

FRAGILE STRENGTH  
Ben Cullen Williams

I am gasping for breath, and my lips are chapped. Vast waves of snow stretch out before me. I stop for a while, to marvel at the majestic splendour of this place, of the untouched Earth. I exist in a world beyond thought, beyond human presence, as if within a moment of suspended light. Is this real?

Two months beforehand, I had approached polar explorer Robert Swan. We spoke about me joining his upcoming expedition to Antarctica. Now, after some planning, three flights, a hazy night in Buenos Aires, and two days sailing, my boots are dragging through white powder. It forms a perfect plane, as far as the eye can see. As I walk forward, I look up to the horizon. I think of my seven-year-old self. As a young child, I always dreamt of venturing to this wild continent, to retrace the footsteps of Captain Robert Falcon Scott. But I can't daydream, I have to focus. I have come all this way to make specific work.

The ice crystals in the air split the sun's rays into a gold halo, a circular rainbow. This delicate ring is a parhelion, and its light blinds me, washing out everything around me. It's easy to look at so much white, yet somehow it is very hard to see. I brush the snow off the black metal of my camera, and I raise the viewfinder to my eye. My finger squeezes down, and I release the shutter.

Click.

Pause.

That precise moment is instantly transformed into history, a marker of the immediate past in a fluid landscape that refuses to stand still. It is a slice of time, registered in the exposure. Through this image, I can feel time compressing and expanding; it envelopes and repels in a magnetic flux.

I think of Herbert Ponting, the photographer on Captain Scott's expedition, whose haunting black and white images depict the landscape as a protagonist on their fateful Terra Nova journey (1910–13). The image becomes history, history becomes image. And yet Ponting's images are not static, they refuse to be fixed, changing with the human eye that looks at them, in a feedback loop of meaning.

I am nowhere, but always somewhere, always located and dislocated, through knowing and not knowing. I slowly scan through my photographs to orientate my purpose. The moments captured in my photographs are now as alien to me as Ponting's, a recollection of a past life, my history now intertwined with his.

I have eliminated colour from this landscape. My photographs are thus detached from the world of the lived, and move into the realm of pure image, interpretations more than representation. I imagine my own monochromatic photographs in direct conversation with Ponting's. As they merge with his, alternate visions of reality come forth. To see again, with fresh eyes, habitual patterns need to be broken. I decided to move away from my own judgement.

Instead, I embraced the placid objectivity of artificial intelligence. I felt perhaps AI could help me to see things that remained concealed in my images. Perhaps, in this way, I could fold the past, the future and the present into one another.

I developed an AI, a generative adversarial network, and trained it by asking it to look at thousands of images. It did not complain. The machine learnt to look at the world, and was able to slowly bring its own understanding of colour into my black and white images. It scanned for connections, trying to make sense of a world of which it has no lived knowledge. Yet, its algorithms are in sync with those of nature. At a time of rapidly increasing technological change, these images capture a moment in the centuries-long cycle of melting and freezing. These photographs try to question our relationship with technological advancement.

The use of machine learning in this way results in uncanny tones and hues which are suggestive of something other, familiar but different. Through this process, the work is an attempt to form a dialogue with and about the continent's cycle – a cycle now in transition, at a threshold. We suspect, although it is not yet entirely known, that a tipping point is imminent, and that the new direction of change will be irreversible within the lifetime of our species. Such images bring into question our evolving relationship with technology, and our relation to memory, truth and the natural world.

Silently, these otherworldly images are birthed by computers, with colours that don't quite match my memories. The divergence is uncanny, but maybe even more real. Or perhaps these photographs achieve a different kind of truth. They allow me to see something else. With the abandonment of realism, of natural law, I see the continent clearly as it is, at the gate of different possibilities. Its stable past is no more. Even the unstable present captured by the images no longer exists. What I see are unique futures, that form and unfold as quickly as flakes of snow land on my bare hands.

















