

# Reflections of truth on a frozen canvas

An artist's journey to Antarctica captured a view of ice, truth and penguins, writes Rosemary Sorensen

ANGUS McDonald did not think he'd be seduced by the penguins. When he accepted the invitation to travel with the Mawson's Huts Foundation restoration crew to Cape Denison on the edge of Antarctica, he was pretty sure, being a keen observer of light, that the sky and the ice would impress him. The adoration of penguins on the back of recent documentary and cartoon film productions, however, was fine for the general populace. An artist is made of more serious stuff.

Nevertheless, there he is, in a photograph accompanying the magnificent series of images he captured during his trip to Antarctica, grinning alongside the comically patient sentinel form of an emperor penguin.

McDonald was eyed off, then told off and shoved about a bit, but finally he just became one of the boys when, on one of his sorties from base camp, he came across a penguin rookery. McDonald sheepishly confesses to gently holding a flipper and promenading with one big bird, but he also controlled his glee sufficiently to lie down on the ice and take many photographs of penguins.

He has selected a small number of these irresistibly attractive images for an exhibition that has opened at the Lismore Regional Gallery in NSW, and which will also open later this month at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London. The new works by McDonald are juxtaposed with a selection of photographs taken by Frank Hurley at the same site during the first Antarctic expedition.

McDonald's penguins are accompanied by ice-scapes that bristle with the *Drang* of German romanticism (and McDonald experienced a couple of ripper *Sturms* during his stay, to complete the effect). The idea, originally, was for him to spend the summer at Cape Denison, documenting the site, including the inside of the two huts still standing on the windiest spot on the planet. When he returned to his studio at Lennox Head, just south of Byron Bay, he used the photographs, as well as his copious notes and sketches, to create a series of paintings.

Mawson's Huts Foundation chairman David Jensen invited McDonald to be the



**Sparse beauty:** Artist Angus McDonald's photographs of the Antarctic explore the relationship between light and ice

expedition artist on last year's trip on the strength of the painter's still-lives. Coffee pots, bowls and fruit counterpoised against calm but unnervingly unstable folds of cloth are his trademark images. He knew the foundation was keen to learn where his interest in groupings of domestic objects would lead him inside the hut Mawson and his men built and lived in during the 1911-14 expedition.

McDonald's father fell ill just before he left, and the artist was forced to cut short his stay, leaving before the ice around the entrance to the fragile hut had thawed. He will return at the end of the year to spend a further eight weeks at Cape Denison.

Although he doesn't consider himself a photographer, the beautiful and poignant images he captured during his month-long stay have become the basis of this two-site

exhibition and catalogue. Sales will contribute to the Mawson's Huts Foundation and its efforts to protect what remains of the original expedition buildings.

McDonald uses the word truth about his own goals, suggesting that finding a truthful way to "describe light" aligns him with early Spanish still-life painters such as Velazquez. He started painting relatively late, attending the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney in his early 30s after various attempts at career paths that depressed him.

His aptitude for verisimilitude can be seen in his chalk drawings of cows and horses, as well as in the more poetic still-lives he obsessively depicts on canvas. McDonald's father didn't appreciate his art until the recognition that the Antarctic trip bestowed. His mother, who is a volunteer guide at

Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art, considers realism to be inferior to the kind of multimedia installations and found-object sculptures that gallery favours.

But, at 46, McDonald is an artist who — like another man who became obsessed with ice, German romantic Caspar David Friedrich — has looked into the abyss and shuddered, not only because of the cold but with awe. Maybe, he says, his experience of the South Pole will make it impossible for him to keep painting those elegant still-lives, but he doesn't want his Sydney dealer, Tim Olsen, to know he's even thinking that.

The ice paintings are slow in coming: one is on show now in Lismore, another two are on their way to London for the opening there. Three in nine months may not seem particularly productive, but McDonald is happy not to



**Cold comfort:** Detail of McDonald's oil-on-canvas work *Iceberg Wall* on show in Lismore



**Mates:** McDonald and an emperor penguin

rush, methodically developing a passion for ice that translates into obsessive research about freezing points and the structure of crystals.

Although he's a man who appears sociable and articulate, he is also attracted by that Friedrichesque quality of brooding self-sufficiency. One of his brothers was a mountain climber who died six years ago on Wellington's Mt Cook, and he remembers being able to pick, from among the mourners at the funeral, those who were also that particular kind of adventurer: good company but always a little separate, with a gaze both inwards and off to the disappearing horizon.

"My brother was intense, a physically large man but very quiet, with very bright eyes," McDonald says. "It's a particular sort of person, and all the guys down there (in Antarctica) are the same. Not needy,

completely composed. You can't imagine them ever panicking."

McDonald rates himself a very different character type, and he enjoyed being labelled the greenhorn among the crew, teased for his wide-eyed amazement. "I'm a studio painter," he says. "I do cows and pots. When I was invited by the Mawson's Huts Foundation to do this trip, I asked if I'd see polar bears. That's how little I knew.

"But I've become fascinated by the nature of ice and more conventional landscape and, of course, penguins."

In his ice painting you can see reflections of the studio still-lives: the ice folds and thrusts echo the deep crevices of his arranged cloths. McDonald is interested in contemplating, in both instances, the pathway of light across a surface. But ice is more daunting than cloth or the smooth polished surface of a translucent ceramic bowl. Ice breaks the spectrum and locks in colours, separating and combining so often that it made McDonald's head spin.

"I spent a lot of my time there not believing it," he says. "I found it almost too much to handle. That's why I'm so excited about going back. I want to be stymied, puzzled, out of my depth. I want to feel like I can't do it justice, to exhaust myself in it.

"That's what I want to do."

Angus McDonald's Antarctica is at Lismore Regional Gallery until October 13, and at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London from September 26 until October 11.