

‘Scale in Antarctica is extraordinary. It is impossible to understand the size of things in the distance’

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.



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What was your first impression of the Antarctic?

BO I found the environment awe inspiring. It made me think how minuscule and insignificant humankind is in this vast expanse. It also made me think about climate change and our role in it. It was only when I landed in South Georgia, that it all crystallised – dramatic snow-clad mountains, birds of prey, seals and penguins in abundance. This is where I found I could relate to scale and subject.

WS It was fascinating to go to the Falklands. We went on an uncharacteristically sunny day. It was more British than Britain, like the set of *Midsomer Murders*.

In the popular imagination Antarctica is a sublime white landscape, with slashes of blue. What colours and forms did you see?

The colours are not as you might expect. The sky is often an unusual subtle colour, sometimes pinkish or greenish. These colours keep changing. The submerged part of icebergs can be an electric blue/green. Some of these are like Walt Disney floating sculptures. In South Georgia there was vivid green vegetation. When we went ashore early in the morning, the light was yellow. There were soft blurry edges to things but sometimes great clarity. The contrast between the mountain snow and the flecks of dark rocks reminded us of white ice cream with broken shards of chocolate. Sunset in the Lemaire Channel seemed to last for hours, with dazzling orange, yellow, red, purple and green.

WS The orange and yellow on the king penguins actually looked like watercolour

washes, especially in contrast to their precise black and white outfits.

BO As soon as you get your sketch pad out the colour has changed.

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

Although we are both figurative painters and are interested in people, being somewhere as exciting and different as Antarctica makes you want to respond to it.

WS I drew a long visual diary panorama of the trip, drawing the seals, penguins, icebergs etc, but also life on the ship and the places we went.

BO Scale in Antarctica is extraordinary. It is impossible to understand the size of things in the distance. It is only when a creature walks into the frame for comparison that you can see it.

What was your favourite subject or idea to picture? Do you have a favourite work from the voyage?

BO My most ambitious work from this series was the large oil painting of Grytviken, which I painted from drawings and works on paper when I returned.

WS My folding sketchbook is the visual diary of the voyage. It is the story of the whole experience. I like my elephant seal portraits.

How difficult was it painting en plein air in the Antarctic? Did the cold climate affect your drawing and painting techniques or the characteristics of your materials?

When we flew from Buenos Aires to Ushuaia to start the voyage, the suitcase 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 on 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.

WS I was particularly fascinated by the enormous elephant seals. I enjoyed painting their 'portraits'. All the gouaches [opaque watercolours] were made on the ship. The ceramics and prints I made on my return.

You went to Antarctica as two artists who are also life partners. How do you work together – or don't you? How does the work or interests of each of you affect the other?

We don't share a studio in Sydney. We have two huge adjoining warehouses. In Paris we work on two large tables, not unlike the studio on the ship. Although we are both figurative/narrative painters we both have distinctively different approaches. We respect each other's work and opinions.



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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'



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- 01 Page XX King penguins, Bernard Ollis 2014
- 02 Page XX Sunset, Lemaire Channel, Wendy Sharpe 2014
- 03 Grytviken, South Georgia, Wendy Sharpe 2014
- 04 Study of nine king penguins, Bernard Ollis 2014
- 05 Grytviken, March 1 2014, Bernard Ollis 2014



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

After following the route of his boat journey on a warm, comfortable modern ship, it seems almost impossible they could have achieved it! Shackleton, Frank Wild and their men were remarkable – superhuman in today's terms. How they all survived is beyond belief. Visiting Shackleton's and Wild's graves in Grytviken was very moving. The whaling station with its little white church has hardly changed.

What about life on those islands today – any thoughts on this?

Grytviken has only a few people living around the museum. It is incredibly isolated.

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.

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.

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

WS Like another planet.

BO Vast, silent and sublime.

Do you have any other thoughts or observations you would like to make?

There were many passengers on the ship who had been dreaming of Antarctica since childhood and had saved for years

to come. The trip we went on was incredible – something you would remember forever and find hard to believe you really experienced. 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.

Painting for Antarctica – Wendy Sharpe and Bernard Ollis Follow Shackleton is on at the museum from 11 March to 9 August. The works from the exhibition, and from the companion exhibition *Shackleton – Escape from Antarctica*, will be on sale through the Mawson's Huts Foundation. Proceeds are being donated by the artists to the foundation. The artworks will remain on display at the museum for the duration of the exhibition and will be returned to the foundation at the end of this period. Prospective buyers can visit the Mawson's Huts Foundation website for information: mawsons-huts.org.au

Please note, the Australian National Maritime Museum will not be involved in sales or transfer of ownership of the artworks.

Wendy Sharpe is exhibiting in this special charity exhibition for Mawson's Huts Foundation at the ANMM courtesy of King Street Gallery on William, 177 William Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney.

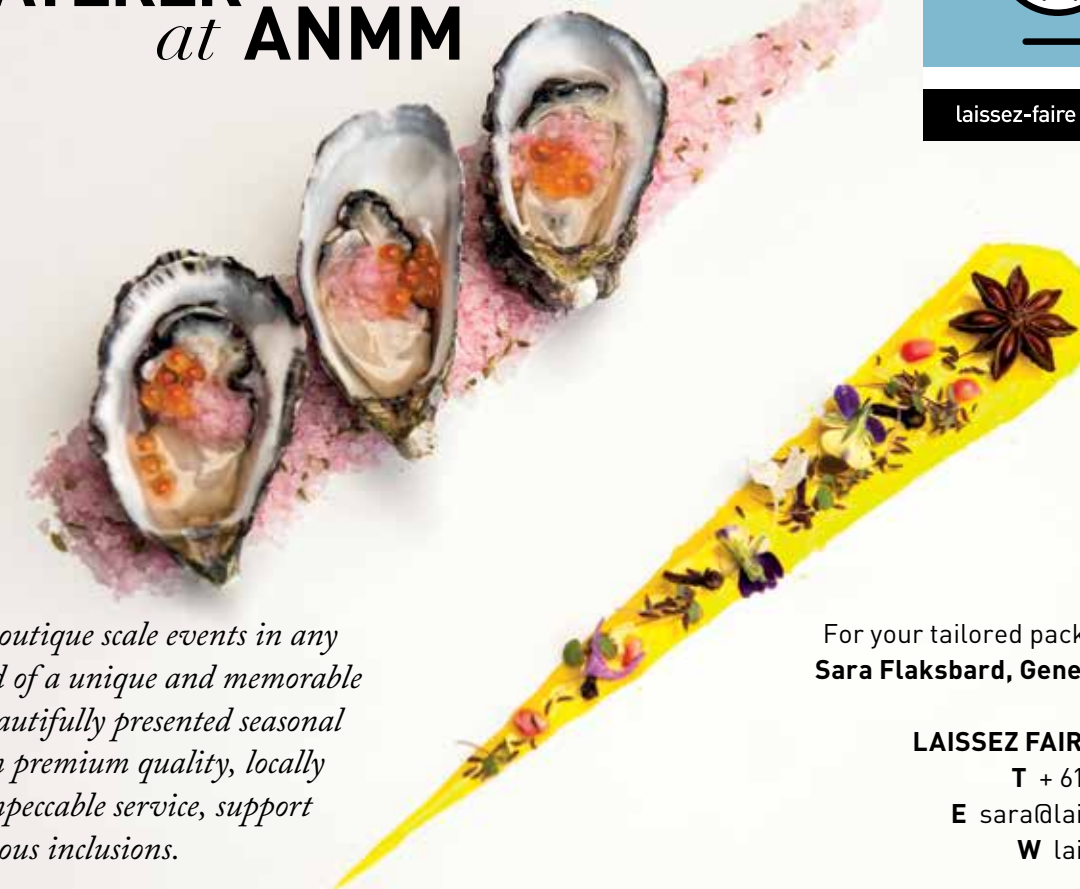
Bernard Ollis is exhibiting in this special charity exhibition for Mawson's Huts Foundation at the ANMM courtesy of N.G. Art, 3 Little Queen Street, Chippendale, Sydney.

- 01 *Elvis the elephant seal*, Wendy Sharpe 2014.
- 02 *South Georgia with Seals and Penguins*, Bernard Ollis 2014
- 03 *Seals and Penguins*, Wendy Sharpe 2014 (made in collaboration with Anne Smith)

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