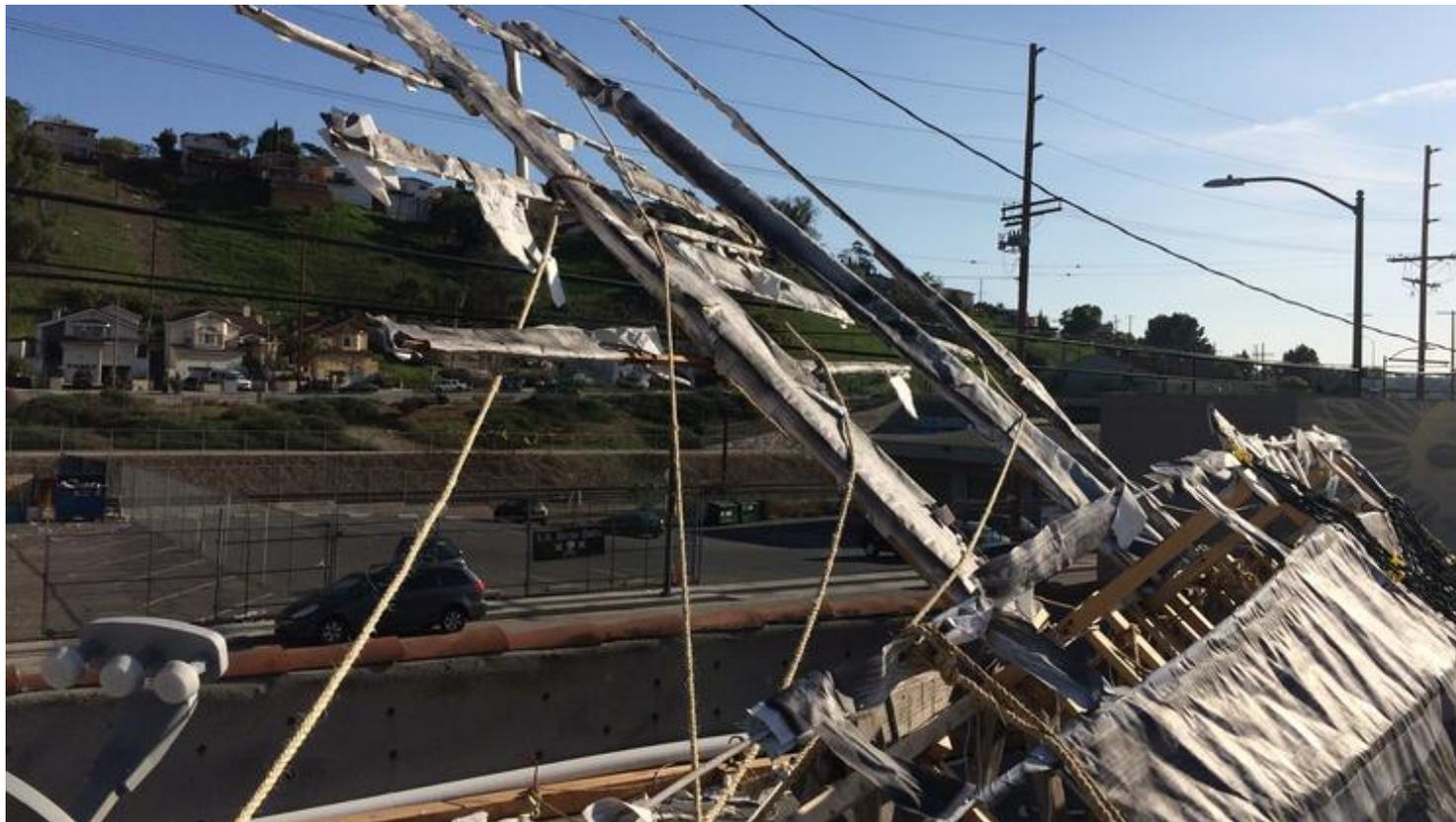


# The artist who re-created South Pole explorer Ernest Shackleton's doomed ship on an El Sereno roof



On a gallery's rooftop in El Sereno, artist Jim Ovelmen has built a ship sculpture in honor of South Pole explorer Ernest Shackleton. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)



By **Carolina A. Miranda** · Contact Reporter

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**W**alk along Alhambra Avenue in El Sereno, past a storage company, a car wash, a motel, and you might come across an unexpected site: the profile of a listing wooden exploration ship on the roof of a stout, gray industrial building.

The ship is an artistic re-creation of the famous *Endurance*, the ship that belonged to South Pole explorer Ernest Shackleton. The building is home to [AWOL gallery](#), an artist-run space that opened on this industrial stretch late last summer.

The whole curious sight is an installation by Los Angeles artist [Jim Ovelmen](#). (He and his partner, Nicole Wang, run AWOL.) Using wood and paper and artfully placed Styrofoam — a stand-in for Antarctica's mountains of snow — Ovelmen has crafted a surreal tribute to Shackleton's doomed ship.

Down in the gallery, a chandelier, made out of wire and paper, as well as a club chair, give the room the feel of an early explorer's club. There is also a periscope, which provides video views of the ship. This video feed is also projected onto one wall — in a purposely degraded format that gives the footage a grainy, early 20th century newsreel look.

The artist says that he has always been struck by the historic images of Shackleton's ship, which was engulfed and eventually crushed by sea ice early in 1915 as he attempted to cross Antarctica, forcing all of the explorers aboard to take to the ice for more than a year in an epic quest to survive.

"It's the iconography," says Ovelmen. "Seeing this beautiful ship with ice clinging to its ropes — this austere, beautiful ice painting."

Since mid-December, the artist's sculpture (which was made in collaboration with architect Mehran Ayati) has sat on the roof, weathering El Niño wind and rain. And the last few weeks, Ovelmen and Ayati's piece has been partially transformed by East L.A. street artist [Mondo Bobadilla](#) (known as Mondo 59420).

"I thought it felt appropriate to put it out there and let people react to it," says Ovelmen, "to destroy it, to bomb it."

Bobadilla is also intrigued by Shackleton and the tale of his near-death.

"It's this incredible story of exploration," he says. "He is someone who is willing to take up this challenge that may lead to his demise or a lot of suffering."

On Saturday night, AWOL hosts a reception to celebrate Phase 2 of the project.

Ovelmen has long been intrigued by [the story of Shackleton](#). (This is the second time he has resurrected the Endurance. The first was in 2002, at the now-defunct London Street Projects in Silver Lake.)

For one, he is captivated by Shackleton's stunning failure, which gave the explorer greater renown than if he had succeeded. (Roald Amundsen, the Norwegian explorer who was the first to reach the South Pole, never quite captured the public imagination in the same way.)

"He's a great metaphor for an artist," says Ovelmen of Shackleton. "He failed, but he nonetheless went

on the journey. The mystique and the ability to refute common sense and reality — only artists and explorers do that."

The piece also offers him the opportunity to imagine what may have been going through Shackleton's mind as he and his fellow explorers struggled to survive on Antarctic ice floes for months on end. As part of this, Ovelmen is using the sculpture as a set for a film he is creating titled "Shackleton Hallucinates."

"If you were trapped on sea ice for a year and a half, what kinds of hallucinations would you have?" says Ovelmen. "What would you do to not go crazy? After a year and a half, I imagine your dreams and nightmares might become one."

Certainly, the piece has its hallucinatory elements. The day I arrive at the gallery, a young woman is standing next to the wreck in a bird mask. With a lever, she controls a winch that leads to the paper chandelier in the gallery below, swinging it up and down and side to side, as if the entire gallery were a creaking sailing ship.

But Ovelmen has an interest in Shackleton that goes beyond the hardships and romance of exploration travel.

"In a way, he represents the most innocent form of colonization," says Ovelmen. "There was 'nothing' there. It was just ice and penguins. But as we always learn, there's always 'something' there."

The piece is Ovelmen's way of acknowledging his own presence as a white artist in historically Mexican El Sereno — at a time in which there are growing concerns about gentrification and displacement on L.A.'s Eastside.

"Artists can be quite negligent about the privilege they have," he says. "Often, they too act like explorers and discoverers — what [some] call 'Columbusing' ... I thought it'd be perfect to put Shackleton in the crucible of this."

Through [El Sereno Community Arts](#) he met Bobadilla, who is a native of neighboring East Los Angeles.

Bobadilla, who has been painting on and off the street since he was a kid, welcomed the opportunity to collaborate on the Shackleton piece. Not only was he intrigued by the story of the explorer, he liked the symbolism of one artist turning his work over to another.

"He was really open," says Bobadilla of Ovelmen. "His choice to do this was to act a bit vulnerable."

To the rooftop, Bobadilla has already added a mural that features the downtown Los Angeles skyline along with the word "LOVE." The artist will be repurposing Ovelmen's Styrofoam snow into building

blocks for a pyramid-shaped structure.

"If the ship represents the pioneer," he says, "then the pyramid represents the indigenous part, the local geography."

Ovelmen says Bobadilla has carte blanche for the show. "I have no idea what he is going to do," he says. "That is really exciting to me."

Bobadilla, for his part, finds himself continuously inspired by the story of the ill-fated Antarctic explorer. "Everything was against them," he says. "But no matter what he was facing, he never gave up — even in the direst straits."

*"Being Ernest Shackleton — El Sereno (In Two Phases)" is on view at AWOL gallery through March 5. On Saturday, the gallery will hold a rooftop play and hip-hop performance at 8:30 p.m.; doors open at 7 p.m. 4937 Alhambra Ave., El Sereno, [awolimited.com](http://awolimited.com).*

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