

PETER JAMES SMITH

UNDER SOUTH - A HISTORY OF FUGIVE MARKS

7 - 25 May 2013

At the start of Wolfgang Peterson's 2004 movie *Troy*, a filmic interpretation of Homer's poetic masterwork *The Iliad*, the surviving character of Odysseus muses in voiceover:

'Men are haunted by the vastness of eternity. And so we ask ourselves: will our actions echo across the centuries? Will strangers hear our names long after we are gone, and wonder who we were, how bravely we fought, how fiercely we loved.'

The camera fades from a contemporary beach scene in Greece to the remote history of 1250BC, in exactly the same beach-side location, as the troops on the beach are marshalled by the Greek King Menelaus as they prepare to set off to do battle to retrieve Helen who has been spirited away by the Trojans. This beach has seen a lot of warfare.

Such a segue of camera fade from a landscape in the present, to show the same landscape at a time deep in history, offers powerful insight into the history of human habitation on this earth. It is a filmic version of the landscape bearing witness to human activity in all its glory, covering conflicts and resolutions across the passage of time. Indeed, as time passes, the precious moments of human presence fade. Our objects break and decay and our texts are lost. But somehow the landscape goes on, and continues to bear witness to what we have done.

This exhibition mines this vein of thought, capturing in painted form, not so much the battles of Ancient Greece, but rather the landscape holding onto the texts of science and culture, mathematics and human gesture—before they are gone. These are landscapes of our South—of Victoria, Tasmania, New Zealand, Macquarie Island, Campbell Island, and the Antarctic—with filmic relics of what is here and what has been here. This is a history of fugitive marks.



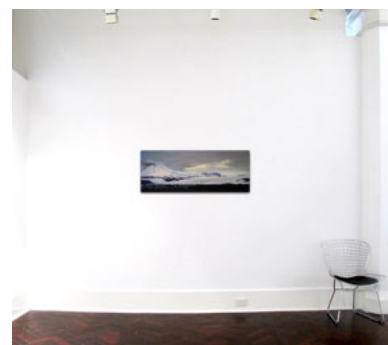
Arrival at Macquarie Island
 oil on linen
 91 x 166cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Erebus Diaries (Erebus Ice Tongue)
 oil on linen
 46 x 121cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Strands of Empire
oil on linen
112 x 168 cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



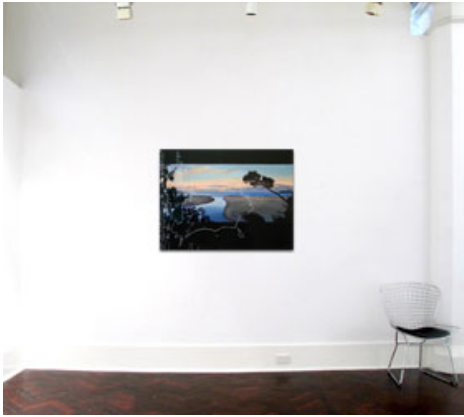
Distant Light (Sunset at Farewell Spit)
oil on linen
91 x 168 cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Tidal Fall at Gabo Island
oil on linen
91 x 121 cm



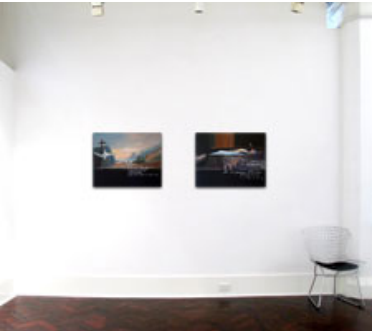
Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Cast Away (Shot Albatross, Macquarie Island Expedition, 1911)
oil on linen
61 x 76 cm



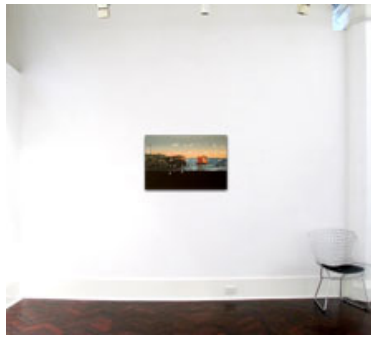
The Emperor's Silence
oil on linen
61 x 76 cm
\$3,950 AUD



Artworks in situ on 3.7m wall



Fugitive Marks
oil on linen
61 x 91cm



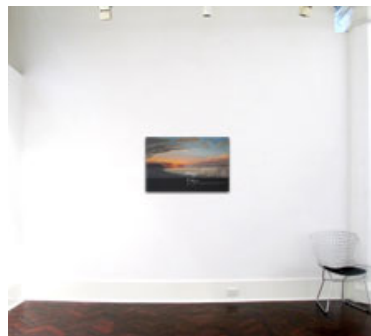
Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Time & Place
oil on linen
61 x 122cm



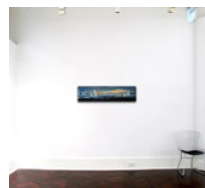
Tides (Port Phillip Bay)
oil on linen
61 x 91cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



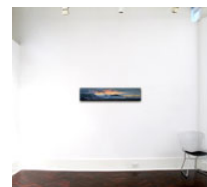
Shackleton's Light (Iceblink at Cape Royds, Antarctica)
oil on linen
20 x 81cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



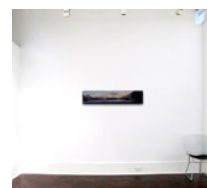
Silver Light (Shore Bound, Rafting, Macquarie Island)
oil on linen
25 x 121cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



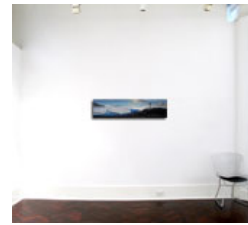
Signs of Historical Narrative (Sealers Camp and Boat Ramps, Dusky Bay, NZ)
oil on linen
25 x 121cm



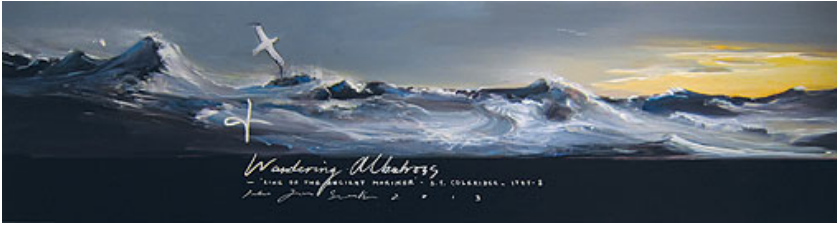
Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



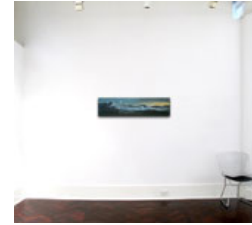
Ice Station (Vince's Cross 1902, McMurdo Sound)
oil on linen
31 x 121cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



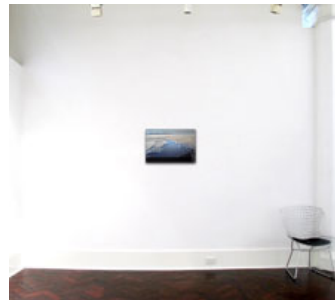
Wandering Albatross (Rime of the Ancient Mariner)
oil on linen
31 x 121cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



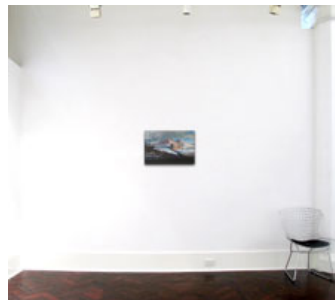
Icebreaker at Winterquarters Bay (Oden)
oil on linen
41 x 61cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Scott's Dark Angel (Discovery Hut, Antarctica)
oil on linen
41 x 61cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall



Wind Across the Great Southern Ocean
oil on linen
91 x 121cm



Artwork in situ on 3.7m wall

CATALOGUE NOTES

Tides (Port Phillip Bay)

On a recent trip south to Tasmania on the Spirit of Tasmania, I became aware of the enormous size of Port Phillip Bay, the dangerous bar at the entrance to the bay, and the power of the tides. This late evening image from an indolent hot summer evening outlines the bay with overlaid texts showing the resonance of the tides in the enclosed harbour. There is what T.S. Eliot calls the *still point*, a point in the harbour where the tides neither rise nor fall. In the inscribed theoretical formula, this point is a node at a critical length, l , from the harbour end, for a harbour of depth, d . It arises when we think of the tides in the form of a wave with period and amplitude.

Silver Light (Shorebound Rafting at Macquarie Island)

In December 2012, Mary and I were part of an expedition to the Southern Ocean and the sub-Antarctic Islands. Macquarie Island is 3 days sailing, 1000 kilometres south of Tasmania. The island is some 30 kilometres long and less than 5 kilometres wide. The image refers to the era of Joseph Hatch, c 1860, an entrepreneur who set up an industry extracting penguin oil from the colonies at Lusitania Bay, further south on Macquarie. At dawn, in silver light, the hawser trails loosely in the water behind the rowing boat, hauling empty barrels to the shore.

Arrival at Macquarie Island (Under lenticular cloud)

We reached 54° 30'S and 159° 20'E inside the Antarctic Circle at the northern tip of Macquarie just as the December sunlight was fading. After 3 days at sea, in cruel weather, we stood on the bridge with straining eyes trying to see the island coming into view. The wind blew strongly from the southwest, streaming over the island, making lens-shaped clouds (lenticular) billowing into the darkness. I felt as if I was on the bridge of *The Mimyi*, with Captain Thaddeus Bellinghausen on Emperor Alexander's Russian expedition to the Southern Ocean 1819-21. Our crew was Russian. *The Mimyi* hove to in our same position north of the island, then tacking here there and back again in jagged traceries.

Distant Light (Sunset at Farewell Spit)

Farewell Spit (*Tuhuroa*) is a narrow isthmus of land at the northwest corner of the South Island of New Zealand that stretches eastward 26 kilometres into the ocean currents. In parts, it is barely 100 metres wide. It steadies the tide like a lintel. To stand on this piece of land and gaze out at sea is exhilarating—akin to standing on the window ledge at the top of a 100 storey building and looking down. As the sun set to the west, I became acutely aware of the concept of *distance*, and of being able to see into the distance. The overlaid texts show the simple diagrammatics of parallax, of measuring the distance to the stars. Ancient observers noticed that as the seasons changed, relative positions of stars changed, and they used this to measure distance. The derivation shows that stellar distance (in parsecs) is the inverse of the parallax angle in arc-seconds. That is, distance = $1/\text{angle}$.

Strands of Empire

On our visit to Lusitania Bay, eastside central on Macquarie Island, the heaving sea swells meant that we were not able to reach shore, but remained adrift in zodiacs amid forests of tangling Bull Kelp. These long plant strands had a cloying effect of capturing everything that ventured into the water. From this vantage point of insecurity, we could see a shoreline covered in many thousands of Royal Penguins. They loved, ate and lived, shoulder-to-shoulder in an immense colony, completely oblivious to the rusting penguin digesters in their midst. They crowded about these vehicles of their own destruction. Happy. Unafraid of humans. Unable to recall the slaughter of the 1860s. Beneath this filmic image is a timeline that charts the explorers, innovators and entrepreneurs in Macquarie Island's history, from the island's discovery by Frederick Hasselberg and his sealing gangs in 1810, to the visit by Sir Douglas Mawson on the Australian Antarctic Expedition of 1911-13.

Fugitive Marks (The lighthouse at Airey's Inlet)

Airey's Inlet is a small coastal town on The Great Ocean Road, south of Melbourne. The Split Rock Lighthouse (built in 1891) stands on a coastal promontory within near sight of a beckoning sea stack (Eagle Rock) that is pounded by the waves. The light was automated in 1919. The last keeper, Richard Joy Baker, scratched on the black paint on the back of the lantern. The black paint had been applied to stop the light shining inland and annoying the resident townsfolk. Each time the lenses rotated, the light flashed through the holes of the secret scratchings. So the keeper could retire to the local hotel in the evening and see that all was well with his light. His were fugitive marks indeed. These marks are represented by overlaid texts, whose meaning may have been clear at one time, but are now completely illegible.

Cast Away (Shot Albatross, Macquarie Island Expedition, 1911)

The text comes first: *At length did cross an Albatross...* immortal lines from S.T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, 1797-98. This landscape from Macquarie Island at Sandy Bay shows an Albatross shot and hung up to dry, in much the same way as rows of ducks are hung up in a modern shooting season. Times and cultures change. We would shoot ducks but we would not shoot an albatross. The image is based on an historic photograph from the Australian Antarctic Expedition of 1911. The bird hangs cross-like as a Coleridge warning for humanity not to tamper with the natural order of things. It hangs from a *finger post*—another cross-like structure that can be seen from the shoreline pointing the way for shipwrecked sailors to the nearest storehouse of provisions. The Australian and New Zealand governments in a rare showing of solidarity agreed to the setting up of castaway depots on the Sub-Antarctic Islands after horrific stories of deprivation from marooned sailors c 1880s.

The Emperor's Silence

For over 100 years the Emperor Penguin has lain on Sir Robert Falcon Scott's map table in his vestibule corner of the Hut that he built at Cape Evans for the Terra Nova Expedition 1911-13. To the left is Scott's bunk. A newspaper and a tripod are the worldly accompaniments to these mummified remains. Even though the Cape Evans Hut is undergoing renovation, this corner seems to lie in revered silence. It is illumined by darkness. It has all the trappings of a shrine to immortality because it is too cold for flesh to decay.

Signs of Historical Narrative 1793 (Sealers' Camp and Boat Runs, Cascade Cove, Dusky Bay, New Zealand)

Mary and I ventured to the remote Dusky Bay on the south west coast of Fiordland, New Zealand in 2005. Although ironically this area was one of Captain James Cook's favourite watering holes on his voyages to the Southern Ocean 1769 and 1773, it remains today uninhabited and remote, accessible only by sea. Cascade Cove was a quiet backwater in the southern half of Dusky Bay where Cook often moored and made expeditions to the waterfall around the corner that was the subject of the masterwork painting (*Cascade Cove*) *Dusky Bay*, 1775, by his shipboard artist William Hodges. We moored overnight in Cascade Cove and at dawn, on a falling tide, we could see the ridges in the gravel bank of the shoreline—rows and rows of ridges and grooves—clear as the day they were made c 1793 in the era of shorebound whaling. These were *boat runs*, where the longboats were dragged up out of the water, time and time again, to be stored at the sealer's campsite above high tide. The text overlay calls to this repeated patterning in a nod to the New Zealand modernist Gordon Walters. He made koru patterns that combined fern fronds with wavelets of water. His is a pattern of deep cultural gravity and sensitivity. These boat runs remain against the tide like the staves of a musical score. Nuanced and light, they are indeed signs of historical narrative.

Time and Place (The Lighthouse at Tasman Island)

Tasman Island lies at the seaward extremity of the Tasman Peninsula in Tasmania. It is pounded by the ocean swells of the Tasman Sea. In 2007, Mary and I ventured offshore in a jet boat, past the jagged vertical rock stacks of Cape Pillar (in the centre of the image). The sea swell is treacherous against the island—landing is only possible with crane and gantry to provision the light. The text overlay gathers the 4 dimensions of time and place together. Time is measured out in musical beats with interludes and place is referenced by Tasmanian placenames (C. Pillar; Robbins I, Storm Bay, Cape Raoul, ...).

Icebreaker at Winterquarters Bay (Oden)

On my Antarctic visit in January 2009, on a New Zealand Antarctic Fellowship, I visited Hut Point at Winterquarters Bay several times. It lies right next to the American base at McMurdo Sound, extending out into the bay. It is where Captain Robert Scott built the original Discovery Hut in 1903. It has a convenient docking place for ships beside the peninsula of land, so that Hut and moored ship may be a mere twenty metres apart. This may have been fine in 1903, however, now the ice has closed over summer access. The icebreaker Oden was moored at Hut point on one of my visits. I watched it depart through the sound of crushing ice, and as it disappeared into Erebus Bay to become a small speck in the distance, the channel that it had cleared started to close over.

Shackleton's Light (Iceblink at Cape Royds)

When Sir Ernest Shackleton made his arduous rescue of his stranded men at Elephant Island, he crossed to South Georgia in an open boat. In his book *South* he recounts the sense of the *Third Man Syndrome*, or the guiding hand of a spiritual presence helping him on his way. This Light is referred to in the title of the work as the glow from multiply reflected light off snow and clouds (iceblink). The image shows icebergs drifting past Cape Royds on the extreme west of Ross Island, the location of Shackleton's Hut for his Nimrod Expedition of 1907-9.

Erebus Diaries (Erebus Ice Tongue)

Ice in the Antarctic is an extraordinary phenomenon. The *Erebus Ice Tongue* is the tip of a fresh water glacier that cascades off the slopes of Mt Erebus. When it reaches the frozen-over 'sea' of the Ross Ice Shelf, it cantilevers itself over the top of the sea ice (with stages of frozen seawater with reduced salinity) in a remarkable projection 11-12 kilometers long, 300 metres high at its outset, and 50 metres high at its tip. It is riddled with caves and contorted formations. The painted image shows Erebus and the dark-tipped Cape Barne in the distance with the Ice Tongue just reaching beyond this. To the right in the far distance is inaccessible Island, set amidst the frozen ice shelf. The texts refer to dimension and the oak-leaf fluted shape of this extraordinary feature best viewed by satellite.

Ice Station (Vince's Cross, 1902, McMurdo Sound)

George Vince was a member of the Discovery Expedition team and slipped off Hut Point during an Antarctic Blizzard and died in the frozen water in March 1902. Remarkably, we wish to erect monuments to fallen colleagues in remote locations such as this, even though few travellers could ever see it. Crosses are part of our human condition and perhaps we leave something of ourselves behind when we erect them. The Antarctic is an eerie frozen wasteland. The overlaid graph points to the fact that the ice extent in the Antarctic is increasing even in a world of supposedly warming climate (data showing mean sea ice extent in 1012 m², 1979-1999).

Wind across the Great Southern Ocean

On our December 2012 expedition, we arrived at Campbell Island (one of New Zealand's Sub-Antarctic Islands) in fading light and amid gale-force winds blowing streaks of foam in lines across the sea. Again from the bridge we strained to see the tent-like shape of Jacquemart Island, 1 km offshore from the southwest corner of the main island of Campbell. Jacquemart is New Zealand's southernmost island. The seas were terrifying. The ship pitched with a 40 degree roll. The texts show the formula for the

island of Campbell. Jacquemart is New Zealand's southernmost island. The seas were terrifying. The ship pitched with a 40 degree roll. The texts show the formula for the construction of the Beaufort Scale for wind velocity: $v = 0.8632 B^{3/2}$. Here, v denotes the wind speed 10 metres above the water and the Beaufort number, B , is then a numerical representation of observed conditions (free from subjective human interpretation). The streaking conditions of our arrival saw $B=8$ or 9 .

Wandering Albatross (Rime of the Ancient Mariner)

The Wandering Albatross inhabits the vast deserts of the Southern Ocean. The mature birds have wingspans of 2.5-3.5 m. The plumage of the males is white with black wing tips and trailing black feathers on the wings. They soar gracefully on the breeze generated by the ocean swell, never having to flap their wings, they are supreme gliders. When they bank and turn at the bottom of their flight trajectory, they reach for the water with their wingtip, but never seem to touch it. It is interesting to draw a timeline from James Cook's second voyage to the Southern Ocean and track the career of his on-board astronomer William Wales (1734-1798), who, post voyage, took the fantastical stories of albatross and tempests to his teaching of an impressionable Coleridge at Christ's Hospital School in London.

Tidal Fall at Gabo Island

Gabo Island is the weather forecaster's anchorstone on Victoria's south east coast. It is the point where the south of the Australian continent finishes and the landscape turns to the east coast. This is a windswept low-lying and desolate place, connected to the mainland by an ephemeral tidal *tombolo* or sand bar. The tides surge in and out of the harbour at Mallacoota. The light at the end of the day is reflected off all the water flooding past the harbour mouth into the sea. The image captures this tidal breath and overlaid texts link image to place with a geographer's map.

Scott's Dark Angel (Discovery Hut at Winterquarters Bay)

The Discovery Hut was built for Sir Robert Falcon Scott's Discovery Expedition of 1901-3. It is nestled on Hut Point adjacent to the American base at McMurdo Sound. Its interior is totally unrenovated. Its doors are locked and bolted. Inside, the sinister days begin: Piled in a corner are the dark remnants of numerous seal carcasses. A thick stench fills the air. They are not rotten or decayed, but particles of them fill the air. This makes it very difficult to breathe. In my visit in the summer of 2009, much of the ice was starting to melt on the scoria facades of Hut Point. The dark scoria warms in the sunlight and then melts the ice it is touching. However, on the veranda of the Discovery Hut was a huge flange of ice, like the vast wing of a sleeping angel. It streaked from under the cover of the veranda and out into the world, smooth and streamlined, chiselled into line by the Antarctic gales. The overlaid graph records the terrible hollowed-out seasonal temperatures that sculpt these effects.

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