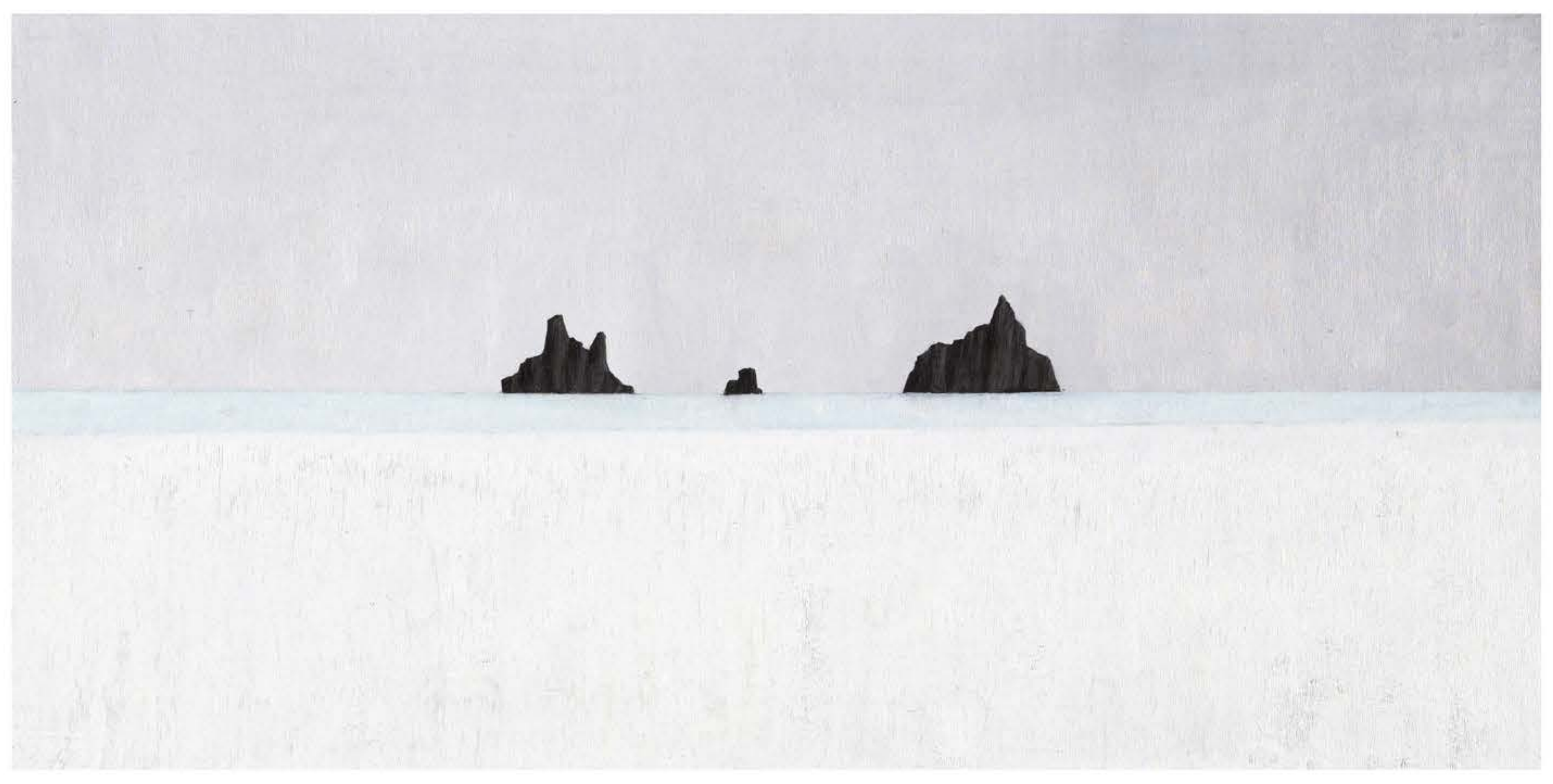












In the great white south

It's April 2014. The Boeing 777 flies over Malaysia then banks, proceeding along the Malacca Strait. As the plane turns again, I can't help thinking of the missing Malaysian Airlines plane, MH370, the one presumably lost thousands of kilometres further south in the Indian Ocean. Press reports described the part of the Indian Ocean where it might be as one of the remotest places on earth.

If the Indian Ocean west of Perth is remote, then the Australian Antarctic station at Mawson, thousands of kilometres further south, is beyond 'Woop Woop' – another world, where normality is turned on its head. Antarctica, the driest continent on earth, holds 70% of the earth's fresh water. Its bright light and white sheets of ice are a photographer's dream, yet for six months of the year it is continually dark; a continent full of danger and contradictions. It is several months since my return from Antarctica, not long enough to properly comprehend my voyage, but I am already aware that it is a significant point in my life as an artist.

Friends ask 'What was the most difficult thing about Antarctica?' and I reply, 'The decision to go'. There is also a difficulty in returning to normal life after a journey that had so many exciting adventures that heightened one's senses. My *Guardian* blogs record my visits to the nunataks at Rumdoodle, to Auster Rookery and the Adélie penguins at Béchervaise Island, viewing icebergs from Mount Henderson, and staring down beautiful blue crevasses.

My incredible journey began in Hobart in October 2013, in a collegiate atmosphere with 90 others that took me across the Southern Ocean on the icebreaker *Aurora Australis*. The ocean voyage had adventure and excitement from the beginning, when we attempted to outrun a storm crossing the Great Australian Bight, only to turn into some wild weather further south that sent the ship rocking and rolling, with sea-spray smattering the windows of the Bridge and sending many scurrying to their bunks. This sea voyage, estimated to be around 11 days, turned into a three-week epic, with much of it spent icebreaking. The effort delivered a piercing audio below deck, in my 'studio', as the ice scratched at the steel hull, and on more than one occasion I stopped painting thinking that the ship had been ripped open.

On arrival in Antarctica a small group of us were helicoptered off the *Aurora Australis*, over Iceberg Alley and onto the ski-way at Davis, where a DC3 flew us across the Amery Ice Shelf to Mawson. After three weeks on-board, I had become used to company in this isolating landscape. How could you not be sociable in the shared cabins and the close quarters of the ship, with life revolving around the wonderful galley; although after several weeks it felt like being locked in a cafeteria!

As my journey progressed, the number of people around me diminished until, at the end, I was the only one left on a plane that flew back over Bass Strait to Melbourne. It seems now like a nice metaphor that explains how, despite the practical proximity of others, the journey to the remotest part of this earth is a journey from which, by necessity, one returns alone, with your own thoughts and memories. After all, we all had come from diverse backgrounds and professions, with different goals and missions to complete in this hostile environment, where one has to confront oneself both physically and mentally. It is almost like a physical embodiment of panning back from oneself, exemplified when the DC3 banked over the *Aurora Australis* to reveal that my entire world of three weeks – that enormous and imposing ship – was nothing more than a tiny red speck on a vast sea of white.

I have no problems admitting I found my experience confronting and challenging; 55 paintings in nine weeks and five essays published whilst working in such a difficult environment broke me down day by day. Physically and mentally the environment took its toll. By the time we flew back to Davis from Mawson, after several weeks of work, I was in need of a rest. However that was to prove impossible.

The first evening I was billeted in the communications building and was within earshot when the communications officer uttered words that felt like fingernails drawing down a blackboard; 'whiteout, helicopter down, injuries'! The helicopter had gone down in a crevasse field on what was termed The Loose Tooth, an appendage of the continent waiting to be an iceberg. It was the same helicopter and pilot who had flown me off the ship a few weeks earlier and the prognosis was not good for our colleagues. The weather had closed in and immediate rescue was impossible. We were told they could be stuck there for a week or more.

The stress and uncertainty that accompanied the accident made working impossible. Over the next few days the anxiety and fear for our colleagues was palpable and those endless days stretched one's mental resources as we waited for the weather to break. It was excruciating. I could only imagine how it felt for those trapped out on the ice.

We were informed that with the loss of the helicopter the normal flying program would be cancelled and that many of

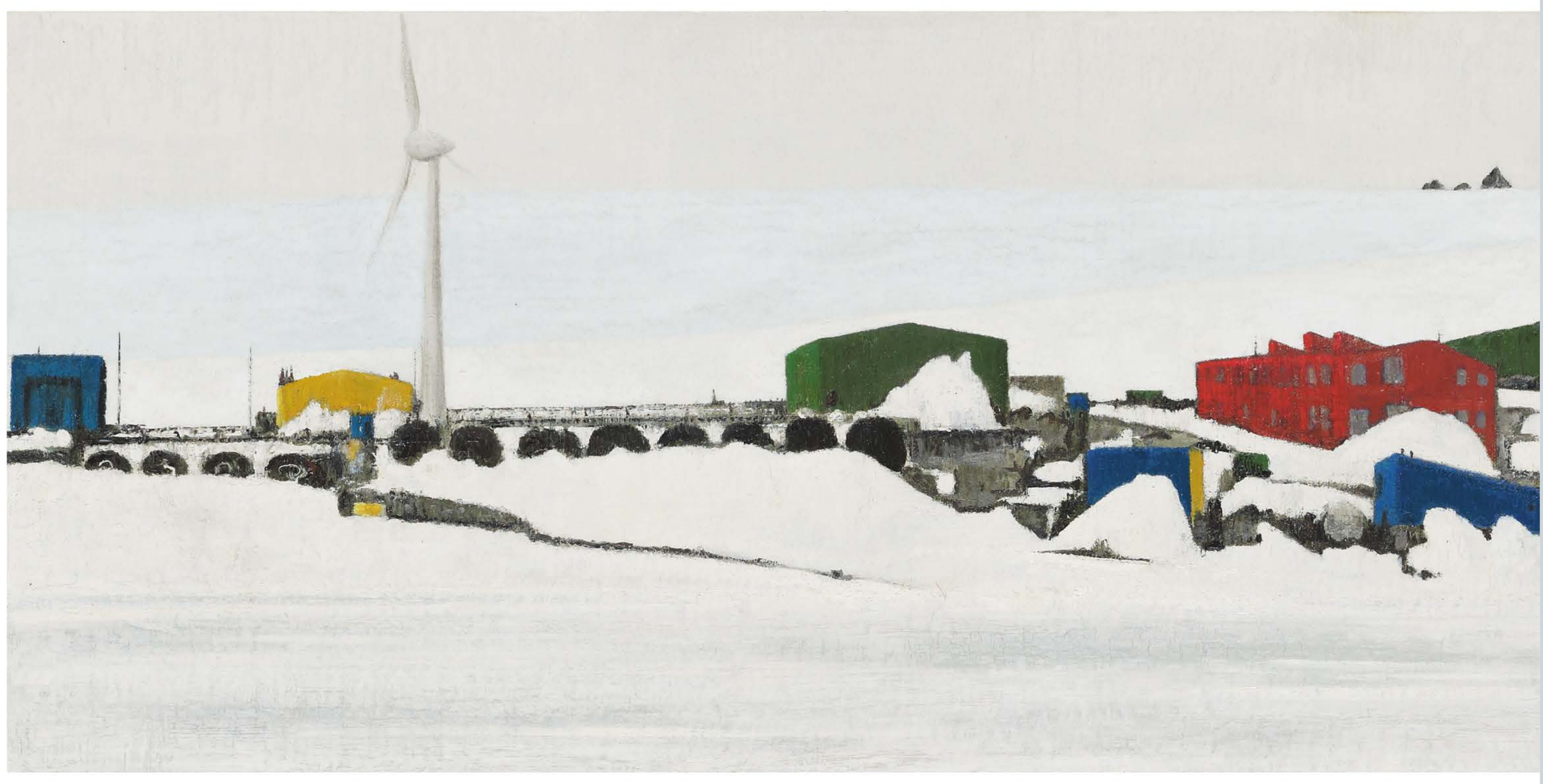
the scientific projects would also be cut short. This meant a small group of us would be on the first and last available DC3 flight back to Casey, after the injured had been retrieved and evacuated. Fortunately, after a couple of days, the weather brightened long enough for the rescue to succeed. A few days later a Twin Otter flew us from the sea ice up to Woop Woop, another ski-way, to await the return of the DC3, which duly arrived to fly us out.

By the time the five-hour flight to Casey ended I was exhausted. Because of luggage restrictions I had left a significant amount of my art materials back at Davis, so even if I had the energy to work, I simply did not have the material to keep painting. Instead, I flew back to Hobart with a small group of others on the A319 to spend Christmas with my family. When the crew offered me a lift to Melbourne, I gratefully accepted and had the rare experience of being the only passenger on a commercial airline. Returning alone, after a visit to the most isolated place on earth, felt like an apt end to my journey.

Whilst in Antarctica and after the helicopter crash, I felt that our presence there might be an extravagance, a far too hostile environment for scientists and others to risk their lives to collect esoteric data. However, a few weeks after my return, the press announced that evidence of gravitational waves from the Big Bang had been observed that confirmed Einstein's theory of relativity. The information had come from a microwave-sensitive telescope in Antarctica that had relied on the dryness and darkness to be able to collect the data, in an environment where time and space behave quite differently to what we are used to. It made me realise just how special this frozen cap is to our ability to understand our world, our universe, and the potential that there might be others. It seems fitting that the evidence for Relativity was collected from this icy world that man had only just begun to explore when the Zurich patent clerk with a wayward haircut put forward his incredible hypothesis.

John Kelly

This post originally appeared in
Australian Antarctic Magazine, June 2014.



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First berg 23/10/2013
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Morning berg 24/10/2013
p.19 oil on canvas board
24.4 x 40.4mm

Berg in the distance 25/10/2013
p.18 oil on canvas board
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Friday (Ramp berg) 25/10/2013
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p.27 oil on canvas board
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p.23 oil on canvas board
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Berg (Map of Oz) 29/10/2013
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— Petersen Island 21/11/2013
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— Welch Island 21/11/2013
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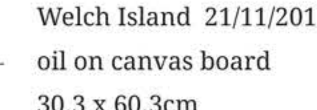

p.37 Mawson skiway 21/11/2013
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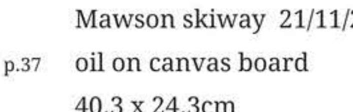

p.63 On the way to Auster 2013
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p.57 Auster 2013
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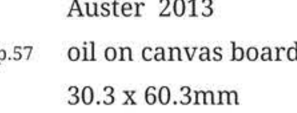

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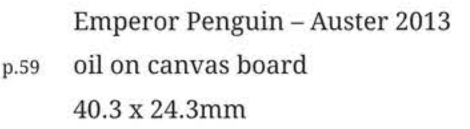

p.68 Nunataks 2013
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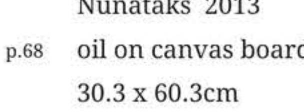

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— Reptile Berg from Bechervaise 2013
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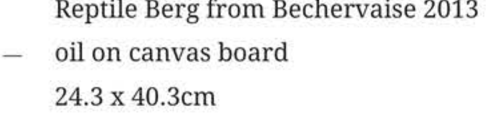

p.64 Rumdoodle Rock 2013
oil on canvas board
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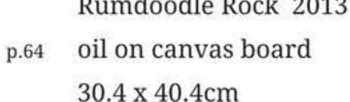

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p.69 From Rumdoodle 2013-14
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p.10 From Rumdoodle, afternoon 2013–14
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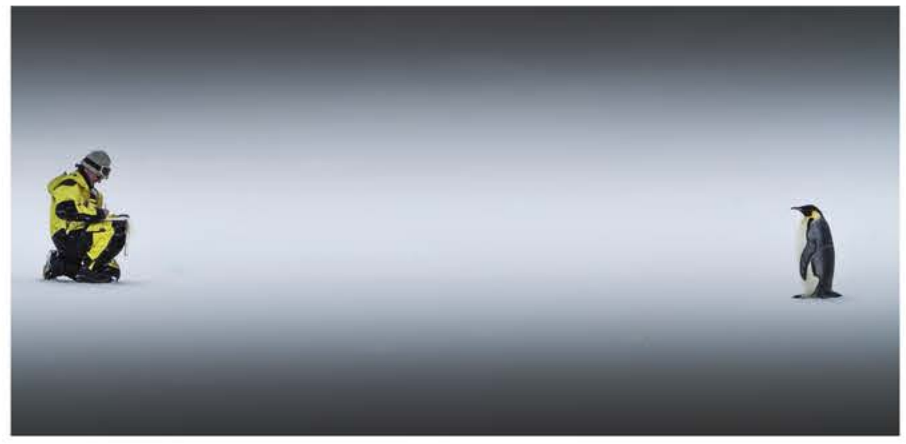
Justin Chambers



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John Kelly in Antarctica