

A world apart



When **Joan Myers** went to photograph the extraordinary landscape of the Antarctic she was as much concerned with man's presence in it as she was with the isolated beauty of the place. Mike Crawford talks to her about her work



MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH the Antarctic photographs of Joan Myers was last year among the many stands presenting work at Photo London. Her exhibition and new book, *Wondrous Cold*, is the result of a four month visit to this remote and unforgiving continent. Printed as large scale platinum prints and black & white (as well as colour) inkjets, Myers shows not only the grandeur, mystery and natural beauty of the Antarctic landscape, but also the effects and signs of our own occupation in such an inhospitable world.

This southern tip of the planet, 58 times the size of Great Britain, is technically uninhabited by man, leaving it predominantly free for the millions of penguins which live there. However, it is a leading centre for scientific research and exploration, with teams of scientists from almost 30 countries working on a variety of projects. They are concerned mostly with the changes occurring to the global climate, our oceans and environment, as well as astrophysics and monitoring the effects of industrial pollution which can be detected in Antarctica's ice.

This series is the latest and most ambitious in a career which, since the 1970s, has documented our relationship with the landscape. I recently spoke to Joan to find out more about her work, her impressions of the Antarctic and the conditions that these photographs were taken in. 'I guess you could call me an honest landscape photographer,' she considered. 'I really believe that the human element in the landscape is not something you can ignore. You can't go anywhere now, even to the Sierra, Ansel Adams country in the West, and not see human traces everywhere. I've always thought that this should be part of my photography – how we manage to exist in a landscape or, in other words, how we fit in to it, what changes we have made and what it looks like when we've lived in it or passed through it.'

Originally from Idaho, she initially studied ▶

PREVIOUS PAGE McMurdo Station, home to up to 2,000 researchers, scientists, station staff and engineers

◀ music before moving to Los Angeles and switching to photography in the mid '70s. 'I started out shooting landscapes in the Los Angeles area and in the desert. After moving to New Mexico in 1979, I spent quite a few years photographing subjects dealing with the Western part of the United States.' Dissatisfied with conventional printing she researched different methods before settling on platinum as her favoured medium. 'I tried a variety of early photographic processes including gum and carbon,' she recalls, 'but soon discovered platinum, which I love. I could keep detail and yet I had the surface of paper which I preferred far more than gelatine.'

Since the 1980s, her work has appeared in many exhibitions and in books, starting with *Along the Santa Fe Trail* which recorded her contemporary perspective on the landscape surrounding the 19th century trade route between Santa Fe and Missouri. 'I love doing both exhibitions and

books, which are often done as a collaboration with a writer,' she explains. 'Sometimes I write the text myself, though I prefer not to if I can find someone else to do it! All my work has had an historical axis. *Salt Dreams* contained environmental as well as historic issues, *Santiago* covered architecture, history and pilgrimage. I always read a lot and research during the process of taking a series of photographs, so it is good to be able to put some of that information in a book together with the photographs.'

Antarctica is a very different location and I was curious as to what led her to change her subject so radically from Mid West America. 'My mother was a great armchair traveller and had read a lot of books about the South Seas and loved stories of mutineers, but her other favourite place was Antarctica. Finally, she took a trip there which she loved, and when I was growing up her photographs were around the house and I got this

BELOW Iceberg, Cape Crozier



LEFT Robert Falcon Scott's ill fated attempt of 1912 to reach the South Pole is remembered by the expedition hut at Cape Evans, seen here in the middle of a blizzard

hankering to see what it was like. Eventually my husband and I took a short tour to the Antarctic peninsula, and I was hooked. I thought that this was the most beautiful place in the world – so different, like being able to go to another planet!

After this short trip Joan applied to the Antarctic Writers and Artists Programme funded by the National Science Foundation. 'When I put in my grant application for Antarctica, I told them I wanted to photograph how, as a species, we have

managed to live and work in a place that is basically inhospitable to humans. I was successful, so ended up going down there for four months.'

Since the great expeditions of Amundsen, Scott and Shackleton, early last century, many scientists have come and gone and today this non-indigenous population from all parts of the world number in their thousands. Myers was stationed at the American base McMurdo, the largest community in Antarctica which, since

▶ BELOW Barne Glacier



◀ 1956, has grown from a few simple structures to over 100 buildings served by a harbour and landing strips. 'It's definitely a small town,' remarks Joan. 'There's fuel and all the sorts of things you would expect to find in a small town, a barber, a laundry, a bowling alley. In the summer months, which is the primary season in the Antarctic, there are perhaps 2,000 people working there.'

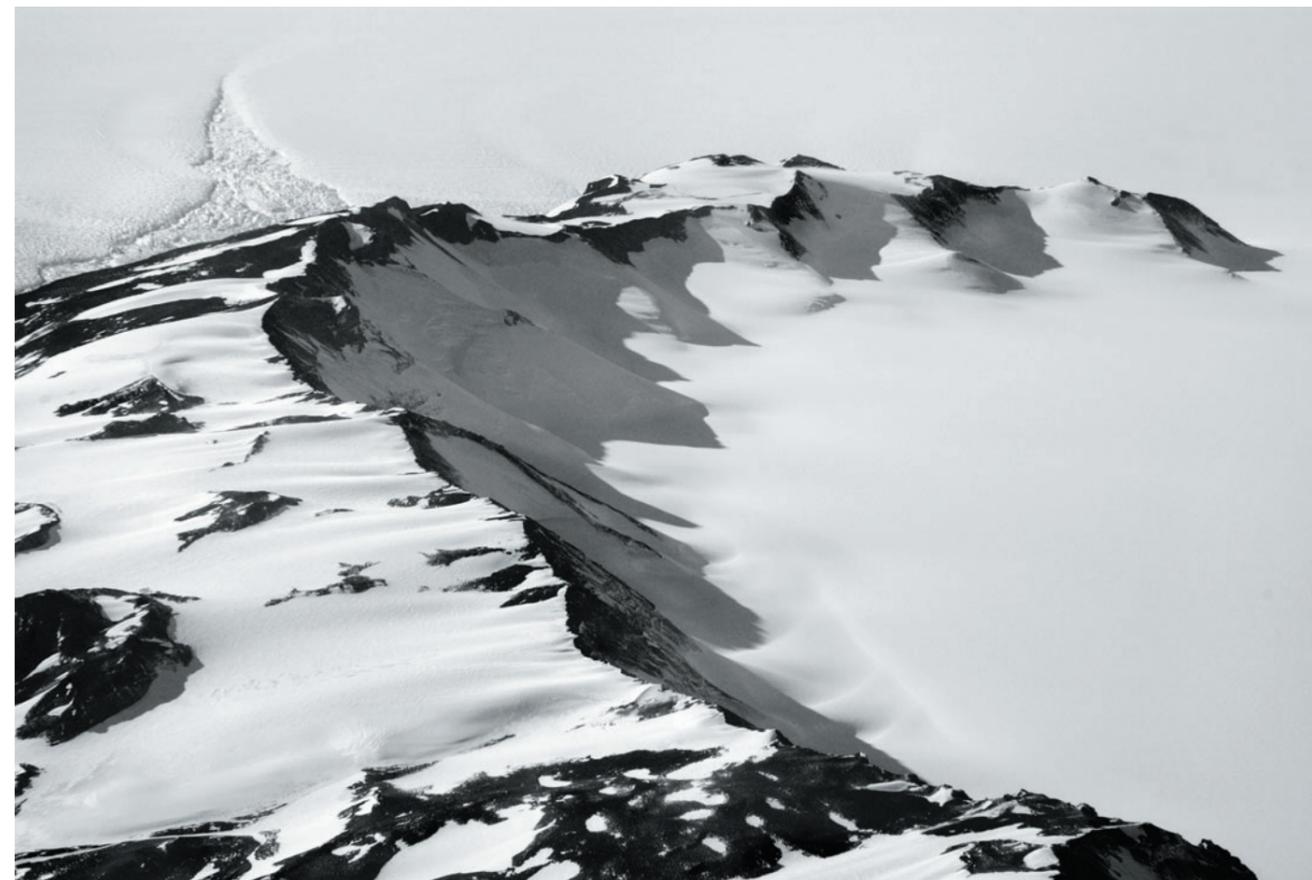
To begin, she spent her time acclimatising herself to the cold, preparing for the sub zero temperatures outside of McMurdo and learning the necessary survival skills at 'camp school.' For the duration of her visit her time was divided between taking numerous trips and expeditions to discover and capture the Antarctic landscape and photographing the people and places around the base. 'It's a wonderful community,' says Joan,

'I think one of the most special in the world because it comprises of people who really want to be there, doing the work they truly want to do.'

Away from McMurdo, she photographed glaciers and volcanoes, meteors and icebergs, and the true residents of Antarctica, the seals and penguins. Among the many highlights of her new book are remarkable panoramics of colonies of these sea birds.

With this project, Joan has also started to use digital cameras and printing, allowing her to photograph and print in colour as well as black & white, though some of the work, including the panoramics, were shot on film. 'My background is with large format and I have shot 4x5 for years – 6x7 was the smallest I would ever use,' Joan tells me, 'but now I'm happy that I can do such high

BELOW Cape Royd's hut built by Shackleton and his crew in 1909



quality work digitally and come out with either colour or black & white.' Indeed some of her previous work was hand coloured, so she sees her use of colour as a natural progression.

At her studio in Santa Fe she has large format Epson printers as well as her darkroom. 'I love to print platinum, but I find now that people are buying more of my digital prints. To a degree I have more control with digital than platinum, and when they're hanging in a show, I don't think people would be able to tell the difference. I'm using Jon Cone's Piezo inks, which are all black pigments, and have a similar warmth to the colour of my platinums.'

The extreme weather she worked under surprisingly caused few technical problems with her equipment. 'At the South Pole I was shooting at 60° below,' she remembers. 'The digital camera (a Nikon D100) worked perfectly and as I was there for such a long time, I was very grateful that I could see what I was getting. I would keep the camera just under my parka and had no trouble

with batteries. There were some problems with film,' admits Joan. 'You have to wind it on very slowly in the cold or you may get static electricity marks. I also had one roll of 120 which separated from the backing, as the glue must have dried out in the cold.' Her photographs wonderfully convey the conditions of such extreme weather, and the qualities of Antarctic light which, like the blizzards, snow storms and high winds, often made photography difficult. ▶



ABOVE Minna Bluff

LEFT Steps leading from the research station directly to the South Pole



The South Pole is as far down as you can go and at mid summer, the sun just goes around in a circle high in the sky, so it feels a little odd. It's hard light to work in because it is so bright when it's full and when it's cloudy it's like being in a marshmallow. There is no definition to anything.

Some of the most poignant photographs in the book are her studies of the abandoned huts close to McMurdo from Captain Scott's failed expedition to reach the South Pole. They stand today, 90 years later, untouched, their contents left intact and conserved by the cold. 'When you are in these huts it feels like they could come back at any moment because they are so frozen in both reality and in time.' Indeed, in her journal, which can be read on her website, Myers writes that, 'You could still survive for a considerable period of time on the food remaining in this hut,' as well as mentioning the 'piles of seal blubber, perfectly preserved.' Particularly fascinating is the photograph of Herbert Ponting's darkroom, with its rows of chemicals and developing trays, ready and waiting to be used again. 'It's an amazing experience to walk into his darkroom and see how

he was living,' says Joan. 'He had a bunk underneath the counters, sharing that little space with all his equipment and his chemistry. His apron and tripod are still there.'

In the two years since her trip, she has printed the work for her forthcoming exhibition, and accompanying book, which opens at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington in May which will then tour for four years. Her current plans for the next year is to take some time out, 'Some playtime,' she laughs, 'and to scan some earlier negatives and start to reprint things digitally in a slightly different way.'

Myers, however, has clearly been captivated by Antarctica and I asked her if she would be returning there. 'I have more pictures of ice than I could ever sell or exhibit, so it is time to move on to other things,' she replies. 'But I would go back down there in a minute if someone invited me, because it is so beautiful.' **B&W**

- To see more of Joan Myers work and to read her Antarctic journal, visit www.joanmyers.com and for gallery representation, www.andrewsmithgallery.com
- Her exhibition *Wondrous Cold: An Antarctic Exhibition* will be showing at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History in Washington DC in May 2006

Wondrous Cold: An Antarctic Journey is published this month by Smithsonian Books, ISBN 1 5883 4238 7



LEFT Ponting's darkroom

BELOW Researchers, Beaufor Island

