

# On Big Drawings

2020

ART AT HOME



## Joan Gabie: Emailing Antarctica



Emailing Antarctica –  
a collaborative project by  
Joan and Neville Gabie

Initiated by Joan Gabie, she asked Neville to email her a line of text each day describing his experience whilst traveling to and being in Antarctica.

In response Joan Gabie made a daily drawing, derived either from the content of the email or from her own experience of being left at home. The resulting body of work is a series of 96 emails and 96 drawings.

In 2011 Joan and Neville Gabie were invited to develop a commission by Cheltenham Museum & Art Gallery, funded by New Expressions 2, in response to their very substantial Edward Wilson Antarctic archive. Edward Wilson, born in Cheltenham and was the doctor, scientist and artist that accompanied Scott to Antarctica on two occasions.

What fascinated us was the letters exchanged between Edward Wilson and his wife Oriana, letters which took months to be delivered. In particular one letter and telegram caught our attention. In March 1912 Ory sent a telegram back to England whilst waiting for Edward Wilson to return to New Zealand.

The telegram reported back that Edward was fine, based on news she had received from Antarctica. In fact Edward Wilson was already dead. Although it is now possible to email in seconds, physical distance and the distance of experience was something this body of work considers.

This communication between a married couple helped frame Emailing Antarctica and the final body of work includes a copy of Ory's telegram as well as the last letter penned by Edward Wilson.



**24th December 2008.**

'Out of nowhere in a stormy sea,  
a huge flat-topped iceberg with sheer  
cliff faces of exquisite pale blue, unmoving, melancholy,  
silent and doomed to be eaten away  
by the waves breaking on its sides.'



### 30th Dec.

'....looking ahead into a white world with only the merest hint of a division between the ice and cloud.

Gradually as my eyes adjusted, I began to discern the faintest smudge of grey beginning to emerge.

.....as we silently got nearer the most enormous iceberg with a crystalline cliff face and soft snow covered top loomed over me.

Joan, it was quite the most beautiful thing I think I have ever seen."



## 2nd Jan. ....

Once off the HMS Shackleton we climbed into a ski trailer attached to a snow cat and began our 10 mile journey to Halley research Station following a track in the snow marked by oil drums and flags – a drumline.

Without this you would have no idea where you were going. In every direction the horizon as far as the eye can see, is absolutely flat, white and devoid of distinguishing features.

13 of us sat in the trailer amongst the kit bags and made the 40 minute journey in silence – each caught up in their own thoughts .....'



## 12th Jan. ....

Over the last few days it has struck me very clearly  
that everyone is looking for  
something to photograph –  
penguins, seals, icebergs, the ship, the base, each other.  
Something to focus on ....  
What it has made me want to try is to see  
if I can photograph nothing –  
to see how little you can have in a photographic image –  
what it can be reduced to.....'



**23rd Jan.**

I was reminded that what looks so solid underfoot  
can give way at any moment and there  
is only ever a thread to hang on to.



**28th Jan.**

"Have you journeyed to the springs of the sea or walked  
in the recesses of the deep?"

"Can you tip over the water jars of the heavens"

Quoted from the Book of Job, from the Halley's library.



### 31st Jan.

The air still and frozen and hanging like a veil.  
The space undisturbed and silent year on year,  
interrupted now by us.



## 6th Feb. 2009.

More equipment needed installing close to the edge of the ice shelf  
so I headed out with Rich and Ryan.

Our route was at 90 degrees to any  
possible crevasse and having been in one ,  
recently I knew just how far back they can run.

A crevasse can easily have an opening to swallow a skidoo in a second,  
camouflaged by a "bridge" of snow

...I followed in their tracks with a great deal of nervousness.  
I was thinking to myself what if they merely provoke the ice  
with their skidoo blades and when it strikes I will be in its jaws?



**7th Feb.**

" The doggy men were forced to kill their teams from  
a cold distant order sent by men  
with the taste of sherry on their lips"



**23rd Feb 2009.**

One of the projects the scientists are doing is attaching antennae to Weddell seals as a means of studying the ocean floor.

These huge and docile creatures feed at a depth of 500 metres so they are the taxis relaying data continually to laptops back in an office in Cambridge.

.....You see them lying around, dark mounds of flesh on the floes.



24th Feb 2009.

You have the majesty of the pyramids in desert sand,  
we are surrounded by icebergs, silent ocean liners  
wandering without a course,  
through the Southern Ocean.



**16th March 2009.**

There is a glass cabinet in a museum,  
an old French chateau in Punta Arenas, containing instruments

and maps of the first Europeans who charted the waterways, one thousand islands along Chile's coast.

Their task: to look for safe shipping routes around the Horn, ideally a shortcut between islands avoiding it altogether. As well as maps these marine surveyors documented the coastlines in books of drawings and one of these very small books caught my eye."



**Emailing Antarctica : A boxed Edition of 25**

96 loose leaf drawings produced as digital prints, a book containing all the emails in full including the Edward Wilson Letter and Ory's telegram, an Introduction by Helen Brown, Collections Manager and Curator of Fine Art, Cheltenham Museum & Art Gallery.

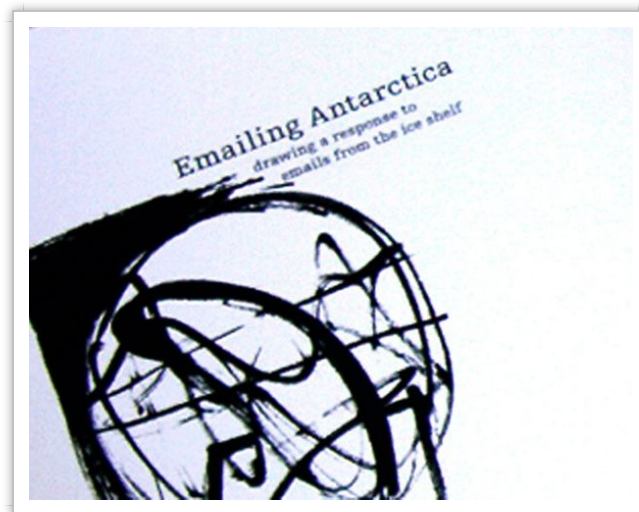
The body of work sits in a purpose made box,

dimensions 44cm x 32cm x 8cm

Published 2012 Design Alan Ward Axis

Graphic Design, Editor Helen Tookey

<https://www.nevillegabie.com/works/antarctica/emailing-antarctica/>





## toandFRO

installation view,

Pier Arts Centre, Orkney – September 3rd – November 5th, 2016

Curated by Susan Christie in partnership with the Pier Arts Centre,

A solo exhibition of work by Neville Gabie,

which included projects from Antarctica,

Achiltibuie, Western Highlands, Scotland and WOMAD

## Joan Gabie: selected figure studies

India ink on paper



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