



J. ADRIAN/NATL. MARITIME MUS.

*High Arctic* immerses visitors in an abstract landscape representing the Svalbard glaciers, the names of which are illuminated by the viewer's ultraviolet torch.

CLIMATE CHANGE

# Notes from a cold climate

Deborah Dixon explores an elegiac exhibition about the far reaches of the Arctic.

The Arctic is often portrayed in 'long shot' as a sublime and haunting land- and seascape. The launch of an exhibition in the glorious new Sammy Ofer wing of London's National Maritime Museum gives the top of the world real immediacy, using sound, light and sculpture to bring home the experience of venturing to this glacial region.

*High Arctic* is an interactive installation recreating the Arctic impressions of Matt Clark, creative director of London-based art and design team United Visual Artists. Clark — whose day job is producing stage shows for bands such as The Chemical Brothers — journeyed to the Svalbard ice field in 2010 with Cape Farewell, an organization that has taken tens of artists and scientists to polar locations for dialogue on climate change since 2001.

The virtual voyager's first port of call in the exhibition is a foyer documenting the Cape Farewell trip. Video screens relay interviews with team members and film clips from the voyage — of icebergs, polar bears and scientific equipment. In a darkened corridor beyond is a timeline of polar discovery, picked out by the light of ultraviolet torches given to visitors on entry. The timeline runs from 2100 back to the fourth century BC,

when the Greek geographer Pytheas of Massalia (a Greek colony; now modern Marseilles, France) travelled to the far north and described the midnight Sun and ice floes.

Other figures in polar history are noted. They include: Jonas Poole, who in the seventeenth century explored Bear Island and Spitsbergen off Norway, and established the English whaling trade; nineteenth-century explorer William Parry, who in 1827 set a record for reaching the most northerly point that stood for nearly half a century; and Nils Strindberg, the Swedish photographer who accompanied S. A. Andrée on his helium-balloon expedition in the Arctic in 1897.

These characters inspired a work by Clark's fellow voyager, British poet Nick Drake. Fragments of Drake's verse are played in a vast 40-by-15-metre room permeated by a soundscape of creaking wood, whistling wind and radio static. Arranged on the floor are more than 3,000 monolithic white forms of varying heights, grouped into 74 'islands' representing the Svalbard archipelago. These abstract representations of individual glaciers, whose names can be picked out in the

**High Arctic**  
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ultraviolet light cast by visitors' torches, have the ghostly air of a drowned cityscape.

Further flicks of the torch reveal more information and poetic interpretations of the fragile landscape in five light 'pools'. In one, shaped like Svalbard's islands, lines of latitude and longitude shift under the beam; in others, snow flurries and drifts appear, then melt into black slicks. In yet another, squares of light calve from a cluster of small monoliths and break up under the torchlight to show the deterioration of the glaciers.

*High Arctic* is elegiac and engaging. Its sights and sounds reveal the wonder and human cost of scientific endeavour in the region. Paradoxically, the more we know, the more we realize the limits to our understanding of this remote place. As Drake's poem has it, "I staked my life and sailed into a dream;/When at last I returned home/They did not believe me./I wrote the truth in a book,/But then the book was lost..." ■

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