

# Feeling For Snow



In a gift to us all, photographer Olivia Martin-McGuire has captured the pure wildness of ice. Victoria Hynes reports.

**M**an proceeds in a fog. But when he looks back to judge people of the past, he sees no fog on their path. From his present, which was their far-away future, their path looks perfectly clear to him, good visibility all the way. Looking back he sees the path, he sees the people proceeding, he sees their mistake, but not the fog."

Milan Kundera, from the book *Dancing with Strangers*, written by Inga Clendinnen.

It is said that Inuits in Greenland possess 49 different derivations for the word 'snow', so acutely sensitised are they to

the subtleties of their icy habitat. Photographer Olivia Martin-McGuire has attained the aesthetic equivalent with her recent spectacular series of photographic images exploring remote winter wonderlands in Iceland and New Zealand.

Viewing Martin-McGuire's 22 large frozen landscapes at Sydney's Maunsell Hughes Gallery last November on a sweltering spring morning, these immersive environments sent a chill through the humid air. Near abstract close-ups of light-suffused snow caves, in various shades of icy blue, were rendered like painterly watercolours. The majestic grandeur of glaciers were reduced to minimalist sculptural formations.

Additionally, there were grainy atmospheric shots of rolling mists fogging a freeway to near impenetrable visibility and panoramic vistas of ominous swirling clouds brewing an impending snowstorm. Her medium format compositions, captured in delicate monochromatic tones, seem to transport

the viewer to another dimension that is almost Turner-esque in its evocative power.

An adventurous solo traveller, this young Australian photographer and filmmaker trekked to geo-thermal pools outside Reykjavik and through glacial landscapes in New Zealand, loaded down with camera equipment, to capture sublime and enigmatic visions of inhospitable and isolated white worlds, seemingly untouched by humankind. Hitching a helicopter ride up to mountains on the South Island of New Zealand, she trekked through ice caves, chased after Antarctic snow storms and mountaineered through hovering clouds to render her soft ethereal images.

Most closely aligned with the nineteenth century landscape tradition of the romantic sublime, Martin-McGuire deliberately fogs her camera lens and uses grainy film to evoke a mystical realm, rather than just a physical representation of place, which elevates her work beyond travel photography. The clean, crisp beauty of her landscapes also revealed the photographer's own introspective state of mind as much as the actual location. She intentionally

sought out remote environments that reflected her desire to remove herself from civilisation and look within.

Fantastical and emotive, they also imply a heightened sensory awareness that is often only experienced by travelling alone, when the mind is still, and in tune with one's surroundings. In the wildness, the sense of awe felt when faced with nature's grandeur and also its menace leads to that perfect transitory moment when one's separate sense of self dissolves. At one with the elements, the spirit soars.

Ultimately Martin-McGuire believes that her photographs act as a kind of documentation of her own rite of passage. This quest has recently continued in the form of an expedition through Korea and to Hokkaido, on the North Island of Japan to study the particular snow crystals of this region and their unique snowflake museums. Ideally the photographer's intention is to seek out residencies in all the frozen glacial habitats around the globe. One cannot but admire her singular determination as she continues along her physical and personal journey through the world's pristine white wilderness environments. In the process she pays homage to our ever diminishing and fragile ecological reserves.

■ Victoria Hynes is Deputy Editor of Australian Art Review

(Olivia Martin-McGuire's solo exhibition 'Oversea, Understone' was held at Maunsell Hughes Gallery, 98 Holdsworth Street, Woollahra, from November 1-15, 2003.)

above:  
???, 200?,  
acrylic on linen,  
91 x 91cm.

right:  
???, 200?,  
acrylic on linen,  
91 x 91cm.

All images  
courtesy of  
Olivia Martin-  
McGuire

