

ONE ONLY

Fiona Davies

With access to Shackleton's Antarctic Expeditions archives, drawn from the extensive collections held at Canterbury Museum in Christchurch, Davies' exhibition *One Only* offered new readings of an important historical journey. In a broader sense it also acknowledged the rich heritage of historical objects and information tucked away in museums the world over.

Davies copied classic portraits of the explorers (both named and unnamed) and displayed them on a raw makeshift table alongside samplings of words written by the men themselves. These extracts, selected from their diaries by Davies, appeared in tablet form - words etched onto small rectangular zinc panels. As the viewer moved around the gallery and the light direction changed the ability to successfully read the text also changed. At times the partly-reflective metal surface appeared to shimmer and at that moment any clear reading of the text was lost. In a sense these panels operated as metaphors of the (lost) Antarctic experience. A heightened sense of dislocation for the viewer reflected each explorer's own dislocation in a world so removed and foreign from what they knew. Each unique quote or message somehow highlighted the fragmented, unknown and often perilous nature of such heroic journeys. A large black-and-white image of the *Endurance* formed a backdrop within the show. The sense of the men's entrapment was chillingly brought to life by the use of a reversed black-and-white negative of the ship.

Davies' installation not only raised important questions about content and context but also how and in what ways we analyse writing. How early methods of photographic documentation captured individuals and, more importantly, the reinterpretation of such material. Added to this was the show's juxtaposition, placing historical information in the context of a contemporary art gallery space charged with its own specific histories.

How was this installation to be read? What sort of men were these heroic explorers? What precipitated them placing their lives at risk against such odds in the first decades of the twentieth century?

Davies' concept was to draw attention to the relevance, parallels (or lessons) these explorers have for future generations. The nature of endurance itself, of humanity, in an incredibly harsh and unforgiving - yet beautiful - environment such as the Antarctic asks more questions than it answers.

Grant Banbury

