

Deception Island
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Terra Nova
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, macrocarpa, fluorescent
light
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Neu-Schwabenland
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, macrocarpa, fluorescent
light
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Southern Ocean
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, cast glass
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Souvenir
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals
2005
Courtesy of the artist



Raewyn Atkinson lives
in Wellington and is
represented by AVID
www.avidgallery.co.nz

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with *Designs on Antarctica*



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DESIGNS ON ANTARCTICA



Maps of Antarctica seem to reverberate with a sense of history and contradiction: that vast, empty centre, punctuated sparingly by a few legendary names; the unruly, crowded edges where countries jostle for space and title. Crudely bisected by conflicting territorial claims, the continent often resembles a once-pristine slate upon which successive generations have scratched their names and ambitions. This highly contested context forms the backdrop to Raewyn Atkinson's *Designs on Antarctica*.

Using laser-printed images transferred onto the still-wet surfaces of slip cast porcelain 'tins' and 'souvenir mugs', she examines Antarctica's complex and often paradoxical identity as heroic stage, political trophy, exploitable resource and tourist destination. After visiting the continent on an Antarctica New Zealand Fellowship in 2000, Atkinson travelled privately to the Antarctic Peninsula aboard the MV 'Polar Star' in 2003. This allowed her to approach the region from two distinct perspectives: as a researching artist, surrounded by scientists, and as a tourist, 'consuming' the continent's history and natural resources. Often moving and always thought-provoking, her new works consider how our Antarctic aspirations have evolved over time and how the exchanges that have occurred between this remarkable continent and the world beyond it have altered both forever.

In Cape Evans (The Ill-Fated Party), Atkinson contrasts the romantic myths that surround the 'heroic' explorers of the early 20th century with the reality of their day-to-day experiences. Five delicate porcelain 'tins', illuminated in a wooden shelf, echo the shapes of the containers that can still be found in and around the historic hut at Cape Evans. They bear the faint trace of a memorable and desperate photograph of Scott's Polar party, who arrived exhausted at the South Pole after an arduous two month journey only to discover that Roald Amundsen's party had beaten them there. All five would perish on the journey back.

Losing the race to the South Pole was more than a personal defeat for Scott and his men, who carried with them the interests and ambitions of their country. "The first thing is to defeat the foreigners," Scott wrote in 1907. "The Ross Sea area is England's and we will not appreciate designs on it." Of course, marks on maps were not the only way

for nations to secure a presence on the ice, as Atkinson suggests in *Terra Nova* and *Neuschwabenland*, based on the surprisingly similar official seals produced for the British 1910-13 expedition and the German Antarctic expedition of 1938-9. This Nazi-overseen German expedition carried out an extensive series of aerial photographic missions which observed and charted nearly a fifth of the continent with the aim of securing territorial and whaling rights for Hitler's Germany. The mapped area was named 'Neuschwabenland', and the German claim was further strengthened by dropping several thousand Nazi flags, as well as metal poles featuring a swastika and the expedition insignia.

The shaping of perspectives by cultural beliefs is an important and ongoing concern in Atkinson's practice. When Captain James Cook completed his circumnavigation of the continent in 1775, he

dismissed it as inhospitable, but his diligent notations regarding the frequent sightings of whales and seals in the area soon drew hunters south. Over the next 150 years, whales, seals and even penguins were slaughtered in their millions to satisfy the world-wide demand for oil and fur. In Atkinson's *Southern Ocean*, 'tins' featuring an image from a Japanese whaling poster are stacked on a thick slab of cast glass. For many, the diagram illustrating the dissection of a whale for consumption is distasteful, but it is also strikingly similar to the official posters once produced in New Zealand, in which glossy cuts of beef and lamb were proudly displayed and identified.

These days, tourism is the big business in Antarctica, with the number of cruising expeditions growing steadily each year. On her second trip to the continent, undertaken as a tourist, Atkinson experienced mixed feelings about this development, embracing the opportunity to return to the ice, but concerned at the direct and indirect impact of global tourism on the natural environment. *Souvenir* mugs cluttered with iconic images and place names and the tear-tab tins of *Expedition Polar Star*, which feature a snapshot of the famous 'Iceberg Alley', reflect Atkinson's growing ambivalence about the potential impact of the industry. The neatly

packaged tins distil the Antarctic experience into tidy packages, ready for easy consumption. One dramatic stopping point on the tourist route is the enormous ruined whaling station on Deception Island, pictured in all its shambolic glory in Atkinson's work of the same name. It makes an unlikely addition to the itinerary of an expedition cruise whose brochure promises to let passengers 'experience the awesome beauty of the last unspoilt continent, Antarctica'.

In the radio room of the Ukrainian Antarctic base, Vernadsky, Atkinson was captivated by a painting of the Virgin Mary of Antarctica, flanked by a saint with an appropriately icy landscape below her. Recreated as a glowing porcelain icon, this strangely affecting image is a reminder that just as we transform Antarctica, it transforms us, creating a legacy more lasting and compelling than photographs or travelogues can afford. With its alluring blend of science, history and myth, the great Southern continent retains its powerful hold on the human imagination, even for those of us who will never visit.

Felicity Milburn / September 2005

LIST OF WORKS

Cape Evans (The Ill Fated Party)
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, macrocarpa, fluorescent
light
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Vernadsky
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, macrocarpa, fluorescent
light
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Expedition Polar Star
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, macrocarpa, fluorescent
light
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Iceberg Alley
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals, macrocarpa, fluorescent
light
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Icebergs I
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals
2005
Courtesy of the artist

Icebergs II
Slip cast porcelain, chun glaze, laser
print decals
2005
Courtesy of the artist