

Elize de Beer

Antarctic Archive written by Emma Dwyer

Grandparents have a special bond with their grandchildren, the first ones in particular. I remember my grandad teaching me how to use a computer when I was kid in the 90s, before the internet was widely available in domestic settings. Grandad had speech to text software. It didn't recognise my high-pitched voice as well as it recognised his. He had a large workshop out the back of the house. He made us toys, he fixed his boat, and he built what I can only describe as sculptural installations for his daughter's wedding cars – one in the shape of a boat, another a horse shoe. To me he was the sort of man who could do anything.

Elize de Beer's solo exhibition Antarctic Archive is a homage to her own grandfather Willie de Beer. Willie was an engineer and tool maker who worked on South African National Antarctic Programme (SANAP) during the 1970s. As a scientific instrument maker, he was involved in the construction of equipment and research stations on the Antarctic which are still in use today. While there he documented his daily life; he took snapshots of the construction, the already changing landscape, and the natural world. The 1000s of photos were taken by Willie for his own records and exist only on slides. Elize's parents recently shipped the slides from South Africa to Ireland, this was the starting point of Antarctic Archive.

Discovered in the 1800s the Antarctic was previously known as Terra Australis Incognita: Unknown Southern Land. During the so-called Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration at the end of the 19th Century many died or were injured trying to reach it by boat. With advancements in technology, an intensive scientific and geographical exploration followed. In 1959 the Antarctic Treaty was signed and it was declared that the Antarctic shall be used for peaceful and scientific purposes only. It wasn't until 1991 that member nations of the treaty signed the Protocol on Environmental Protection to the Antarctic Treaty. The Antarctic it was agreed would be set aside as a natural reserve with restrictions to human activity, and all activities relating to Antarctic mineral resources were prohibited, except for scientific research.

What Willie captured in his snapshots was the beginnings of climate change. Studies on the Antarctic then and now help us to make sense of the entire earth system. In 1967 – 57 years ago – earth's changing climate was modelled for the first time by researcher Syukuro Manabe. It was predicted that temperatures would rise, atmospheric warming would cause ice shelves to disintegrate, and sea levels would rise. As we know, what was studied and discovered then had little impact to negate human or corporate behaviour. We have continued to burn fossil fuels, we have adopted a culture of single use plastics and fast fashion, all in the interests of profit. If this wasn't reality it would make for the premise of a harrowing horror film.

Elize organised her grandfather's slides into three categories: natural landscape, man elements, and industrial elements. She layered these elements over each other to create photo etchings. Toyobo photopolymer plates were used to preserve the photographic details in the layers. Antarctic Archive III (2024), for example, has four layered images

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consisting of three elements: emperor penguins, a ship, and glaciers. As a result of the layering, it is not clear, penguin aside, what you're looking at. The effect is eerie, ominous, and presents a dystopian vision of the Antarctic.

Walking into Cork Printmaker's what you immediately connect with is Elize's love and admiration for her grandfather. After his death, each of Elize's siblings and cousins selected an item of his clothing as a keepsake. Elize the eldest grandchild in her family, described her grandfather as a warm, sweet, kind and smart man. He taught her algebra. He had an explorative, creative, process led brain which Elize has inherited. Elize chose his suede fur lined snow hat and snow glasses. They are hung as you enter the space. Willie de Beer is written diligently on the hat.

When exploring shelter types for the Antarctic he created an invertible prototype, a moveable shelter based on a hexagon, which turns in and on itself infinitely. Elize was fascinated by this as a child. The plates Elize used for these photo etchings are sensitive to humidity and heat, Elize spent months testing to get the prints right, and ultimately failed with the plates on the hottest and most humid day of the year. She decided to use the ruined plates to make another sculptural work, her own 'hexoflex'. Invertible Landscapes (2024) sits in the centre of the room, the plates bear shadowy images of the Antarctic. It does turn in on itself, it's angular and sharp, it is industrial and an eerie reflection of the past.

In Antarctic Archive V (2024) there are people in the foreground, one with arms on hips, and in the background people appear to be marching off in pairs. There is a horizon, and on first glance there is only sky above, but in fact there are more figures layered on glaciers. In Antarctic Archive IV (2024) a ship is in the foreground – again a horizon is layered with a glacier which cuts out part of the ship, to me reminiscent of what a child would imagine a ghost ship to be, semi translucent moving alone on the horizon. Antarctic Archive I and Antarctic Archive II (both 2024) have structural elements which presumably Willie engineered; they are layered with glaciers, and the effect is a pair of dark images in which the world could be described as burning.

What Elize has achieved in this exhibition is to take a personal narrative: her bond with her grandfather and her admiration for what he did in his work life and the type of man he was; to present on a global topic. The keepsakes she includes – his hat and glasses – draw you in to that relationship, while the prints and sculptural installation draw you out. The images taken between 40 and 50 years ago, when findings were first being presented on climate change, have been transformed by Elize as stark dystopic visions. They reflect what one can only imagine would have been the horror those scientists would have felt presenting their discoveries. Now that we are in this predicted moment – wildfires, catastrophic storms, regular flooding – our climate has undeniably changed, yet we are continuing to prioritise profit, to exist within capitalism, perhaps not seeing an alternative.

Antarctic Archive is presented as part of Cork Printmakers' 2024 Climate Action Exhibition Programme.