

ARUSHA

GALLERY

Catherine Ross, PHANTOMS

There's a moment early on in Sylvain Tesson's wonderful *Consolations of the Forest* when, having just been dropped off to spend six months in a cabin in the middle of Taiga, he watches his only fellow humans for several hundred miles drive away:

'No sight is more poignant to a castaway than the disappearance of a ship's sail. Volodya and Ludmila are off to Irkutsk and their new life. I wait for the moment when they'll turn around for a last look at the cabin.'

They don't turn around.

The truck dwindles to a dot. I am alone. The mountains seem harsher now. Intense, the landscape reveals itself. The land is in my face... Solitude is this reconquest of the enjoyment of things.

It's -27° F. The truck has dissolved into the fog. Silence falls from the sky in little white shavings. To be alone is to hear silence. A blast of wind; sleet muddles the view. I let out a scream. I open my arms, raise my face to the icy emptiness, and go back inside where it's warm... I will finally find out if I have an inner life.'

It is this inner life in extremis, art after and in light of the Arctic's nature which exercises Catherine Ross. Her work is born of boreal fascination, an urge to explore the multi-faceted prism of 'North' and relate her visions, dreams, and adventures — her hymns to the hiemal — in joyous, ebullient colour.

As such her paintings are portals to worlds few of us may visit in the flesh but all of us hold in our imagination.

Here, the dark forests which so haunt the northern mind, cede to glacier, ice mountains, fjord, dark sea and mists, beyond which... cold and colder still.

The Svalbard of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*, the sound of bells in a Narnian snowscape, the crushing coda of Mary Shelley's monster, the great white silence which swallowed Franklin's party, Ann Bancroft's triumphant ski traversal, the mystery of Nansen's final flight, the tragedy of Eduard Von Toll's doomed Russian expedition in search of Sannikov Land in the seas above Siberia, an island that does not exist.

This is the realm of ice bears, walruses, whales, hares, snow foxes, owls, eagles, narwhals, and other mythical beasts unknown. A spectral zone of midnight suns and endless nights; a shifting pack of ideas with intractable ice at their heart. Not the place for the warm hearted home-body this, it takes a certain cast of mind to run towards the abyss, to make peace with the crystalline austerity the Arctic affords. Having said that, viewed through a window of cosy cabin, fire roaring, book in hand, tea steaming, the terrible hyperthermic harbingers recede. Chill horrors seem distant, at bay, thanks to the stove, the soupy heat, the black mirrors of the glass, a snug little bubble... But such thoughts can deceive, as Jack Kerouac found — frightened out of his wits whilst a fire lookout on Desolation Peak in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State:

'In the middle of the night I woke up suddenly and my hair was standing on end – I saw a huge black shadow in my window. — Then I saw that it had a star above it, and realised that this was Mt Hozomeen (8080 feet) looking in my window from miles away'

near Canada. — I got up from the forlorn bunk with the mice scattering underneath and went outside and gasped to see black mountain shapes gianting all around, and not only that but the billowing curtains of the northern lights shifting behind the clouds. — It was a little too much for a city boy — the fear that the Abominable Snowman might be breathing behind me in the dark sent me back to bed where I buried my head inside my sleeping bag.’

Far from being haunted by the void, the work of Catherine Ross invites us to look again at the truly varied palettes, textures, and landscapes of the north. The rich reds and blues of blood-moons and heartwood, the neon greens of the aurora borealis, the silver and gold of the heavens. Her paintings reveal marvels rather than monsters and revel in playful juxtapositions — an enormous waxy star amidst pink clouds, illuminates powdered hills of pines. Elsewhere, scenes of Christmas radiate a glow which manages to charm whilst somehow alluding to the cruel frost and deep snows without. *Phantoms* presents a grove of woozy molten hands, reaching beckoning? There’s more than a hint of Tove Jansson’s haunting *Hattifatteners*, or is the image actually a psychedelic set of snow-swamped trees? Throughout Ross’s show, one double-takes and doubles-back to see the apparently known anew.

Ross has written that her rug paintings refer to the kinds of weaving and knitting traditions found in remote northern parts:

‘Blankets, rugs and jumpers seem to share elements of their design, an abstracting of the wintered landscapes. The depictions of ever-changing shifts in the weather above the landscapes perhaps do not just relate to the natural state of things, but in my mind, to my father’s work as a meteorological observer, or ‘weather-man’, in the high Arctic.’

Again, the mix of the mythic and the biographic, the heuristic and the heroic. To knit a Nordic jumper is to imagine the cold to come, to weave the knowledge of ages afresh and this potent sense of rediscovery and connection runs throughout Ross’s work. Standing amongst it, I recalled a meeting with a Swiss mountaineer whilst climbing with my father. A gentle giant of a man, the Alpinist showed us the massive felt-wool gloves he’d worn when tackling the world’s the highest peaks — because wool keeps you warm even when it’s wet, more so than the most modern kit, and crucially, wool can be mended, darned on the go in a way most man-made materials can’t. *‘Wool is best because it’s simple, it’s old, it’s alive’*, he told us.

So those were the type of gloves I wore when I went, years later, to explore the ice of Svalbard, last land before the North Pole. And the gloves kept me toasty and acted as a totem and comfort, a link back home. At one point I stood before a glacier named Nordenskiöld and hypnotised and smitten with the blues at its core, saxe and cobalt born of eon pressures, snows on snows on snow... and then I snapped back into Arusha, teleported through rime and space. The same will happen to you. Catherine Ross’ art exists in more dimensions than I can explain. Go well, stay warm, have fun.

- Dan Richards