

Art inspired by Antarctica

Children's author, Alison Lester, travelled to Antarctica in 2005 as an Australian Antarctic Division (AAD) Arts Fellow. She is now working on an exhibition of paintings and a new children's book, inspired by her experience.

I travelled south on the *Aurora Australis* with an open mind as to what sort of book would result from the experience. I also went as the eyes and ears of children around Australia. Every night I emailed an account of my day to schools and families, encouraging children to draw my descriptions. These would be used as elements of paintings for an exhibition called *Kids Antarctic Art*.

Within a couple of days of leaving Hobart I was bombarded with emails from schools all over the world, asking questions or wanting to join the project. A friend set up a web page <<http://www.alisonlester.citymax.com>> to cope with the increased mail, and the project was underway.

There was plenty to write about. The first leg of the voyage to Mawson took two weeks. I described the vast Southern Ocean – some days glittering and wild, with albatross skimming the waves, other days shrouded in fog. One incredible evening it was as flat as glass, reflecting a stunning sky; red and orange in the west, and pink and green in the east.

I told the kids about life on the *Aurora*; how it was bad luck to whistle, the fabulous meals, the signs everywhere, usually of people running, how things had to be secured to stop them flying around in bad weather and the strange noises the ship made. My studio was an old photo lab and the ship's ballast system passed close to it. Working in this tiny, windowless space, as the water moaned and gurgled through the pipes, I felt as though I was in the belly of some prehistoric marine creature.

I spent most days writing, painting and taking photographs. On hearing I was going to Antarctica, many people had commented that there wouldn't be anything to paint, that it would all be white; but they were wrong. The colours in the sky and ice changed constantly and subtly; soft pink, brilliant turquoise, indigo and bronze. Dawn was the best time for photographs and often my footsteps would be the first ones on the snowy deck. I was usually rewarded; once by a huge tabular berg framed by a lemon sky, another time by a strip of distant ice, glowing orange on a cobalt sea, and later by a pod of orca spying on the ship.

My perceptions were constantly challenged by the environment. As we steamed into Mawson in fierce winds, I realised that the waves breaking against the rocks were in fact frozen. What I assumed was mist around the Framnes Mountains was ice! And I thought the ice itself would be like snow, not the hard, blue ice we skidded on.

The *Kids Antarctic Art* paintings have begun, with the first

finished piece on display at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. Thousands of drawings were waiting for me when I got home; many were pictures of the *Aurora Australis*, ranging from a tiny dingy with a tree growing in it to a futuristic aircraft carrier. I could see the picture I wanted to make immediately. On the bridge of the *Aurora* is a screen showing all her tracks in the Southern Ocean, and this concept became '*All the Tracks of the Aurora Australis*'. The original is quite small, but will be enlarged and printed on to canvas for a touring exhibition in 2007.

My journal entries will be turned into a children's book, after my editor suggested the story be told by a child. The book features Snoopy Sparks, 10 year old niece of the world famous moss biologist, Professor Georgia Green. When Professor Green's assistant Lulu breaks her ankle, just before a voyage to Antarctica, Snoopy, with the help of Lulu's Peppermint Kiss eyeshadow, pretends to be 18, and takes her place. After all, Professor Green needs somebody to operate her laptop. Their search for a rare and environmentally important moss is threatened, but Snoopy, true to her name, figures things out.

My AAD Arts Fellowship was a magic ticket to a world I could never have imagined. I became instantly addicted to Antarctica and returned nine months later, as the media artist on a tourist boat. I feel privileged and grateful to everybody who shared their lives and stories with me and I hope my books and paintings will inspire others to get addicted too.

—ALISON LESTER
AAD Arts Fellow, 2005

All the tracks of the Aurora Australis is now on display at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery and will tour the country in 2007 as part of the *Kids Antarctic Art* exhibition.

