

The wide-eyed wanderer

NORMAN MCFARLANE

What captivated you? – I ask Tamsin Relly. We're sitting in the garden of her mother's home in Somerset West, and the fluid rhythm of the Lourens River nearby is the soothing backdrop to our fascinating conversation about her life as an artist, and her trip to Svalbard in 2014.

An iridescent Malachite sunbird alights on a bush almost within reach, and Tamsin's eyes open wide in wonderment. "Look!" she exclaims, pointing at the exquisite little creature. She marvels at the intensity of colour, the neatness of form, the bright-eyed alertness of this wonder of nature.

"The cycle of ice calving off the glacier," she says, in answer to my question. "It is constantly changing, streaming past the ship, bubbling, moving. I stood and watched it for hours." It is clear looking at her work since then, that this experience in one of the world's most extreme environments, has exerted a profound influence on her.

dependency on a traditionally rigged Barquentine tall ship, courtesy of The Arctic Circle, an NGO which seeks to foster multi-disciplinary collaborative engagement with the central issues of our time. The expedition takes place twice each year, in summer and autumn, and Tamsin joined the Arctic Circle Autumn Expedition 2014, from October 2 to 20, in the International Territory of Svalbard, an archipelago midway between Norway and the North Pole.

"The ice is constantly changing in form and colour, opaque and starkly angular when it calves off the glacier, it eventually becomes crystal clear and softer, more rounded in form as it streams past the ship, until it comes to rest on the shore across the bay," she says, "and as the ice melts, patterns hitherto hidden in the glacier are revealed, as if placed on shore like an installation."

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Somerset West Artist Tamsin Relly in her studio in London. Behind her on the wall are a number of images from her residency in the Svalbard Archipelago, as a member of The Arctic Circle Autumn Expedition 2014.

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Tamsin was fortunate enough to be selected a member of the bi-annual sojourn of artists, scientists, educators and innovators who spend a three and a half week residency on a traditionally rigged Barquentine tall ship, courtesy of The Arctic Circle, an NGO which seeks to foster multi-disciplinary collaborative engagement with the central issues of our time. The expedition takes place twice each year, in summer and autumn, and Tamsin joined the Arctic

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Tamsin was born in Rooi Els , and was educated and grew up in Somerset West. She matriculated at Parel Vallei High School in 1998, and it was there that her natural talent took form, under the tutelage of art teacher Francois Visser. "He helped me develop my painting to a point where it became interesting to me, and helped me to recognize a magic in the creative process," she says. She lives and works in London, where she completed her education, graduating with an MA in Fine Arts from the City & Guilds School of Art in 2011.

For Tamsin, the creative process is a constant voyage of discovery. "There is a huge element of surprise. I will have a starting point, an idea," she says, "but the final results are dependent on the unpredictability of the mediums I choose to work with." Tamsin works in multiple mediums - including but not limited to water-based monoprints, traditional metal plate etchings, oils, and medium format (6cm x 7cm) film, the latter having played a significant role during the Svalbard trip.

"I use a digital camera for reference," she explains, "but I wanted to explore analogue photography that far North, I wanted to use a different quality film and process for the uniqueness of the landscape." and it is a landscape of extremes, exquisitely beautiful and at the same time, surreal. At the 79th Northern parallel, nothing is pedestrian. The temperature reached -17°C, and just surviving the cold required constant vigilance. "You learn to dress for the cold; you eat twice as much as usual, because you need the calories; and of course in such extreme temperatures, your relationship with your materials changes as well," she says.

"It was sensorially overwhelming – I wanted to be awake 24 hours a day, so not to miss a thing. Every day is unique. You lose 20 minutes of light each day, as Winter approaches, and the quality of the light is constantly changing. The ship's clock was adjusted so that we could make the most of the daylight hours each day."

Most of the three and a half weeks was spent on board ship, as it sailed up and down the western reaches of the Svalbard Archipelago, making for a stark contrast. "Vast and sublime empty spaces while being around people all the time," she explains. The expedition company numbered 25, plus a crew of 10, who when they did go ashore, provided the safe space they needed to pursue their creativity. "I was in awe of our guides - mostly Scandinavian women - adventurers, at home in this unusual world. One of them actually lives on Svalbard, in a tent with her husky," Tamsin says.

Our conversation ranges widely, as she recounts her sense of wonderment at the constantly changing landscape, her intense engagement with the extreme environment, and concludes with her heartbreak over the very obvious impact of our assault on our fragile world. "The glaciers are receding each year," she says, "and it's hard to ignore when you see the ship's crew marking newly exposed rocks and reefs on the navigation charts. The impact of climate change up there is staggering, and you can feel the grief of it."

As much as I want to see more of the world through Tamsin's wondrous eyes our time together must come to an end, for her return flight to London departs in just a few hours.

And as I reluctantly take my leave of Tamsin and her family, wishing her well for her return journey and her work that beckons, the lyrics of Tim Rice's "Can you feel the love tonight" from The Lion King run through my head - There's a time for everyone if they only learn / That the twisting kaleidoscope moves us all in turn / There's a rhyme and reason to the wild outdoors / When the heart of this star crossed voyager beats in time with yours - and it strikes me that she is the wide-eyed wanderer of the song, and her love affair is with the world around us that she sees with a remarkable clarity which most the rest of us miss, but which she reveals to us in her exquisite work.