

# COLE

Robert Nicol Erebus And Terror 11 May - 9 June 2012 i



Walking to Starvation Cove  
2012  
Acrylic on perspex  
50 x 70 cm

In 1845, John Franklin, a notable Royal Navy officer and explorer, set out to the Arctic to travel through the last un navigated section of the Arctic Passage, a potentially valuable trade route connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. Commanding close to 130 men, in two ships, the Erebus and Terror, Franklin and his men were beset by problems from pretty nearly the start. Their food supplies, initially earmarked to last several years, were hastily assembled and became contaminated with lead. Within a year of setting off they were trapped in pack ice, unable to continue, and were forced to travel on foot. In groups, the men all died, variously from scurvy, tuberculosis and pneumonia: local Inuits, observing the tragedy with bemusement, reported scenes of cannibalism, of packs of men wandering aimlessly in the snow. Franklin's wife spent the best part of the next four decades trying to discover her husband's body, but, along with the corpses of many of the men he directed, it was never found.

This sorry tale, with the benefit of historical distance, is as surreal as it is tragic. While local Inuit populations saw the men walking to their deaths, they were never consulted on how to survive. The British explorers' intense preparation and discipline fell apart almost immediately. If it were just for the statues erected of Franklin around the world since he passed away, one could easily conclude his final trip was not the medical and logistical disaster which the historical records overwhelmingly suggest it was. Indeed, the public's attitude towards him was ambivalent at best. While he had been highly decorated for three previous Arctic forays,

during one he had lost over half the men under his command; an improvised diet had won him the nickname 'the man who ate his boots'.

Joining the roll call of artists who have taken inspiration from Franklin's demise – 'Ten thousand pounds I would freely give, To know on earth, that my Franklin do live', sung mourners in 1852's *Lady Franklins Lament* – Robert Nicol's appetite for the macabre, along with the opportunity to apply his witty form of Folk-Art-inspired historical re-imagining to Franklin's mysterious final days, have brought him here. He has rendered the holds of the *Erebus* and *Terror* as bulky graves, mysteriously lit by Victorian street lanterns which fail to illuminate the grey; the Great Exhibition of 1851, supposedly the acme of 19th century industry and imperialism is bled into by the Arctic's sparseness and the undiscovered corpses of the expedition. Nicol has fused the real with the surreal, with tiny characters that drag or are overlooked by objects which were later discovered and documented by search parties in the 1850s. These include an oversized compass in reference to the magnetic North Pole that Franklin was intent upon studying, and pocket watches frozen in time, as delightfully misshapen as Nicol's own predilection for tiny feet or an elongated quill in the arched limb of Charles Dickens. The author, whose work as a journalist is often overlooked, wrongly refused to believe the stories of cannibalism which later emerged about the starving party, as he pored over the details in an 1854 article entitled 'The Lost Arctic Voyagers' in *Household Words*, the weekly magazine he edited at the time.

As the story has captivated audiences for over a century – it took close to 150 years for scientists to confirm the tales of cannibalism, which were originally relayed in the 1850s – so Nicol's work attempts to transport us to an alternative history seen through his eyes: where whales spout playfully beneath pack ice lurching in mimicry of a once eaten finger, or teeth and dismembered digits are fattened and delivered in ceramic. Their chubby playfulness are both amusing but hint at a disturbing truth that has been reawakened throughout history as successive artists have introduced new mythologies to elucidate the horror of the original incident; Nicol hopes to increase his audience's connection with Franklin and his doomed ambitions. As the Inuit populations were later discovered to have refashioned the crews equipment to suit their own purposes, so Nicol has reimagined the circumstances and objects associated with their demise for his own purposes.

'I wanted an objectiveness to the exhibition; as those who tried to rediscover Franklin before found little traces of his final days, so I wanted to go through that process myself, to enhance what the audience was taking away from the imagery,' says Nicol. 'The artefacts had to be personal, somehow; in places they are animalistic. All of them need to look like someone owned them. These things, these modern relics, bring the story closer to you.'

Rob Sharp  
May 2012