

90° South: Chris Willcox | BY CHRISTOPHER ATKINS

“Victory awaits him who has everything in order—luck, people call it. Defeat is certain for him who has neglected to take the necessary precautions in time; this is called bad luck.”

—Roald Amundsen, from *The South Pole*

“All the pictures are dull grey, mostly very blurred, diffuse. Their presence is the hard-to-bear refusal to answer, to explain, to give an opinion.”

—Gerhard Richter, quoted by Kaja Silverman in *Flesh of my Flesh*

From the late nineteenth century through the 1920s, often called “The Heroic Age of Antarctic Exploration,” Antarctica was host to several exploratory and scientific research expeditions. These journeys maintained multiple goals, including geographical conquest, feats of discovery, and naming rights, often driven by national pride.

Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen led the first expedition party to reach the Geographic South Pole in 1912. British Royal Navy officer Robert Falcon Scott helmed the 1910-12 *Terra Nova Expedition* shortly thereafter. And Anglo-Irish seafarer Sir Ernest Shackleton’s famous and ill-fated 1914–17 *Trans-Antarctic Expedition* remains a world-famous tale of the entire crew’s survival.

Photographer Herbert Ponting documented the *Terra Nova Expedition*, and Frank Hurley photographed Shackleton’s voyage. These expeditions and their photographic documentation provided the starting point for local artist Chris Willcox’s painting series, *90° South*. For her, the Ponting and Hurley portfolios doubled as archives from which she drew figural compositions and landscapes, recombining them into paintings.

Preserving the first-person, documentary perspective of the photographs, she painted as if she were a participant in the scenes. Because she was working from archival photographs,

her paintings “took leave” from the original images, building in historical and spatial distance. And since Willcox used paint to describe her intimate knowledge of Ponting’s and Hurley’s photographs featuring the Antarctic landscape and the explorers, the resulting works maintain an objective distance from the narrative.

Exploration is a search for knowledge. It brings places and cultures into view so they can be studied, as if taking an inventory of the world. Mapping, which happens after exploration, “is fundamental to the process of lending order to the world,” according to Robert Rundstrom, associate professor of geography, University of Oklahoma. As a record of an exploration, a map gives names to places and provides the explorer with tangible proof of the journey. While exploration seeks knowledge, the map is a reduction of the experience, turning what happened into lines drawn on a page.

In her previous work, specifically the series titled *My Burden My Joy*, Willcox used a similar technique, parsing images from her own childhood and commingling them with photographs of her two sons. Another series of paintings called *Witness* used personal histories and archival information as source material. In all of these, she created a loose, yet carefully controlled, transparency, using the thin paint layers as a metaphor for the tenuousness of memory.



Beset (12,000 Miles from London), 2011, acrylic and ink on paper, 40 x 60 inches

Here, Willcox’s monochromatic color palette and poetically bleak tone preserve a formal link to Ponting’s and Hurley’s photos. It is a formidable landscape to duplicate, in paint or photography, but scale helps Willcox’s paintings capture the feeling of the white-out conditions. The increasingly complex transparency of her paint does something else as well. When describing *The Lost Men (100 Years Ago)*, Willcox has called these figures, set against and unattached to the landscape, “ghosts.” The four figures, unrecognizable and transparent, are on the cusp of visibility. They are like ghosts, in the way a battlefield can be seen as a container for the people who died there. It is as if Antarctica were haunted by the spirits of previous explorers who made the trip but did not survive. And finally, there is specter of Amundsen’s first expedition, which must have haunted Scott.

Scott and his team did not survive their return trip from the South Pole, one can only imagine the hollow looks on their doomed faces. This tent could be the marker for where the hapless group perished.

Like other painters who have worked with documentary photography, Willcox touches the past but does not hold onto it. Like her earlier work, the *90° South* suite uses photographs as a place to begin her compositions, enabling a creative, rather than reductive, process. It’s painting as a “leave-taking” from the original images; in Willcox’s hands they’re both a departure and a farewell.

Noble Provisions, 2011, acrylic and ink on paper, 40 x 60 inches



Christopher Atkins is the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program (MAEP) coordinator

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90° South

Chris Willcox

AND

Standards

Mark Ostapchuk

January 20 to April 1, 2012
Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program
Galleries

Opening Reception
Thursday, January 19, at 7 p.m.

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Thursday, **TK**, at 7 p.m.

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For more information about the artists,
this exhibition, and MAEP, visit:

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Cover:
The Lost Men (100 Years Ago) (detail), 2011,
acrylic and ink on paper,
40 x 60 inches

Inside flap:
Grave (South Pole) (detail),
2011, acrylic and ink on
paper, 40 x 60 inches

