Documents from Antarctica

Kristie MacDonald

June 11 - July 29

Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre is a non-profit organization facilitating the presentation, interpretation, and production of contemporary visual, time-based and interdisciplinary arts. Modern Fuel aims to meet the professional development needs of emerging and mid-career local, national and international artists, from diverse cultural communities, through exhibition, discussion, and mentorship opportunities. Modern Fuel supports innovation and experimentation and is committed to the education of interested publics and the diversification of its audiences. As an advocate for contemporary art, as well as for artists' rights, we pay professional fees to artists in accordance with the CARFAC fee schedule.

Modern Fuel is situated on the unceded ancestral territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples. We acknowledge the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabeg peoples as the past, present, and future caretakers of this land. We also recognize the Métis peoples and other nations from across Turtle Island who have called Katarokwi / Kingston home for generations upon generations. We are grateful to be able to live, learn and make art on this land and be in such close proximity to the waters of the St. Lawrence River and Lake Ontario. To acknowledge this traditional territory and waterways is to recognize this city and country's longer history pre-dating confederation and the work that must still be done in decolonizing our spaces and relations. We at Modern Fuel strive towards respectful relationships with all of our communities in hopes of walking a good path together.

We at Modern Fuel want to state unequivocally that Black lives matter, Indigenous lives matter, and that the lives of People of Colour matter. Modern Fuel strives to ensure that members and visitors feel safe and welcome in our space and at our events. We do not tolerate discrimination, harassment, or violence including but not limited to ableism; ageism; homophobia and transphobia; misogyny; racism and white supremacy. It is also important to us that Modern Fuel not only continues to present works and programs that support Black and Indigenous artists, members and visitors, but invests in the work of becoming an inclusive, anti-racist organization. We feel it is only then that Modern Fuel can advocate for artists and foster community with care and respect.

Modern Fuel Artist-Run Centre
305-307 King Street West
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Gallery Hours
Tuesday-Saturday
12-5PM

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ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kristie MacDonald is a visual artist based in Toronto. Her practice-based research engages notions of the archive and its roles in the evolving meanings and contextual histories of images, artifacts, and places. MacDonald is a recipient of awards from the Toronto Arts Council, Ontario Arts Council, Canada Council for the Arts, and the Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts. She has exhibited her work in Canada, the United States, Norway, and Iceland. She is currently a PhD candidate in the department of Visual Art at York University, and an Assistant Professor at the University of Guelph where she teaches Studio Art.

kristiemacdonald.com

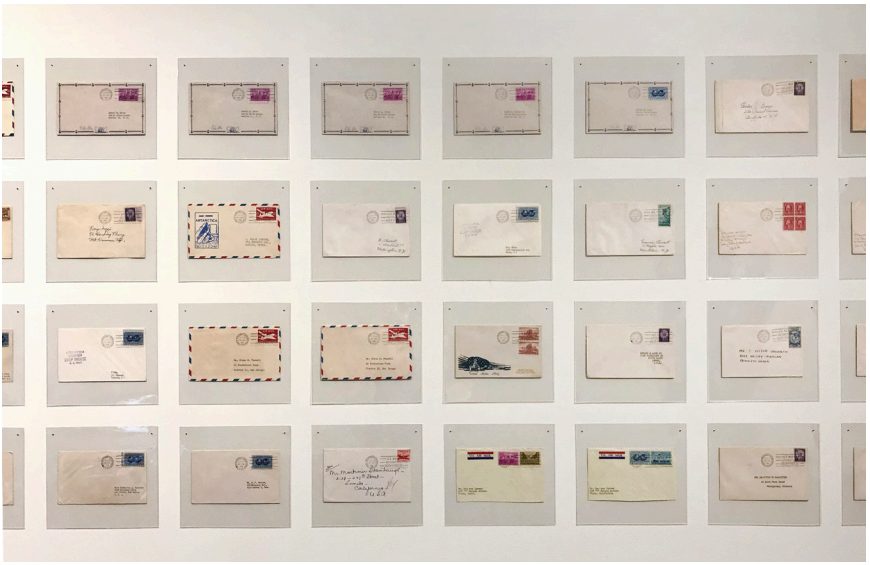
ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Material culture is one of the primary ways humans understand and define themselves – responding to the conditions of their social and geographic surroundings by making, building, and recording. Documents from Antarctica investigates the role of material culture produced on and about the Antarctic continent. The body of work in this exhibition explores the potential to build meaning through gestures of accumulation, and the capacity of ephemera to act as evidence.

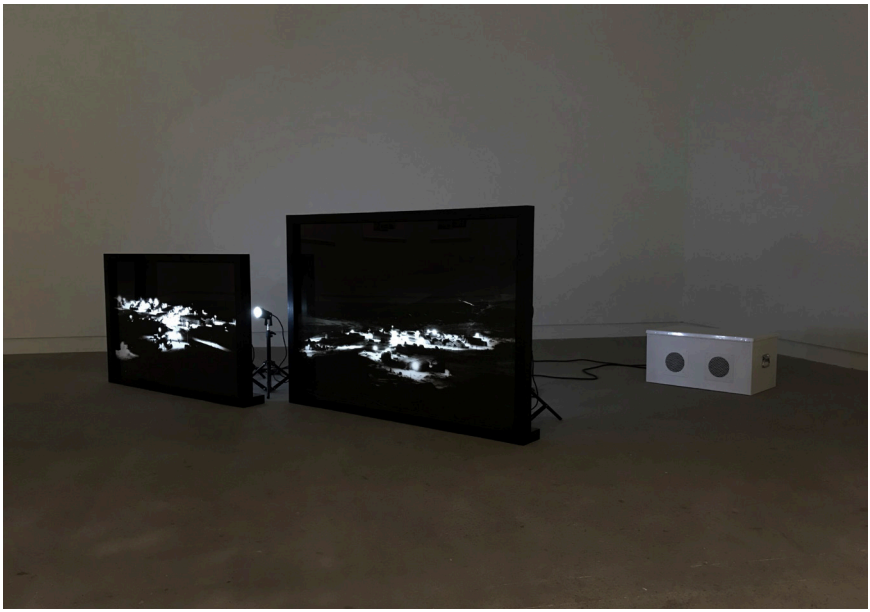
Pole Station Antarctica: December 15th 8am 1956 (2012 – Ongoing) is a collection of envelopes postmarked at the same time, on the same day. Shifting scale each time it is exhibited, the work contains 136 envelopes and counting. When observed en mass the cumulative minutia of place names, postage stamp designs, and decorative embellishments expose the complicated cultural and geo-political circumstances of this particular mailing.

McMurdo at Night (2022) features two large photo transparencies illuminated by an autonomous 'power gird.' The images portray McMurdo Station, Antarctica's most established settlement, as a series of roadways and buildings lit by conspicuous streetlamps. A series of spotlights activate the transparencies and mimic the infrastructure pictured within the photographs.

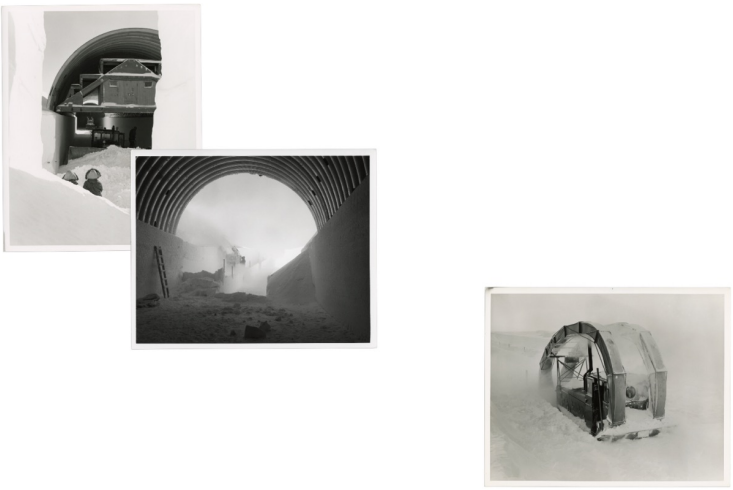
White Out (2021), Floated to Sea (2021), and *The snow doesn't fall, but it moves with great speed (2021)* each depict stacks of historical photographs. Images are paired in order to reveal a history of human habitation in Antarctica, while simultaneously highlighting the ways photography has witnessed and turned away from the accompanying environmental footprint.



Pole Station Antarctica: December 15th 8am 1956 (Detail)
Collection of found envelopes
Installation Variable
2012 – Ongoing



McMurdo at Night
Photographic transparencies, wood, plexiglass, battery generators, LED lights, tripods, extension cords
Installation Variable
2022



The snow doesn’t fall, but it moves with great speed
Digital Print
40” x 30”
2021

Floated to Sea
Digital Print
27” x 19.5”
2021

Whiteout
Digital Print
24.5” x 19.5”
2021

ESSAY BY DANIELLA SANADER

The narrator of Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "Sur" is a nameless Peruvian woman, who wrote a report that was tucked away in her suburban attic for years, perhaps longer. Anonymity was the highest priority for our narrator, eclipsing even the desire to be remembered for what she achieved in 1909. In Le Guin's feminist-revisionist tale, the Peruvian narrator recounts how she and a team of eight other South American women were the first to reach the geographic South Pole, two years earlier than the Norwegian expedition led by Roald Amundsen, who is otherwise credited with the accomplishment. This team of South American women are forgotten by history by their own design: they lied to their husbands and families about where they were headed, and they left no marker of their presence at the South Pole, because "there seemed no particular reason to do so." Even the Peruvian narrator's report is by no means a gesture of historical reclamation—instead, she wanted to share her story with her family, written down as a kind of inheritance. As she finishes her report—as Le Guin's story concludes—she writes of her grandchildren finally knowing her secret: "But they must not let Mr. Amundsen know! He would be terribly embarrassed and disappointed. There is no need for him or anyone else outside the family to know. We left no footprints, even."

As I write this, I'm looking at photographs of the Amundsen South Pole expedition on Wikipedia. In the most widely shared image of the expedition, four men are shown standing on the left, each looking up in reverence at the Norwegian flag erected atop a tent on the right side of the frame. Behind them, the snowy terrain recedes infinitely, both the grain of the photograph and the weather conditions making it unclear where ground meets sky. This image of Amundsen and his team is popular for obvious reasons: it's stark, quietly heroic, and perfectly symmetrical—four small bodies balanced with a triangular shape of equal visual weight, set against a dappled-white backdrop made all the more mysterious in its illegibility. It's easy to ignore the long cables criss-crossing throughout the photograph;

the support structure that keeps the Norwegian tent and flag upright. They mostly recede from view—otherwise they would throw the visual harmony off-kilter—but without that infrastructure, that footprint, the photograph would have not been possible at all.

By contrast, the photographs used as source material throughout Kristie MacDonald's exhibition Documents from Antarctica expose a different view of the polar landscape: one indelibly mediated (and damaged) by human infrastructure and industry. MacDonald has been collecting images of Antarctica for several years now—mostly archival press shots or decommissioned military and government photographs sourced from eBay—and her arrangements of images highlight the significant labour required to maintain occupation in an otherwise "inhospitable" place. In The snow doesn't fall, but it moves with great speed (2021), three structures echo in shape with curved roofs overhead, each participating in the (Sisyphean) effort of clearing snow for stable routes between research stations. In Floated to Sea (2021), an aerial photograph of pristine ice—taken in 1956, the year Antarctica's first permanent structures were built—is partially occluded by an Associated Press wirephoto from 1971, featuring a (considerably less pristine) pile of human-made trash, with gulls circling in the sky. An accompanying press caption explains how the trash pile will be burned and set adrift to sea on a melting ice floe, as per U.S base protocols, "but improvements to the system are under study."

As a geographic entity, Antarctica resists stability or easy categorization. For instance, the South Pole discovered by Amundsen's team in 1911 (or perhaps by Le Guin's narrator in 1909) lost its accuracy shortly after it was marked. Given that the land mass of the continent is mostly covered with a massive sheet of ice, any structures or markers on the landscape will drift towards the sea at a rate of ten metres per year. As a result, the South Pole is consistently resurveyed, just as routes in the snow must be constantly redug, stations frequently rebuilt. Human settlement on the continent is the result of a dense network of geopolitical negotiations and

international supply chains. Signed in 1959, the Antarctic Treaty stipulates that the continent remain demilitarized, not owned by any of the countries that occupy its territory solely for scientific purposes. (However, this treaty is set to expire in 2049.) Moving across great oceanic distances—and at great ecological cost—everything needed in Antarctica must be shipped in, everything discarded must be taken away; or as we have seen, set adrift into the sea.

The U.S base setting fire to trash in MacDonald's 1971 image is McMurdo Station, a research facility that serves as the subject of the artist's photo installation McMurdo at Night (2022). Nighttime images of the continent from this mid-century era are rare, and MacDonald's installation shows why: the grainy blackness of the landscape is interrupted by a grid of artificial lights, exposing the sharp edges of buildings and the great extent of the station's human infrastructure—these images evade the popular fantasy of Antarctica as a pristine expanse of snow and ice. To carry this point further, MacDonald has lit these photo-transparencies using a rig of small freestanding lights connected to a series of batteries left visible in the gallery space. As an installation, McMurdo at Night is a closed system, untethered from the gallery's power grid, and the bulky infrastructure required to sustain it is on full display—not unlike the criss-crossing cables securing the Norwegian flag in the Amundsen photograph.

As a whole, Documents from Antarctica works to render visible how two (seemingly contradictory) visions of the continent are constructed: Antarctica as pure, untouched landscape; Antarctica as hospitable for human permanence. Both visions are false, both have immeasurable costs. In her installation Pole Station Antarctica: December 15th 8am 1956 (2012-ongoing), the root of MacDonald's research trajectories into the continent can be found. In 2012, at an antiquarian book fair, she discovered an envelope mailed to Keswick, the small Ontario town where she was raised. It was sent from Pole Station, Antarctica, postmarked on the date and time listed in the installation's title. Searching eBay, she soon found a second envelope from the station, postmarked with the same information. Ten years

on, her collection now includes some 136 envelopes—all collected together at a U.S. research station in Antarctica in 1956, they travelled great distances to reach their intended recipients, and now, they have travelled even further to be reunited in an artist's collection. December 15, 1956 was the first mailing to be shipped from the newly built Pole Station, a permanent address on impermanent terrain.

Small details on the Pole Station envelopes reveal large contexts. Some feature stylized military insignia, penguins and icebergs accompanying the title U.S. NAVY – OPERATION DEEPFREEZE. Others feature U.S. postage stamps designed to celebrate ATOMS FOR PEACE—a remnant of the nuclear optimism of the late 1950s. Some envelopes are emblazoned with decorative details celebrating United Confederate Veterans, complete with soaring eagles and confederate crests. It's an uneasy reminder of the military force required to sustain Antarctica as a colonized space, despite any justifications that the terrain's settlement is purely for scientific research endeavours. Assembled as they are in Documents from Antarctica, MacDonald's envelopes create a fractured portrait of a fraught location, and its connection to a global network of infrastructure, negotiation, and power.

"We left no footprints, even," writes Le Guin's anonymous narrator in the final line of "Sur," articulating her own refusal to bring permanence to her presence on the continent. Rereading this line, I'm left wondering what kind of permanence MacDonald's source photographs of Antarctica offer. Throughout her exhibition, these scanned reproductions have undeniable markers of time: their edges are yellowed, corners worn, crop marks and other notations left visible. Like the South Pole shifting ten metres in any given direction, their fixity is, on some level, an unattainable fantasy. Through all of its accumulated works, this is what Documents from Antarctica archives: human efforts to control, understand, and extract value from this location, like footprints in shifting snow and ice. However, as we have seen in the ever-warming century since Amundsen's expedition, these efforts are becoming increasingly, dangerously, permanent.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Daniella Sanader is a writer and reader based in Toronto.
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