

Two Media, One Message: A Discussion with Watercolourist David McEown and Photographer Daisy Gilardini on Art and Conservation

By RACHEL WEINER, MEDIA RELATIONS and COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR



FIG. 6



FIG. 1



FIG. 5



FIG. 2



FIG. 3



FIG. 4

Photographer Daisy Gilardini and watercolourist David McEown have visited and documented some of Earth's most remote and fragile ecosystems, having travelled by plane, research vessel, icebreaker, sailboat, and skis through the Arctic and Antarctic numerous times over the last decade. The couple, who married in 2011, share their extraordinary adventures, including close encounters with penguins and polar bears, as well as their message of conservation, through presentations and workshops.

Gilardini's images have been published internationally by leading magazines and organizations, such as *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, *BBC Wildlife Magazine*, *Greenpeace*, and the *World Wildlife Fund*, among others. And both Gilardini and her work have also received

awards, including an IPA International Photography Award and BBC Wildlife Photographer of the Year.

McEown is a graduate of the Ontario College of Art and Design University and has been working in the watercolour medium for the past twenty-five years. He is an elected member of the Canadian Society of Painters in Water Colour, which awarded him the prestigious A.J. Casson Medal in 2005. His paintings are represented in collections worldwide.

Both artists will be speaking at the McMichael on Sunday, March 15, at 1:30 p.m., and McEown will run a Master Class at the gallery entitled *Colour Exploration: Watercolour Painting with David McEown* on Saturday, March 7 and Sunday, March 8. For more information and to register for these programs, please visit mcmichael.com.



FIG. 7

Fig. 1: David McEown (b. 1962), *Paradise Bay, Antarctica*, watercolour, 56 x 112 cm, Courtesy of the artist; fig. 2: Daisy Gilardini (b. 1968), *The Melting Globe—Franklin Strait—Boothia Peninsula—Nunavut—Canadian Arctic*, Courtesy of the artist; fig. 3 *Painting the Emperor Penguins*, 2006. Photograph by Daisy Gilardini; fig. 4: David McEown (b. 1962), *Lemaire Channel Sunset*, watercolour, 18 x 38 cm, Courtesy of the artist; fig. 5: Daisy Gilardini (b. 1968), *Emperor Penguin Family—Snow Hill Island—Antarctica*, Courtesy of the artist; fig. 6: David McEown (b. 1962), *In the Ice #2, East Antarctica*, watercolour, 25.5 x 17 cm, Courtesy of the artist; fig. 7: Daisy Gilardini (b. 1968), *The Laughing Seal—Weddell Seal—Antarctic Peninsula*, Courtesy of the artist

Combined, you have made thirty-seven expeditions to the Arctic and thirty-eight to Antarctica over the past decade. What continues to draw you back there?

Daisy Gilardini (DG): Many times I have tried to understand this irresistible attraction to the poles, which I would define almost as an addiction or obsession. These extreme adventures transport me out of my ordinary worldliness and lead me to discover some of the most pristine regions on Earth. By returning to the foundation of existence, in a world balanced by the rhythm of nature, I feel the urgency to document the changes happening in order to inspire respect and awareness about the importance of these delicate ecosystems.

David McEown (DM): The sheer wonder and beauty of these places are sublime, inspiring, and rejuvenating. It's like a reset button for the soul. From a watercolour painting and aesthetic point of view, the stark minimal icescapes illuminated by endless surreal light allow an artist to work with exciting abstract forms.

Since you began painting and photographing the Polar Regions, have you observed first-hand any changes to the environment?

DG and DM: Since we started exploring and documenting the Polar Regions, huge visible changes have occurred. Some of the Arctic routes that were possible to navigate only by icebreaker ten years ago are now mostly free of ice in the summer. The Greenland and Svalbard ice caps are melting at an incredible speed. To give you an idea in numbers, the Greenland ice cap is losing ice at a net annual rate of 200 gigatonnes.

In the Antarctic Peninsula, precipitation has increased due to the rise in temperature and evaporation. This translates into more snow, which is affecting the penguin populations. The population of Adélie penguins is decreasing because their diet is made up of krill, which depend on ice, while the population of gentoo penguins, who have a more varied diet, is increasing dramatically.

How do you balance the roles of artist and conservationist?

DG: I'm a member of the International League of Conservation Photographers, the mission of which is to further envi-

ronmental and cultural conservation through ethical photography. Awe-inspiring photography is a powerful force for the environment, especially when presented in collaboration with scientists and decision-makers.

DM: Art and conservation really complement each other. It is important to have those first-hand experiences to bring back and share with others, and painting is a great way to do that. Even being quiet in one's studio in the contemplative act of painting, I believe, is a great source of positive energy and a form of conservation, but one needs to get out and share the experience sometimes to reach a broader audience.

Some of your most spectacular images are of wildlife. Can you recall a particularly memorable animal encounter?

DG: I still remember my first trip to Antarctica in 1996, and the first landing on Half Moon Island in the South Shetlands. With a lump in my throat, I was shaking from the emotion of being surrounded by hundreds of chinstrap penguins. That day I couldn't even take a picture, and the few I did shoot were all blurred because of the shaking. It was the trip that changed my life!

DM: In such a vast and seemingly empty place, one can be surprised by sudden encounters. Many of the animals have not developed a fear of humans, so they are often curious. When painting on the sea ice near an emperor penguin colony, we observe from a five-metre distance; however, the penguins often come closer to inspect us. It is hard not to anthropomorphize these penguins. I swear, sometimes, these birds are critiquing the painting!

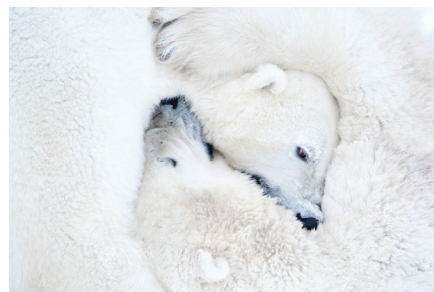
On South Georgia, the elephant seal pups are numerous along the shore early in the season. While painting at Gold Harbour, a pup came out of the water and calmly lay down against my tripod. Truly a wonderful experience looking into those big eyes, but setting up to paint in wilderness areas requires a keen awareness in

order to anticipate any possible negative interactions. So while enjoying the company of my new friend, I was looking out for the mother, as well as a 3,500-kilogram bull elephant seal on the move. The portable studio must be easy to pack up, as well as water- and guano-proof!

In addition to your individual artistic practices, you regularly hold presentations and lead workshops. What stimulated your interest in teaching?

DG: My passion for the natural world has grown into a lifelong commitment to disseminate conservation messages and inspire others to respect and preserve our fragile planet. I strongly believe in the education of younger generations, impressionable minds that will one day become the decision-makers of the future.

DM: Being an artist is often a solitary occupation, so teaching and sharing what one loves to do is rewarding. I learn so much from my students and gain new insights into my art form. **MM**



From top: Daisy Gilardini (b. 1968), *The Hug—Polar Bears Sparring—Wapusk National Park—Manitoba—Canada*, Courtesy of the artist; *Close Encounters with an Elephant Seal Pup in South Georgia*, 2013. Photograph by Greg Bukoski; David McEown (b. 1962), *From Danco Island #1*, watercolour, 18 x 28 cm, Courtesy of the artist

