

## Interview with Sally Robinson

by Alyce Neal, Assistant Curator, UNSW Art Collection

Sydney, 12 September 2019

**Can you tell me about your time with the Australian Antarctic division, where did you travel and how long you were gone for?**

We travelled on a supply ship, taking two weeks to travel to Antarctica, two weeks around Antarctica and its surrounds and then two weeks to travel back, visiting the Australian Stations of Mawson, Davis, and Heard Island. Heard Island is a sub-Antarctic Island, south west of Perth, and north of Antarctica. It used to be an old sealing station and is under the protection of Australia, and its extreme weather prevents most travellers visiting. There were masses of wildlife, penguins, birds and seals; the expedition leaders kept saying to us 'you're not allowed to get closer than five metres to the wildlife', but no one had told the wildlife, they got very excited and came over to look at us.

Travelling to Antarctica stayed with me. I was keen to go again, but I'm a terrible sailor. These seas are some of the roughest seas in the world. I would be quite sick and just laid out flat, and if I could muster the energy to stand vertical, I would hang onto the railing outside.

I went back to Antarctica in 2012, this time travelling to the Chilean side of Antarctica and went to quite different places, places which had more of a human presence. We went to bases on the Chilean part of Antarctica, a Chinese Station and to relics of old whaling stations. On the trip I took with the Australian Antarctic Division, I got to go much more into the heart of Antarctica, whereas from the Chilean side I only really touched the edge.

**What did you expect to see when you went to Antarctica for the first time?**

I thought it was all going to be white, and the stunning thing is, there is a lot of subtle colour, there are greens and yellows in the reflections and water and different colours in the ice. There was also a lot of rock, something that I wasn't expecting.

**The series *Antarctic impressions* is a homage to the research and exploration of Australian scientists in Antarctica and the prints carry a sense of curiosity, discovery and at times, humour. Can you tell me about *The last huskies*?**

When I was on the voyage with the Antarctic Division in 1991, it was the last year that huskies were allowed on Antarctica – they were an introduced species. So, they removed them from the Australian bases, by then they were only at Mawson Station, and later they were all found new homes in Australia and around the world.

The huskies would be tied up on a trace and it was on a bit of a hill. The Adélie penguins would try to go from one side of the hill to the other, and you could see the dogs thinking "let it be me that they come in front of" ... so they lost a few Adélie penguins to the dogs. I was interested because, in the history of Antarctica, the sled dogs were so important to help explorers get across the ice. Now they use Hägglunds and machines. The dogs were very

gentle, but their handlers said, “if you want to pat one, that’s fine, but you will have to pat them all”, otherwise the other dogs would get jealous.

**Can you tell me about *Atlas Cove – Heard Island 1993*, what are the buildings depicted in this work?**

They’re the sealing huts, used by sealers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Everything is protected on the island - the wildlife and these huts – they are not to be dismantled and you can only view them at a distance. The life of a sealer would have been very hard – the island is bleak, and the seas are so rough, because it’s in the middle of the ocean – there’s nothing around. There is one big volcanic mountain at its centre, Big Ben, with huge glaciers like Challenger Glacier that run down to the sea.

**The print *Challenger Glacier*, text is overlaid in the background, where is this from?**

The text is an extract from Douglas Mawson’s paper: ‘The B.A.N.Z. Antarctic Research Expedition, 1929-31’ by Douglas Mawson, published in *The Geographical Journal* 1932. Mawson was one of Australia’s greatest and most famous Antarctic explorers. The text seemed appropriate as it gives a little history and geographical details as well as some of Mawson’s impressions from his expedition to Heard Island.

I hadn’t used text like this before, overlaid within the print, but it’s something I do more now in my painting practice. I like the graphic appearance of letters forming part of the fabric of a painting as well as giving some relevant information. When I use them in a portrait, they are words written by my subject or words that have significance for the subject. Often the words become obscured by other elements in the painting, but they remain readable if the viewer wants to make the effort.

**What is the process in creating these works?**

The way I work is, I take lots and lots of photographs and then I put them together as a little photomontage. In those days, we didn’t have digital tools to do this like we do now. Then I used to cut and paste, it is satisfying to work like this, but much more time consuming. From the photomontage, I would make stencils, to print layer upon layer upon layer. The mechanical texture is created with photo stencils. These allow you to reproduce a photographic image as halftone dots or dashes which can be very small and fine or very large and coarse depending on the effect you wish to achieve. These are printed as the last step in the process to get the detail and the tonal modelling. Most of the other stencils were produced manually, by scratching, painting, or cutting out shapes which held back the printing ink in some areas but let it print through onto the paper in other areas.

**Trained as a painter, you established yourself as a printmaker after art school. Can you tell me about your prints from this time and your shift to painting?**

I studied at the National Art School in the early 1970s and although I had been painting for a while, I was really taken with screen printing and after I left art school it was the first thing I focused on. The early prints all had a bit of humour, some of them looked a bit loony (see *Rabbit Flat*) of course the bustards would never group together like that. Because I produced these works by creating a montage of lots of photos, I could create a juxtaposition that wasn’t real, but believable.

The *Antarctic* series was the last body of prints I produced and marked the end of my printmaking career, screen printing is very bad for your health, for all sorts of reasons. I needed to change for that reason, but I also needed a creative change. I had been making screen prints for twenty years and I loved it but had taken it as far as I thought I could creatively. Returning to painting after screen printing was interesting, I paint like a screen printer. I devised a way of painting using stencils, which is how I get my texture and line work, painting through stencils. These stencils can be made from found objects, they can be commercially produced stencils or, if I want a particular shape or sized texture, I get them laser printed to my specifications.

### **Colour and layering are key to your painting practice, how do you bring stencilling into painting?**

There are two main parts of my painting practice – portraits and abstracts. The abstracts play with a palimpsest idea, there are layers of colour and texture and sometimes one might appear to come forward, but on another day, you may see a different colour there. A palimpsest was created when monks used to reuse the old parchments. They would scrub off the original writing on a parchment and then write over it, but you could still see the shadow of the old writing. I think of my abstract painting a bit like that.

With the portraits it's a similar sort of thing in a way. I use a heavy texture over a flatter background colour to give a feeling of depth and richness. These works look more realistic or photographic when viewed from a distance, but when you get closer to the surface of the painting, the elements start to break up.

The use of colours in the abstract works are planned to a degree, but once I start it becomes intuitive. With my prints, I was always interested in colour and getting a colour that was believable for a particular landscape but heightened and popping out.

I often paint a couple of portraits and then do an abstract to refresh; I am better known for my portraits but the abstracts are very important to me, not only as a creative expression, but they are the purest sense of me as an artist, and they help me with my portraiture. The portraits and abstracts are quite different, and I like that difference.