

# ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## Searching for infinite space in extreme locations

Photographer Murray Fredericks aims for more than just coffee table pictures. Just don't call him an adventurer, writes **Garry Maddox**.

**P**lanning an expedition to a remote part of Greenland next month, the photographer Murray Fredericks was alarmed by one item on the list of compulsory gear – a gun.

"My wife and I said 'what the?'," he says. "Then she just looked at me and said 'bears.'"

Yes, polar bears will be a "technical risk" when Fredericks spends five weeks on his own taking pictures and filming after being flown by helicopter into an icy wasteland.

And because hurricane-force winds would sweep away a tent on the surface, he will be swapping a comfortable Bondi house with a wife and four kids for a brutally cold hole in the ice.

During at least 20 hours of light each day, the risks also include blizzards that cause white-outs 10 metres high. But even though the engaging Fredericks looks like the lost Leyland brother, don't dare call him an adventurer.

"There's as little adventure element to what I'm doing as possible," he says at his home, where his striking epic photo-

graphs dominate the walls. "It's not about that. It's about creating the work."

And don't call Fredericks a landscape photographer either. His aim is something very different – capturing a sense of infinite space in a flat environment with a 360-degree horizon, deliberately avoiding any natural, animal or human features that would give a sense of scale to his work.

"The photography is not documentary," he says. "I don't even call it landscape as such. It's about space. It's about the mind's relationship to emptiness and visual representations of that."

Having been "the guy with a camera" at high school who took pictures of sports teams, Fredericks was a serious photographer with commercial and artistic ambitions in his mid-twenties. He shot what he calls traditional coffee table-style photos until he realised he wanted more from his work.

"I reached the point where I went through everything and went 'there's nothing new here'. All I'm doing is finding new angles and new locations but the message itself – and the way the



Solo man ... Murray Fredericks cycles into Lake Eyre on one of his expeditions and, above right, the photographer looking like the lost Leyland brother. Photos: Michael Angus

message is delivered – isn't changing," he says.

"So I went through everything again and I thought 'which images affect me differently?' and they were the images that conveyed a sense of space."

That discovery has taken Fredericks 14 times to Lake Eyre

in outback South Australia in the past six years. His aim was to photograph the flat salt plain with its low horizon and lack of distinctive features.

Hauling his gear to the location by bicycle, he spent up to five weeks by himself trying to capture the nothingness. And

when things changed, he wanted to capture that too.

"Everything happens on the cusp, on the change," he says. "It's the transition periods that are interesting because that's when the stuff you can't imagine or you can't expect happens."

Fredericks's shots of land and

sky have proven so popular there are three galleries – in Sydney, Melbourne and London – waiting for his new work.

"Lake Eyre is one of the only places – apart from being in the middle of the ocean – where you can get this 360-degree perfect horizon," he says.

"That allowed me to shoot in every single direction and still hold that thing of trying to break with the traditional language of landscape photography."

Fredericks was surprised by the shots he was getting on the lake.

"I thought I was going to get one or two photos and come



back. After one trip, it was like 'my god, there's nothing here yet look at this work.'"

Over various trips, Fredericks shot the documentary *Salt*, which has won seven international awards over the past year. It shows him working, talking to his video camera about what he's going through and calling his wife on a satellite phone.

While stills are the main focus, Fredericks plans another documentary in Greenland.

"I'm taking nine time-lapse cameras with me this time and am looking at doing some kind of installation work, having cameras pointing in all direction, running right through the storms, running right through the good times, the night, the whole thing," he says.

And hopefully those cameras won't be picking up approaching polar bears.

*Salt* screens on ABC1 tomorrow at 10.05pm.