



Anne Noble

Ice Blink: Antarctic Photographs

THE ICE BLINK AND THE WATER SKY

Colours and light, it is true, stand in the most intimate relation to each other, but we should think of both as belonging to nature as a whole, for it is nature as a whole which manifests itself by their means in an especial manner to the sense of sight.¹

In *Theory of Colours* 1810, German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe describes the close of a day's travel in the Harz mountains, where he observes the shadows on the snow-covered ground as the light changes with evening's approach. Earlier, snow touched by daylight casts violet-tinged shadows tending towards blue; as the sun begins to set, the scene is bathed in a diffuse red and the shadows turn to green, "in lightness to be compared to a sea-green, in beauty the green of the emerald." The scene before him is one of delight and wonder which, he writes, might be imagined to be a "fairy world, for every object had clothed itself in the two vivid and so beautifully harmonising colours" which slowly drift into a soft grey twilight followed by a night lit by the moon and the stars. Goethe is pleased to find that this harmonic palette is mirrored in the sea's depths, far from the mountains he has traversed. He observes that, as sunlight leaks in to a diver's diving bell under water, a red light pervades their vision, whilst shadows are seen as green; "thus nature throughout is in harmony with itself."²

Harmony keeps oppositions in accord, holding light and dark in mutual abeyance. "Yellow is a light which has been dampened by darkness; blue is a darkness weakened by the light," wrote Goethe.³ Fittingly, the first progression of light towards day's end he describes above is known as the 'golden hour', the last hour of sunlight before dusk when our surroundings are last illuminated and long shadows are cast. This is followed by the 'blue hour' of twilight, both times of day said to be traditionally admired by landscape photographers for the quality of light they bring. In Antarctica, this circadian rhythm is folded out across longer stretches of time; day follows night after months of darkness and darkness returns only after as many months

of light. In the summer months of this extreme environment, the sun shines at midnight, allowing the 'golden hour' to stretch through the night, illuminating snow and ice with yellow and gold. Golden-orange is also the colour of a penguin's beak, echoed in the feathers at its throat. Blue, in all its variations, is the colour of glacial ice, sea, and sky. Then the long polar nights bring with them the dramatic beauty of Aurora Australis, or southern lights; long, swirling curtains of green light drawn across the sky by a mysterious solar wind.

Combining science, philosophy and literature, Goethe's book-length study of colour is phenomenological, his observations the result of experiencing and observing nature and its effects. The harmony between colours in nature that so delights Goethe in these passages above is central to his advice for painters, given at the book's conclusion: "It is only by means of harmonious relations in light and shade, in keeping, in true characteristic colouring, that a picture can be considered complete ..."⁴

For travellers on polar seas, the ice blink and the water sky are lessons, carried out in light and shade. The ice blink is white light, a brilliant glare on the horizon reflected from sheets of ice that lie beyond the earth's curve. The water sky is its opposite, a reflection of the sea made visible on the undersides of clouds appearing as pools of liquid darkness leaking across low skies. Following the pools of darkness and avoiding the light can assist in a safe passage through partially frozen seas where whole ships can be crushed by ice. Frank Hurley's photographs of the 1914 trans Antarctic expedition depict this fate. Hurley's photograph of the barque Endurance trapped and sinking on pack ice show a field of white impacting on the skeletal body of the ship, its captain and crew dark silhouettes against the milky backdrop of sea and sky. In their basic elements of monochromatic light and shade, this image reduces the continent, its explorers, the ship's fate to their extremes: black, white, life, death.

In these photographs by Anne Noble, taken nearly a century later, we see the colours of Antarctica reflected back upon ourselves as we have reimagined them, in locations spanning four of the world's continents. The green light of the Aurora Australis bathes these images and is echoed by the clear, teal green of the polar sea. In Norway, the southern lights swirl within the bounds of a black frame. Their cool glow is reflected in the slightly bored faces of visitors watching a screen in a darkened room in Japan. In New Zealand, it is a neatly circular pool of light edged in green on a wall, safely contained by a thin rope strung across the room. The polar sea and the dark forms of the creatures that inhabit it are miniaturised on the tiny, glowing screens of two mobile phones. King Penguins struggle, not across vast tracts of wind-blown ice, but across a small landscape made brilliantly, toxically chartreuse by their urine. They are separated from their companions by a strange jumble of screens, their plight reflected in a mirrored glass wall of their enclosure. Small pools of white light holds two penguins tightly within its mesmerising grasp as it leaks through small windows high above them.

Dr. Kyla McFarlane

Assistant Curator, Exhibitions - Monash University Museum of Art

- ¹ Goethe, Preface to the first edition, in *Goethe's Theory of Colours*, trans Charles Lock Eastlake, London, Frank Cass and Co. Ltd. 1967, xviii. First published in German in 1810.
- ² Ibid, 34-36.
- ³ Ibid, 14.
- ⁴ Ibid, 345.

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404 George Street

Fitzroy Victoria 3065 Australia

Telephone: +613 9417 1549

Email: info@ccp.org.au

Web: www.ccp.org.au

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No.2 *Penguin* [Antarctica, Nagoya, Japan] 2003
No.3 *Penguin Keepe* [Antarctica, Nagoya, Japan] 2003

BIOGRAPHY

Anne Noble's substantial body of work spans landscape photography, documentary photography and large-scale installations incorporating both still and moving images. In 2002, Anne travelled to Antarctica as a New Zealand Antarctic Arts Fellow, and her subsequent work considers the cultural origins of the Antarctic imaginary and how this contributes to a 'sense of place'. Her project *Whiteout*, explores representation of the landscape in conditions at the point where human perception and cognition founders. In other projects she critiques the framing of the Antarctic landscape as picturesque, heroic and sublime. Noble is a recipient of a 2008 US National Foundation Artists and Writers Award and shall return to Antarctica in November 2008 to complete *White Lantern* - observations of Antarctic light and atmospheric phenomena.

Anne Noble is a Professor of Fine Arts (Photography) at Massey University, Wellington, New Zealand. Her work has been exhibited in Australia, New Zealand the US and Europe and is held in major museum collections in New Zealand, Australia, and France.

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Anne Noble is represented in Australia by Stills Gallery.



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