

Icebreaker Dreaming



An exhibition by Ruth Maclennan

**at Pushkin House, London
20th November 2019 – 8th February 2020**

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An outdoor projection of a frozen arctic sea will animate the exterior wall of Pushkin House on Bloomsbury Square on the opening night of *Icebreaker Dreaming*, a new solo exhibition by the artist Ruth Maclennan. The exhibition explores the Russian Arctic, as a place to live in, to travel through, to project onto, to control and exploit for its natural resources, in the context of the climate emergency. The footage is shot from the bridge of a Russian icebreaker and conjures up a route for arctic shipping alongside the traffic in central London, connecting the distant arctic with urban, fossil-fuelled, metropolitan life.

Inside the building an immersive installation traces journeys that Maclennan has taken, and imagined in the Arctic region. It brings together newly commissioned films, drawings, photographs and found objects.

The centrepiece of the exhibition is a film *Cloudberries*, recently premiered at the BFI London Film Festival. The film was shot in Arctic Russia, on the Kola Peninsula, along the so-called Northern Sea Route during the hottest summer on record. It was filmed in a small fishing village, made up of an old and a new settlement. The village has taken on geo-political significance because it is situated at the nearest point on land to the Shtokman gas field, which is one of the largest natural gas fields in the world.

The film listens to those who know and live in this place, giving voice to their stories and environments. Changes have always been coming, and more are on the way, but will they bring a better future, and for whom? And what would a better future look like? The film invites speculation, conversation, debate and action.



The Icebreaker is a phantom as well as a central figure of the exhibition. For Russia as it was for the Soviet Union, the icebreaker is a symbol of heroism and the frontier – an object of brute strength encapsulating economic, political, and military strategy. It transforms ecologies on land and at the sea, as well as in the minds of those who encounter it. The icebreaker-building programme is a central part of Russia’s policy to rapidly develop the so-called Northern Sea Route along Russia’s arctic coastline between Asia and Europe.

‘The icebreaker is the future speeded up, as polar ice melts and icebreakers open up sea routes and fossil fuel extraction. The ship helps bring about its own obsolescence. This exhibition uncovers heroic, tragic, comic, and poetic stories of the icebreaker. The exhibition gives voice to people who call the arctic home, and the forces and ideas, and events that resist the world view the the icebreaker represents.’ **Ruth Maclennan**

Maclennan’s exhibition, *Icebreaker Dreaming*, is part of a wider movement to undo prevailing ‘mid-latitude’ clichés of the Arctic seen from afar as untouched pristine nature, with polar bears, idealized or demoralized indigenous peoples, and memories of brave explorers sent to conquer the elements and claim this terra nullius.

The exhibition shows how important the arctic has been and still is as both a place and an idea, for Russia and the Soviet Union: for its enormous natural resources, its geographical location, and for the less obvious role the arctic plays in defining Russia’s place in the world. The exhibition looks at how these meanings are evolving in the context of the current climate emergency.

During the exhibition, Pushkin House will be a stage and a meeting place for exhibiting, describing and interpreting what is going on and what is at stake in the Arctic region today. A series of talks, discussions and performances at Pushkin House will expand on the themes of the exhibition and questions raised by its artworks. Speakers include Michael Bravo, author of *North Pole: Nature and Culture* and Convenor of Circumpolar History and Public Policy Research, and *Histories, Cultures, Environments, Peoples*, Scott Polar Research Institute; Esther Leslie, author of *Liquid Crystals: The Science and Art of a Fluid Form*, and Professor of Political Aesthetics at Birkbeck, University of London, author Charlotte Moore, and Russian actress Natalia Maeva.

Ruth Maclennan studied Russian from the age of twelve and read Modern Languages at Cambridge University before going to art school. She lived in Moscow for a year as an undergraduate, living and working with

artists as the country began to fall apart. She has made several films in the former Soviet Union, trying to understand and interpret what is happening through her friendships, encounters and research. Her inspirations include Russian writers and filmmakers, such as Marina Tsvetaeva and Andrei Platonov, Dziga Vertov, Alexander Dovzhenko, and Andrey Tarkovsky, and the ecological writings of Félix Guattari, and Donna Haraway.

Icebreaker Dreaming continues Maclennan's fieldwork in the Russian arctic begun with Call of North. Through this work she reflects on what climate change means on the ground, and how the geo-political transformations associated with climate change are being experienced and expressed.

The artist:

Ruth Maclennan exhibits widely in exhibitions and film festivals in Europe, USA, Japan, Australia and Central Asia, Korea, Taiwan and Ireland. *Cloudberries*, *Call of North*, and *Hero City* were each filmed in the Russian Arctic, and premiered at the BFI London Film Festival (2014, 2016 and 2019). *Theodosia* was shot in Crimea a year before its annexation by Russia, and soon felt prophetic. It was screened at ICA, London, and in the solo exhibition, *The Faces They Have Vanished*, (ICIA and James Hockey Gallery). *Anarcadia*, made in the steppes of Kazakhstan, was commissioned by FVU and John Hansard Gallery and toured nationally (Ffotogallery, Stills Edinburgh, Castlefield, Manchester), and to Loop, Barcelona. Other exhibitions and projects include *Somewhere Becoming Sea*, (FVU, Hull City of Culture) *Terrapolis*, (French School Athens, White-chapel Gallery), *Interspecies* (Arts Catalyst, Cornerhouse), *State of Mind* at London School of Economics and Archway Polytechnic. Maclennan's films are held in public and private collections, including Wellcome Collection and Centre Pasqu'Art, Biel. She has a PhD in Fine Art from the Royal College of Art on ecological thought and experiences of climate change in northern Russia and Scotland, following her expeditions to the White Sea, and to Orkney and Shetland with *Cape Farewell*. She also has a Masters in Fine Art from Goldsmiths, and in Modern Languages from Cambridge University. LUX Artists' Moving Image distributes her films. (<https://lux.org.uk/artist/ruth-maclennan>)

Ruth Maclennan is currently Research Associate at Scott Polar Institute, Cambridge University. She also teaches Moving Image at Central Saint Martins and Open College of the Arts.



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