

Arctic experience

EXHIBITION

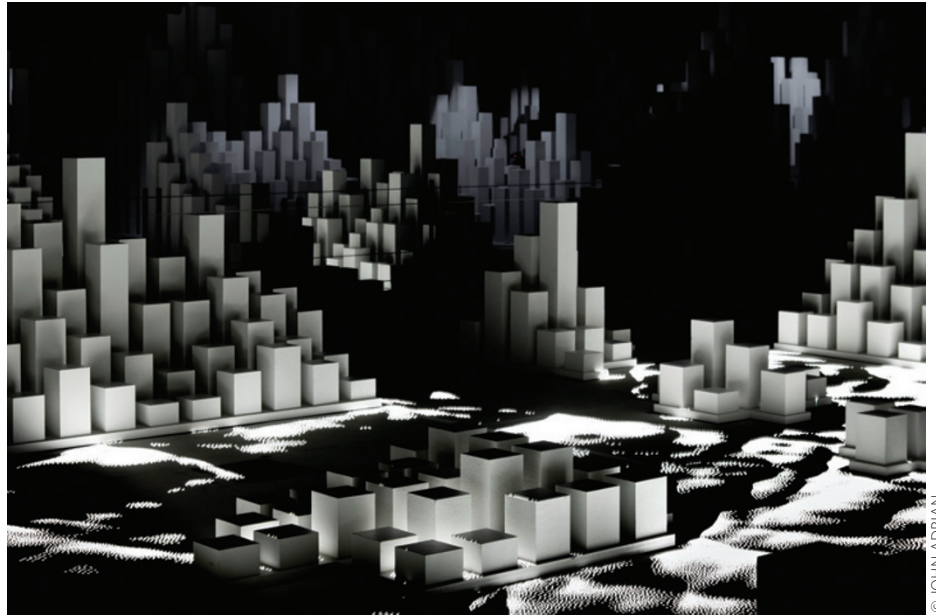
Walking down a dimly lit corridor, with creaking floorboards and sea-like sounds, ultraviolet torch in hand, it is hard not to feel a sense of anticipation on entering *High Arctic*. The exhibition, created by the London-based consortium United Visual Artists following a trip to

the Arctic, is designed to imbue the visitor with a sense of the Arctic landscape and its possible future. It's a tall task, given the complete absence of photographs and text, let alone anything resembling a polar bear.

At first sight, the exhibition seems unremarkable. Clusters of white wooden columns, some short, some tall, fill a plain-looking room. On exposure to ultraviolet light, the name of a Norwegian glacier emerges on each. The novelty wanes after waving the torch over a couple of the columns.

But step inside a little farther, and the exhibit starts to open up. Deep, muffled sounds groan and creak in the background. Scattered voices talk of freezing fog and whale flesh and buried bones. The light brightens, then dims. And the deceptively simple, column-filled room starts to transform into a labyrinth to be explored.

Round each corner a new experience unfolds. Benches, huddled between pillars,



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invite visitors to sit and listen to tales of seafarers and captains and lives lost. A floor teems with specks of light, which shift and swirl around you. After a while, the melodic voice of a man, talking to a loved one back home, starts to sink in. He is going for a walk, on the ice, in the dark. The air seems to chill. All of a sudden it feels like you're in the midst of a great snow storm. In one corner, the usually dulcet tones of the shipping forecast take on a sinister, sad sound: "Synopsis: going, going".

At some point, the cacophony of voices wanes and silence descends. A deep, tremulous sound swells and fills the entire room. A voice, the future, calls "you are in my hands, and I am in yours...we are in this together". When the voices resume, unchanged, they seem to take on a new harmony, like the quiet chanting of monks.

Alone, the component parts of this exhibition could feel quite trite. But together they create the sense of a strange and shifting landscape, and a place long gone. At some points it feels like you are standing in the hull of a great ship, at others like you are perched on the deck of a tiny boat.

Not all parts of the exhibition worked for me, however; particularly those designed to convey the specifics of environmental change in the region. Lacking context, it was hard to decipher what the recitation of a long list of organic pollutants and a tribute to pteropods was meant to convey.

Instead, the beauty of the show lies in the fact that it's there for the taking; be prepared to leave your scepticism at the door, and you'll find a gently inspiring experience. □

REVIEWED BY ANNA ARMSTRONG

■ *High Arctic: Future Visions of a Receding World* is at the National Maritime Museum in London. The exhibition is open from 14 July 2011 to 13 January 2012. Entry: £6.



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