Painting for Antarctica

WENDY SHARPE AND BERNARD OLLIS FOLLOW SHACKLETON

In 2014, Wendy Sharpe and Bernard Ollis were artists in residence on an Antarctic expedition sponsored by Chimu. The museum is exhibiting works from their trip, all of which are for sale to aid the Mawson’s Huts Foundation. Senior Curator Daina Fletcher interviewed them about their impressions of the frozen continent.

Daina Fletcher Wendy, you have been to Antarctica before, while Bernard, this was your first visit. Where and when did you go?

Wendy Sharpe and Bernard Ollis

We travelled in February and March 2014. The ship was called the Sea Adventurer, with a large crew and approximately 120 passengers. We sailed from Ushuaia, the southernmost tip of South America, from an island called Tierra del Fuego (land of fire). The voyage took 16 days. The itinerary was open to change throughout, due to the variants of weather; for example our first unscheduled landing was at Port Stanley in the Falkland Islands to pick up fuel, instead of Argentina. After this, we sailed further east to South Georgia, a stunning and dramatic island teeming with wildlife. Due to the exceptionally mild weather we were able to land in many of the island’s bays, including Fortuna Bay, Gold Harbour, St Andrew’s Bay and Grytviken, where Ernest Shackleton made contact with the outside world (after his expedition had been stranded in Antarctica for 20 months). We then voyaged south, passing desolate Elephant Island, where Shackleton’s party started their boat journey to South Georgia in search of help, and then on to the Antarctic peninsula. After the beautiful Lemaire Channel we returned, heading north to Ushuaia through the challenging Drake Passage.

How and why did you become involved?

We were invited by David Jensen of Mawson’s Huts Foundation and Greg Carter of Chimu Adventures to be artists in residence for the expedition. Such an exciting opportunity!

What were your expectations of the voyage and of Antarctica? What did you hope to get out of it?

Bernard Ollis

This was my first expedition to Antarctica. It was the chance of a lifetime, but daunting in terms of what I would do and how I would make art in that environment. Although I am a very experienced artist, I have never done anything like this.

Wendy Sharpe

I had been to Antarctica before, on a residency from Mawson’s Huts Foundation. It was on the Aurora Australis for a seven-week scientific voyage from Hobart around Antarctica to Fremantle. I had never been to the Antarctic Peninsula or a sub-Antarctic island. I was excited about seeing all the seals and penguins and fascinated by the idea of visiting the places Shackleton went.

Were these expectations met, or how did they change during the Antarctic voyage?

BO I went with an open mind, not sure how I would respond. It proved an unforgettable experience.

WS I was excited to see this area and couldn’t wait to see all the seals and penguins. It was far more amazing than I imagined.
What was your first impression of the Antarctic? Did the cold climate affect your drawing and painting techniques or the colour has changed.

You both have a strong interest in figurative and in storytelling through scene-setting. How did you translate this to those vast Antarctic land and sea scapes?

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I was particularly fascinated by the enormous elephant seals. I enjoyed painting their ‘portraits’. All the gouaches [opaque watercolours] were made on the ship.

When we flew from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia to start the voyage, the outcome with our art materials didn’t arrive. Wendy had most of her gouache in another bag, but Bernard had none of his oil pastels. We had to leave the voyage without it. We were told it was on another boat and would catch us on route... of course it never did.

We were painting in a small curtained-off area near the library at the top of the ship. We had to put all our gear away at the end of the day in case the swaying of the ship scattered everything and upset the painting water. It was impossible to paint large work on the ship, so it made sense to work on a small scale. We did some quick sketches on deck but mostly worked in this studio, looking out the portholes, looking at photos and working from memory while we were there.

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The orange and yellow on the king penguins actually looked like watercolour washes, especially in contrast to their precise black and white outfits.
Wendy, what do you like most about Bernard’s Antarctic work, and Bernard, how do you feel about Wendy’s?  

WS I always admire Bernard’s extraordinary original composition. There is delightful humour in the work. He expresses the wonder we all felt on the voyage.

BO There is an immediacy and freshness to Wendy’s work on the voyage. It could only be on the spot. I love the space and atmosphere.

After visiting Shackleton’s grave and sailing in his footsteps, what are your thoughts on him as an explorer and adventurer?  

BO Do you have any comments on the survival of those 27 men marooned with him in such an extreme landscape?  

WS After following the route of his boat journey, what are your thoughts on the survival of his men were remarkable – superhuman achievements. They achieved it! Shackleton, Frank Wild and their men were remarkable – superhuman achievements. We have been to some unusual and isolated places (including camping out in the Sahara for 16 days) but nothing competes with this out-of-this-world experience.

WS I am haunted too by memories of Grytviken with blood and carcasses everywhere. Now it is surrounded by penguins and seals, with the snowy mountains behind it, and it has a strange beauty.

BO Nine months later and now working half a world away in the Parisian winter, what is your strongest memory from the voyage? What struck you the most about the places you visited?

WS Sailing through the Lemaire channel at sunset. So shockingly beautiful I couldn’t go inside even though I didn’t have proper gloves. Also, our first arrival on South Georgia. There were so many penguins and seals you could barely get ashore! I am haunted too by memories of Grytviken and Elephant Island.

BO South Georgia, walking among penguins and seals. The scale of the elephant seals. Waiting for a Zodiac in an Antarctic blizzard reminded me of how the weather is most of the time. I also remember the silence.

WS Could you sum up your Shackleton Antarctic experience in three or four words?

BO Like another planet.

WS What do you have any other thoughts or observations you would like to make?

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WS The rusting remains of the whaling station must have been horrible. With blood and carcasses everywhere. Now it is surrounded by penguins and seals, with the snowy mountains behind it, and it has a strange beauty.

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