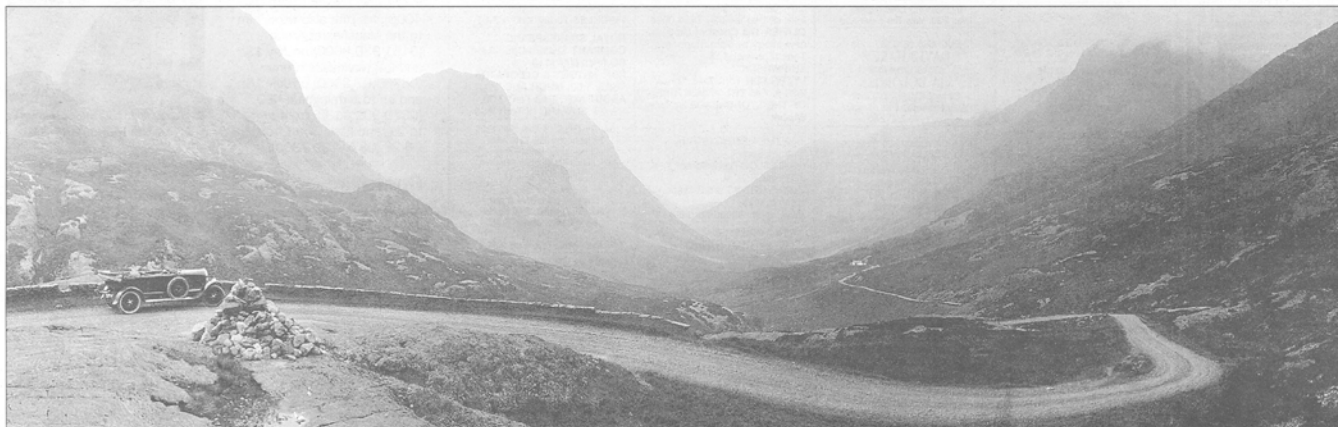


# arts



Mist in Glencoe by Alfred Hind Robinson in 1925. The Scarborough photographer became one of the earliest masters of panoramic photography using a camera that covered an angle of 142 degrees

Whatever its merits as a social utility, the aeroplane has surely been a great aesthetic success. Flight has provided men and women with a sumptuous feast for the eyes, a knowledge of the earth as thrilling and exhilarating as any poet has ever promised.

Lindbergh and Saint-Exupéry flew so they might see the earth. Since then, photographers have taken to the skies to capture the details and patterns of the landscape to enrich our knowledge of the world.

One of them is James Finlay, who set off for the Arctic in March as part of the expedition party preparing for David Mill's planned solo walk to the North Pole. Mill subsequently had to be airlifted out, having built his own runway on the ice, but Finlay was luckier. "I had two weeks in the Arctic while preparations were going on, taking photographs of this extraordinarily powerful landscape, both from a plane and on foot," he says. "It was one of the most exhilarating and challenging experiences of my life."

The stunning images that Finlay captured on film are now part of *Alter Vista*, an exhibition at the Getty Images Gallery. The show contrasts Finlay's evocations of some of the remotest regions of the world with the sublime photographs of Alfred Hind Robinson, taken a century earlier, of some of the most beautiful remote landscapes of Britain. At the time those regions were as far beyond the reach of most people as the North Pole is to most of us today. The combination in one exhibition of the work of these two photographers, separated by 100 years of globe-shrinking technological development, is startling and original.

Much of Finlay's work was shot in colour, and the results are extraordinary: panoramic images of glassy blues and

## A chilling beauty



**PHOTOGRAPHY** A century apart, two landscape photographers have been pioneers of their times. Their images of isolation are startling, finds **Joanna Pitman**

greens, vast boulders of ice the size of three-storey buildings stretching out into the terrifying vastness of the Arctic Ocean. The weight of ice shifting and cracking is almost audible and the sense of emptiness is overpowering.

Even in the muggy warmth of a London gallery in July the crisp, sharp cold from these photographs hits you like a blast. But it is nothing to the shock Finlay experienced. "The cold was like something I had never imagined," he says. "It was minus 50C and your lungs take a while to adjust at that temperature, let alone everything else. I could barely see through my

face mask and I managed 30 seconds without gloves before my fingers just seized up. In the end I had to wear two or three pairs of gloves, which meant I could use only one roll of film per camera because I couldn't change the film. And the film became incredibly brittle in the cold, cracking like dry leaves, so I had to be very careful with it.

"We had to carry shotguns because polar bears were a constant threat. But it was breath-taking. The total lack of recognisable sound, the wonderful expanse of scenery and the colours and textures were utterly astonishing."

Finlay is an impressive techni-

cian but he also has a strong graphic sense, and he takes a genuine intuitive delight in the ambiguity of visual form. A pair of topographical shots in black and white pick out the winding patterns the wind has carved on to the ice, abstract ripples that look like cascading silk, or acres of sand dunes sculpted into sharp-edged forms — monuments of nature untouchable by mere mortals.

Finlay's work is strongly flavoured by the dreamy beauty and romance of isolation. So is Robinson's, too, in an entirely different way. A little known but highly gifted amateur photographer from Scarbor-

**Alter Vista**  
Getty Images Gallery  
★★★★☆

ough, Robinson specialised in panoramic photography and became one of the earliest masters of this difficult craft. Using a hand-cranked camera, which covered an angle of 142 degrees, he managed to take images that have a wider perspective than the human eye can see.

Working under black focusing cloths which hid not only his face but also, it seemed,

his magic secrets, Robinson travelled to some of the remotest corners of Britain, recording scenery that few had seen.

His shot of the Pass at Glencoe seems to encompass the yawning width of this wild glen and its misty depths as far as the eye can see. And his composition of the Giant's Causeway, taken in 1910, gives us a breadth of vision that is almost hallucinogenic, a real work-out for the eyes, as we take in the layers of hexagonal columns, the receding promontories of dark cliffs behind and the diminutive white cottage at the far right. He sold a few of his images to British railway companies for display in their first-class carriages, but Robinson regarded his photography as one of his hobbies, along with shooting and fishing.

While Finlay used a Nikon 35mm camera and a Hasselblad 503, a traditional box camera, for his work in the Arctic, Robinson was working with a Panoram No 4, a bulky and very heavy piece of equipment which projected the image on to glass plates. The use of this equipment for panoramic images required a mastery of technical and compositional complexities that was far beyond the abilities of most amateurs. As he travelled the country searching for vistas unseen, Robinson would have smelled of chemicals, his fingernails probably black to the cuticle, and surrounded by an aura of esoteric alchemy.

When he died in Scarborough in 1950 at the age of 85, his obituary mentioned his time with the 11th Hussars and his experience as a magistrate, but never mentioned his photography. Finlay and Robinson have produced beautiful, evocative images that were pioneering in their own lifetimes. Their work provides us with very individual evocations of our own most startling dreams.

● *Alter Vista*, Getty Images Gallery, 3 Jubilee Place, London SW3 (020-7376 4525), July 11 to August 24.



The First Pressure Ridge, Arctic Ocean, photographed by James Finlay this year: "The sense of emptiness is overpowering"