

# As if to Nothing

## Into the Arctic



Although the 'As if to Nothing' series was completed before the New Mexico works, in December it seemed appropriate to offer a 'cold climate' outing. Seeing the Northern Lights is probably on many bucket lists and so a few years ago, we decided to make it happen with a trip to Northern Norway in late January. Getting the right clothing was itself an undertaking as we needed to be able to withstand very low temperatures down to  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ , possibly lower. Plus, seeing the Aurora is – of course – a night-time activity when it's even colder.

We'd chosen Trömso for the start and finish of our trip, had pre-booked an Aurora 'chaser' as a guide for two night-time excursions, and booked a cabin on the Hurtigruten boat (Trömso to Kirkenes) for the middle section of our stay within the Arctic. Apart from the Northern Lights, my other priority was to spend time in the landscape, travelling with sleds and huskies, and luckily, my husband James was up for that. It had been hard to make a choice before leaving, so on arrival, our priority was to find and book this element of our trip – and find the best places to eat, as seafood is abundant in this part of the world.

## Her Quiet Materials

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White fence, blue light, rusty nails

Our first full day was spent exploring Trömso itself. A beautiful little town with a lovely harbour area, super old half-timbered buildings and a glass cathedral that glowed on the top of the hillside. But the best thing was the light – or perhaps I should say - dimness. Trömso is surrounded by hills and ocean, sitting in a ‘bowl’. During our visit there, the sun had only just begun to show itself above the hills in the east/south for about 2 hours a day, a cause of great joy for the locals involving a fair amount of celebratory drinking. But the absence of the sun didn’t mean it was dark all of the time. Instead, the light had a strange, blue-grey quality, which is accurately reflected in some of the images. After a decent late-afternoon nap, we met our Aurora Borealis guide and set off in to the hinterland.



Fire and ice.



## Her Quiet Materials

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Aurora landscape.

Beautiful to be out in that landscape at night, but we quickly learned that what the naked eye can see of the Aurora is very different to what you see in a photograph. The professionals leave the shutter open for 10 to 15 seconds, allowing the lens to suck in and capture more than the naked eye actually sees, plus, our viewings were hampered by a full moon. However, we decided that seeing the landscape under the silvery light of that full moon was even more rewarding than the Aurora.

The next day was spent in the wilderness. Our dogs were Siberian Huskies and therefore different from the Alaskan Malamute; small, wiry (a little like a working Collie), blue-eyed and very affectionate. A good, fit team can run for 150km without stopping – not that we went that far.

Learning how to drive a sled isn't that hard. Learning to hang on if you fall off is a rather different matter as once running, the dogs don't want to stop and there's not much the passenger can do as there are no reins. Instead, the driver (to begin with, James) has to hang on and be dragged until a snow-plough effect on a prone body slows the dogs down enough for a grab-and-dig-in of the snow anchor – the only thing that will actually bring the dogs to a halt. All very hilarious but the dogs do give you backward glances as if to say "sort yourselves out, let's get going again". As the driver you quickly learn to find your balance, jumping off and running for the uphill climbs then leaping back on again - which meant you soon got warm whereas as a passenger, all you need to do is sit and enjoy.



Raring to go

The ride is exhilarating; cold, cold air (every part of you is covered, apart from your eyes), the panting of the dogs, the squeak of the snow and the pristine, blue-grey landscape unfurling around you. Sometimes nothing as far as the eye could see apart from a horizon line of distant hills or a lone, wind-blasted tree, skeletal against the snow. All great inspirations for work. We were sad to say goodbye to the dogs but knew we'd have a second opportunity after our boat trip to Kirkenes.



# Her Quiet Materials

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Arctic texture.



'Arctic Boundary'. Cotton, acrylic paint & ink, hand stitch. 138cm wide x 61cm tall.

## Her Quiet Materials

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We boarded our Hurtigruten boat the following morning. Essentially ferries, these boats originally delivered vital supplies and mail to the further-flung towns and outposts along the north-west Norwegian coast and fjords. Now they also carry tourists, but the delivery of supplies is still vital, particularly in winter. Seeing the land from the ocean was superb; great un-occupied, bleak terrain, again all tinged with the strange blue light of the arctic in winter. Arrival in a port after full dark was gorgeous, as all Norwegian homes seem to have no curtains. Instead, many windows have lights (now electric, once candle light) that reflect back into the room and twinkle in a welcoming fashion to those outside.



Another kind of Northern lights.

In most instances, the stay in port was short and swift; just enough time to off-load supplies and take on other goods, or rubbish that can't be disposed of locally. Time was allowed for a good walk in Honningsvåg and this gave us the chance to experience a different landscape: the dusky, milky colours of the timber buildings, the collecting and crusting of snow on wooden boards and wire fences, half-buried dilapidated sheds on the edge of the village, snowy railings and snowy roofs. All beautiful in the strange light.

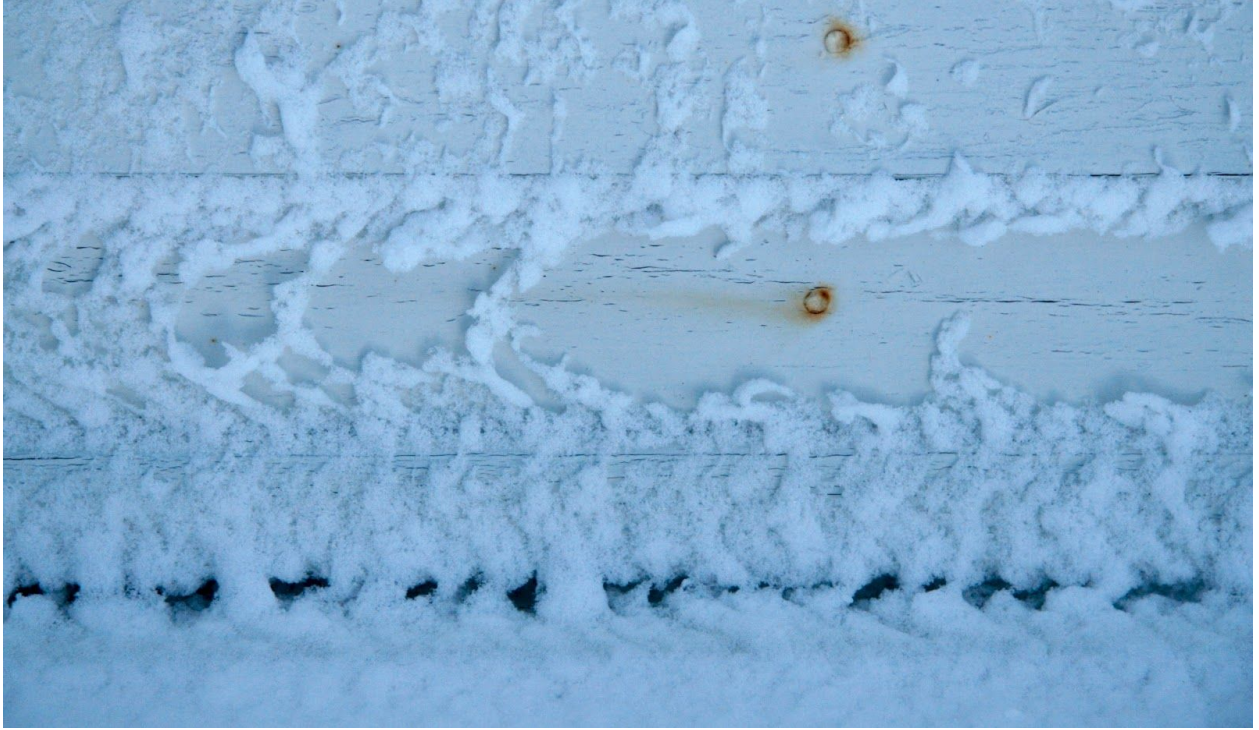


White snow, blue line.



# Her Quiet Materials

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Snow lace.

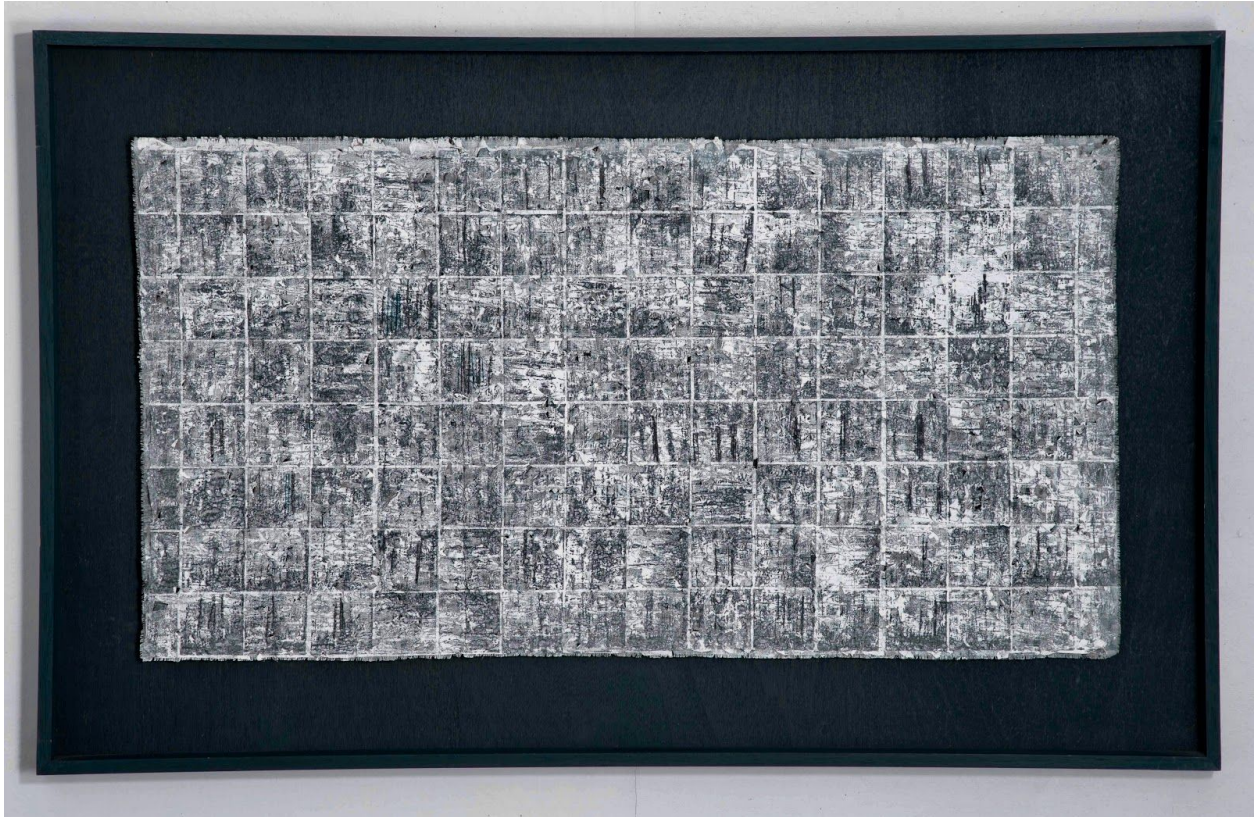


'Barren Arctic', detail. Linen, thread, tissue paper, acrylic paint, hand stitch.



## Her Quiet Materials

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'Barren Arctic'. Framed size 95cm x 50cm.

Passengers can choose to hear an “Aurora!” call from the crew at night and so for both our on-board nights, we got out of our warm beds, bundled up, grabbed a hot drink and went up on deck to watch the Aurora. Somehow more magical at sea, and the sight of the snow-covered landscape under the silvery light of the full moon was again a real added bonus. It also snowed, and watching the ocean through falling snow is a magical thing.



'Ocean', detail. Cotton, acrylic paint, India Ink.

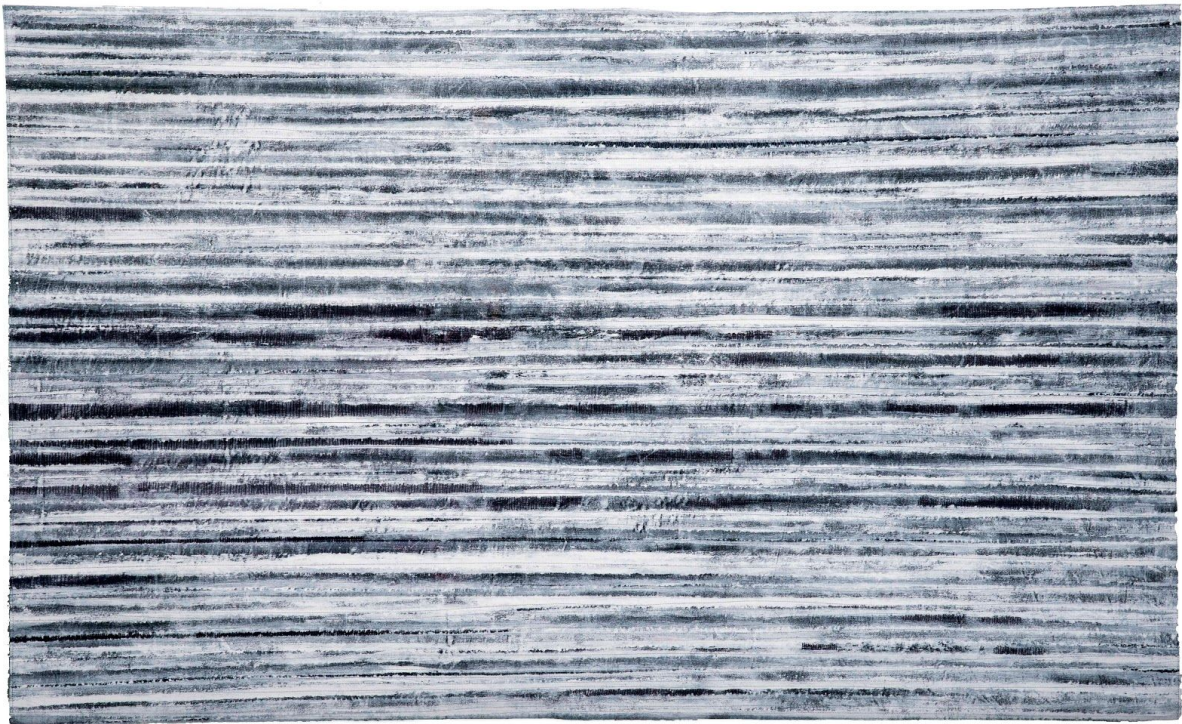


## Her Quiet Materials

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Our final Hurtigruten stop was Kirkenes, followed by a short flight back to Trömso. Having seen great Aurora out at sea, we cancelled our second booking of night-driving, preferring to be awake during the day to spend more time with a different team of huskies and enjoy a snowshoe walk followed by a traditional lunch in front of a roaring wood stove. Trömso itself still offered much and our last day was spent pottering around visiting museums and galleries (and eating!). We were surprised by the number of art and craft shops for such a small town. But, the dark winter is long and the locals like to be occupied, so there was plenty of good art and craft to be enjoyed.

It was exhilarating to have been able to spend time inside the Arctic Circle. This cold wilderness offers so much; the silence of the snow, the cleanness and crispness of the air, the monochromatic, pure vistas, the textural details and the light. All of the work I made (five large, 4 medium and 12 small) used acrylic media on under-painted drill cotton (my old drop cloths), or linen. I needed a lot of white and wanted the physical properties of acrylic to get some of the crusty effects, which in some cases, I also achieved through the use of tissue paper, thread and stitch. After sampling a range of greys, I ultimately settled on using less blue in the mix as it seemed too 'pretty' and tended to alter the character of the underpainting too much.



'Arctic Tundra', cotton, acrylic paint, machine and hand stitch. 142x87cm.

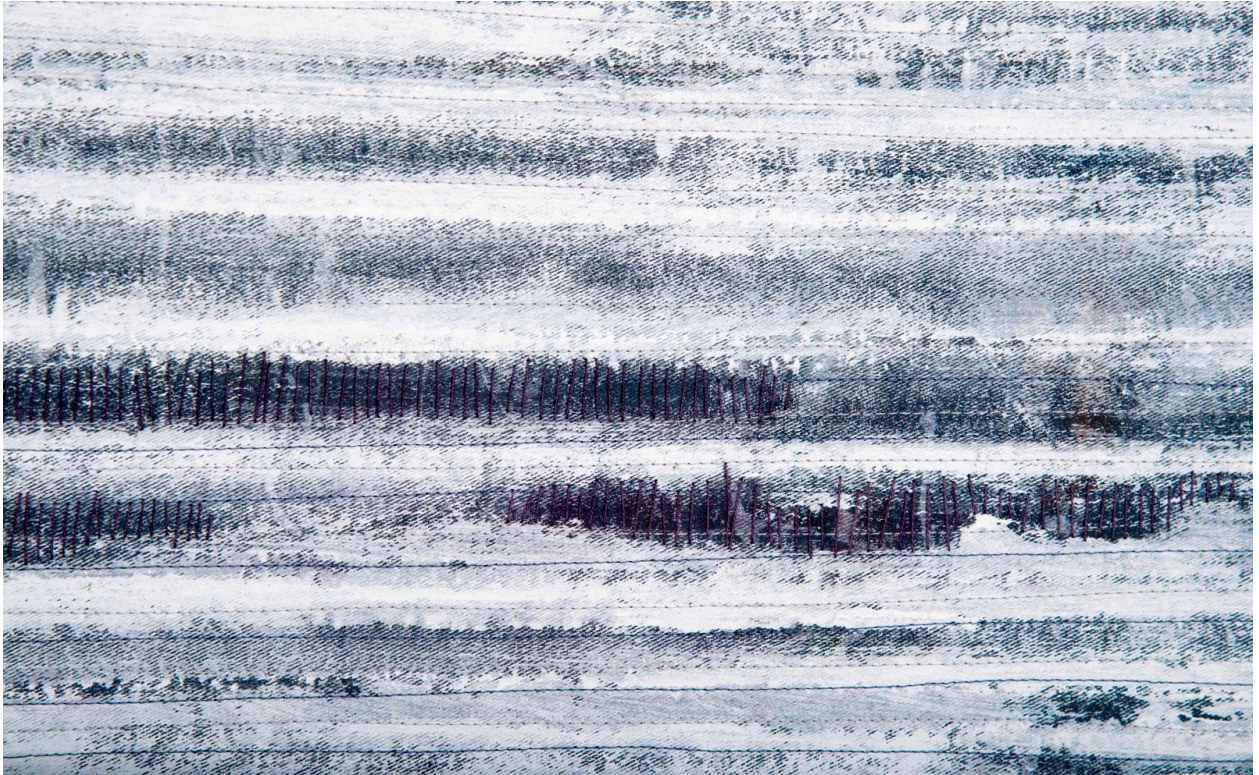


# Her Quiet Materials

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Textured shoreline.



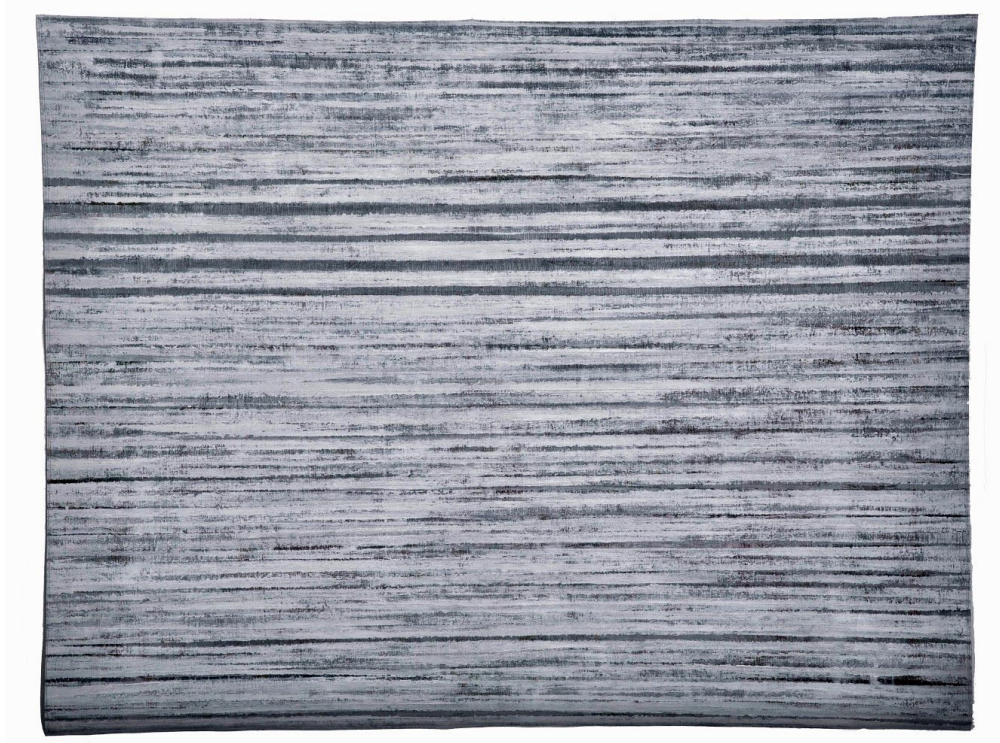
'Arctic Tundra', detail.

I'm sure we'll want to re-visit the Arctic again. Perhaps next time we'll venture to Finland and spend time with the Sami and their reindeer herds..., and I've heard Helsinki is a super place to spend some time.

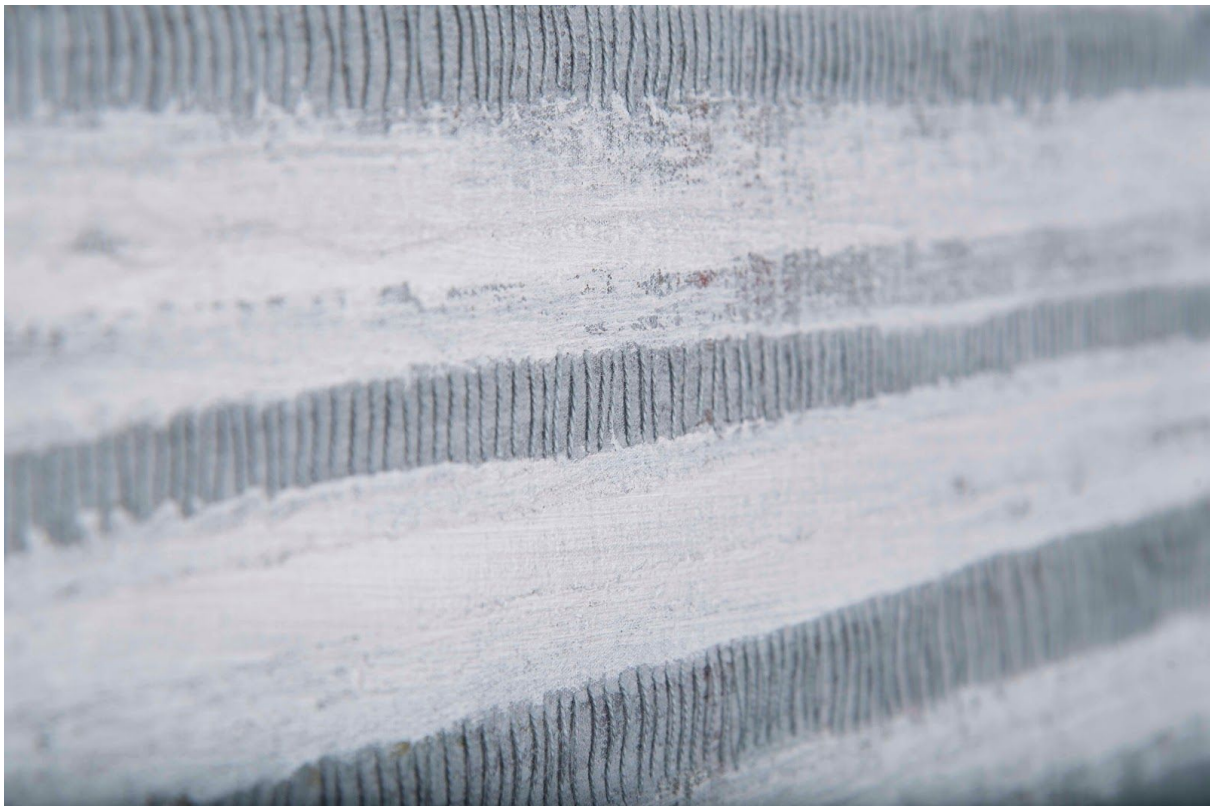


# Her Quiet Materials

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'Arctic', cotton, acrylic paint, machine and hand stitch. 175 x 120cm.



'Arctic', detail.