



Murray Fredericks with his 8x10" camera

Salt

Photographer: Murray Fredericks

Interview by Peter Eastway

Murray Fredericks is currently in Greenland, bunkered down in a snow cave, surviving sub-zero temperatures, waiting for the light. Inspired by his previous project, *Salt*, centred on Australia's hot, arid Lake Eyre, there doesn't seem to be much in common between these two landscapes, but there is.

Space.

"My early career was spent photographing very full landscapes – Patagonian glaciers, Tasmanian wilderness, the Himalayas. It was graphic and busy and I loved it."

But then Murray moved from full landscapes to something far more minimalist: the salt lake.

"I knew what I didn't want, but not what I did. I had a vague idea of working with empty space in the landscape. I didn't want to describe Lake Eyre as the place Lake Eyre, rather it was to be the backdrop for other ideas. In the beginning, that's all I knew."

The resulting body of work is called *Salt* and this is also the title of a short film documenting how Murray created his images on Lake Eyre. *Salt* has aired on ABC1 recently.

"I shot all the footage, but I worked with Michael Angus who directed and edited it and wrote shot lists for future trips. It was effectively 'direction from afar'. It's been great to have the film so well received [it won a Golden Frog Award at the Camera Image Festival for cinematography] and that's why I'm about to do another one in Greenland."

Art School

With a degree in economics and politics, and a successful career as a commercial photographer, Murray moved into the contemporary art world.

"Over the last five years, I've been going to art school part time. For some, 'art' seems to be a career just like any other. Students can do a three year degree, followed by an Honours year and then a Master of Fine Arts. It seems you need these credentials on your CV before your work gets looked at – the curators of many institutions have been through the same art school process and they seem to have a particular way of thinking. Similarly, students are expected (or taught) to follow

certain familiar themes, such as attacking modernism or the medium you choose to work with.

"Unfortunately, I think many of the students are being spat out to follow a career, rather than to follow their own art."

Nevertheless, Murray says he got a lot out of art school. "I went there at a much later stage in life. I had already been exhibiting and I had learnt my craft, yet art school was an epiphany because it allowed me to study art history. Here you can find artists who have 'solved' the artistic problems that you may be wrestling with. This can 'speed up' your journey as an artist and allow you to jump ahead to somewhere 'new'.

"Most importantly though, art school taught me the value of 'concept'. Running around and being a good photographer is quite different to consciously attempting to work as an artist."

Many photographers find it challenging to be both an artist and a commercial photographer, to keep a foot in both camps, yet Murray has a refreshing outlook on this.

"One of the reasons to become a commercial photographer is to keep the pressure out of the art side. I started by teaching, working in a darkroom and waiting on tables at night, trying to take the path of an artistic purist, but I found this process backfires on you. It might be years between shows, so when you finally exhibit your work, there is so much pressure to sell it that a de facto commercial influence creeps into your art."

American Aesthetic, German Concept

During his studies, Murray was visiting Lake Eyre several times a year and staying there for up to five weeks at a time. He obviously had plenty of time to think and work things through in his mind. There were to be two main influences.

The Düsseldorf School, all students of Bernd and Hiller Becher, included photographers such as Andreas Gursky, Candida Höfer, Axel Hütte, Thomas Ruff and Thomas Struth. "The approach of the Düsseldorf School was informed by the work of August Sander amongst others. The process involved grabbing a single idea or theme and 'mining' it again and again. I saw this conceptual approach as a way for me to break from what I had been doing in the mountains and in some



ways from what more 'traditional' landscape photography has been about, which is producing imagery that is essentially about 'place'."

As the subject of the *Salt* series was about 'Space', Murray knew the final prints had to be large. "The images had to work even if they only rendered the most subtle gradations, say from a light blue to a less light blue. When I looked at the early results from 4x5" film, I wasn't getting the fine tonalities that make such subtle information work as an image in its own right. I had to go to the 8x10" format to get that tonality in the negative at the size I wanted to work."

And here the second influence came through. American photographers such as Stephen Shore and Richard Misrach shot on colour negative film, whereas many other landscape photographers choose colour transparency.

"I really loved the aesthetic of the softer tones in the negative film," Murray explained, "and I wanted to consciously separate myself from the very strong, contrasty aesthetic that dominates the tradition of Australian landscape photography. Much of the character of that aesthetic comes from the use



Photography from Salt series by Murray Fredericks



of transparency film which produces a very hard-edged look, often enhanced by printing onto glossy chrome paper. This is not a criticism of that tradition – I really admire much of that work, but in art speak, I wanted to develop that existing 'language' of landscape photography.

"So I adopted an American aesthetic and a German conceptual view."

Switching To Digital

After seven years on Lake Eyre, Murray felt he had most of the images for the exhibition. "In the last two years, I really only got one or two extra exposures. I had reached a stage that when I got underneath the shade cloth, I'd see the image on the ground glass and say, 'Done it'. It was happening too often, but I had committed myself to these five week periods."

One of the ways Murray kept the project interesting was to take an Alpa camera with a medium format digital back and use it instead of his 8x10" camera.

"I started stitching, taking about two or three hundred panoramic sets from which I was happy with five or six aesthetically. However, only two of these were technically perfect – and so only two ended up on the wall.

"The stitches had to be technically perfect with no curvature. I didn't

want the viewer to look at my images and be aware of the 'stretch' – that 'panoramic effect'.

"Other things were also difficult, such as when the light was low and I was using longer shutter speeds. Clouds would move at different speeds, across the frames to be stitched, so some would be sharp and others blurred."

Processing the files required several processes. Alpa has a lens corrector program which Murray applies to eliminate any optical distortion in his files; he uses PTgui to stitch the files together, and then Photomatix for its Exposure Fusion feature which keeps the tone curve based on the middle exposure and just adds in the shadow and highlight detail for the bracketed exposures.

Giant Prints

Murray began working with the 33-megapixel Sinarback eMotion 75 LV, but has since moved over to the Phase One P65+ with its 60-megapixel sensor.

"One of the great benefits of medium format digital capture is the large dynamic range, especially when you're stitching panoramas. Exposure from one side of the panorama to the other can be a big problem if you're shooting into the sun. There is a huge dynamic range in the scene, so if you can keep your exposure consistent all the way around, as you can with medium format's wide dynamic range, it is a huge bonus."

When Murray's dealer in London saw the work, he insisted on them being printed large!

"We made two 4.5x1.5 metre prints. It took Warren Macris a year to get the first one exactly right. There is so much detail in the images at that size.

"The files I am using provide very close to 300 dpi for the 4.5 metre print. If people put their noses up to the Perspex, there is plenty of detail to impress them. It really is amazing



how this amount of detail has the capacity to draw the viewer in.

"When Warren and I make the prints, we can spend weeks working on the images. What we're doing is getting rid of anything that could break the film aesthetic. We're getting rid of problems and bumps that are inherently in the medium, like colour shifts from one side of the image to the other, or contrast changes that happen at the edges of the lens. You often don't see these problems until you make a really large print. It's not the reality we see with our eyes, of course, but it is what we understand to be photographic reality.

"People believe that 'photography is truth' because the process is seen as 'mechanical representation' of reality. Many people then struggle with the notion of using digital processes, as they are aware of the possibility of easy manipulation in Photoshop or whatever. There are many inconsistencies in this way of thinking, but still it's a 'reality' that exists for the viewer. I see no need in my work to question or break with those expectations – it's really not what my work is about, so aesthetically, I work within the look and feel of photography as it's known to most people.

"At the exhibition in London, many people asked me the same question: 'Have you Photoshopped this?' I tried to explain that you have to use Photoshop to print it, just like we used an enlarger to print a negative, but I haven't used Photoshop to move things around or create a montage. The basic elements are true to life.

"I'm working with such fantastical scenes that I don't want people doubting their authenticity. People aren't blind to what the medium can do and they know about Photoshop, so in this body of work I have to be careful how I work with the files.

"The trouble happens when we try to pass one thing off as the other. A lot of conceptual artists say that it isn't relevant

and it shouldn't matter how the image was created, but to the viewer it often does matter.

"Rosemary Laing's exhibition *Tales of the Unexpected* featured photographs of flying brides and stunt ladies hanging off a tiny ladder above a huge jungle... her images all look like they were created in Photoshop, yet they are all real. She was playing with everything we're talking about now, asking why does it matter?

"It's about taking full responsibility for your artistic ideas.

I don't put any limits on what I do. If I have an idea, I'll do what I can to make it happen."

"It all comes back to people's expectation of truth and reality when they view photography and that's why people get upset if we screw around with what we are showing them.

"One of the great things about going to art school is that you are exposed to all these ideas. Some of them are bullshit, but some of them are great because they illuminate what you do. All students should learn to take the good stuff with them and leave behind the bad.

"For instance, one of my teachers at art school banned all discussion of technique in the classroom. Her view, as was the view of many art teachers in the 1980s and 1990s, was that art is *only* about ideas and concepts. Technique is something you can learn on your own time, but the problem with this approach is that photography is necessarily a technical medium. If you don't learn technique you are limiting what you can actually produce. You might have a great idea, but without the right technique you might not be able to express it.



The Alpa SWA camera that Murray has taken to Greenland.



"I find it incredibly liberating to have learnt sufficient technique so that I know if something can be achieved or not before I pick up my camera."

Heading To Greenland

"I want to continue working with landscapes that are featureless or where the dominant feature is space itself.

"I began looking for places similar in character to Lake Eyre. I saw pictures of the Antarctic Polar Plateau and realised it could be a way of continuing the concept. I looked into the process of being admitted to the US Antarctica Division's Artists Writers Program, but they only take eight people each year and there is a lot of negotiating bureaucracy required which I'm not particularly good at. I was looking for someone to help me when I discovered that Greenland had the same landscape: dead flat ice which I could access in my own time, all I had to do was come up with the money.

"Even with the grants from the Australia Council, if I weren't a commercial photographer there is no way I could afford to shoot this project. The Australia Council grant will cover the cost of the helicopter in and out, but once there I need to fund everything else. The benefit is I won't actually be walking anywhere [unlike Lake Eyre where Murray cycled in], so I can take more equipment.

"I am planning to have five cameras shooting time lapse in all directions, plus video of course, and I will be taking the Alpa

SWA with the Phase One P65+ back. Stills for an exhibition are still the primary goal.

"It's taken two months to research the sound equipment, but I have worked out how to build, create and monitor a recording system for a hurricane. I know I will be in some ferocious storms, so the camp will be dug down into the ice for protection. I'm expecting to be trapped for days on end, so I thought recording the sound of the 200 kph winds outside would give me something to do.

"I am imagining the exhibition prints standing alongside a bunch of screens showing time lapse and documentary footage, so I'll need sound to go with it. I'm also looking at a hydrophone to record the sounds of ice breaking and cracking from underneath."

I asked Murray if he felt a bit like Frank Hurley returning from Antarctica with amazing images from undiscovered worlds. Murray laughed.

"It raises some interesting issues. Hurley was at the end of the age of exploration when adventurers truly were heroes. He travelled to places where they were cut off with no chance of rescue. Today all that has changed because we always have the option of pressing a button and being picked up.

"Of course, some people try to pitch themselves against nature, but I think that mentality is how you die. My sole purpose is the photography and I try to minimise risk as much as possible."