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An Interview with Kim Keever

by Kirsten Anderson Posted on November 2, 2011



Artist [Kim Keever](#)'s luminous, strangely affecting images are on display this month at [David BSmith Gallery](#). A former painter, Keever used his back round as an engineer to instead start creating 3D landscape "sets" built inside a giant fish tank. He then fills the tank with water, lights it with varying light sources, and then adds plumes of pigment and other ephemera to create cloud and fog effects. Once the scene is set he photographs the tank as the pigments roil like coffee cream clouds, and then exhibits the results. The effect is that of an enigmatic, quite painterly scene that evokes not only the great landscape painters of the 19th century, but also conversely brings to mind primordial alien worlds that are similar enough to ours to look familiar, yet are also different and artificial enough to cause a slight yet fascinating discordance when viewing. The artist recently talked with Hi Fructose about his compelling work. – [Kirsten Anderson](#)

Your work is landscaped based- what is it that you find compelling about capturing landscapes (vs figurative work, say). Your work is particularly compelling in that each scene looks familiar and yet otherworldly at the same time. Some of your earlier work almost looks like scenes shot on different planets...I was curious as to what your thoughts were behind creating these pristine, semi- alien landscapes were?

Funny you should ask because in the last year I haven't made as many landscapes. I made two versions of a head and shoulders figure and a dog in a prone position. Getting back to the original question, I have always loved the landscape just as a beautiful place to be. Though a lot has been written about my early childhood and my having spent my early years in a rural and picturesque landscape, my earlier artwork was mainly about figure in the landscape. For the last 15 years I have concentrated on the landscape. I've always loved museums and I remember very well going to museums as a child and looking at European and American landscape paintings and feeling a real kinship with them but always thinking it would be too academic to make work that had any serious connection.

This all changed when I realized I was terribly bored with painting and could go my own way. I always remember a show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York which contrasted Braque and Picasso. Since the paintings were right next to each other and you could easily follow the timeline, you could see that both artists were neck and neck in the invention of Cubism. By the end of the show which continued into Synthetic Cubism and beyond, you could see that the energy in Braque's work (he continued with Synthetic Cubism) was fading and Picasso's work was reaching new heights by taking other directions. It made me realize that when you're really bored with what you're doing it's time to change.

My original photography work started in 1991 and involved tabletop models that appeared to be on a planet without an atmosphere. I was satisfied with this look and the concept changed abruptly when I realized I could get a landscape photograph with a more realistic defused light by submerging everything in a water filled aquarium. It eventually occurred to me that what defuses the light in the atmosphere is mainly water vapor. Since water vapor acts like a gas, its "liquid state" would be water. So with my 2 feet of water from the front of the aquarium to the back of the aquarium, I must be capturing miles and miles of atmosphere in a compressed scale, that is. This started to make a lot of sense to me because I had read about fractals and how they occur in many aspects of nature. I noticed that as the liquid paint (which I use for clouds) flows around in the tank it often resembles real clouds. This makes yet another suggestion of fractals, where small systems in nature or math mimic large systems or vice versa.

I think the reason there is in otherworldly quality to my work is perhaps because most of us are familiar with dioramas, especially ones we might have seen as children in museums of natural history or in dollhouses for that matter. You could also think of the otherworldly quality of watching insects move around outside. We see these other worlds as children and I think it is at that time of life we learn to absorb the idea of pretend places where we can allow our imaginations to wander. Since we don't have anyone who has been to another world, these constructed dioramas I make are pretend places too. Since all of my work is made up of materials on a small scale that mimic the real world, it's easy to see how the suggestion of other worlds comes about. My earlier work appears to be more other planetary because there are no appearances of life. Clouds exist but there are no noticeable green plants and no animals. It's not until 2002 that plants and trees emerge in my landscapes.



The Hudson River school is often invoked in discussing your work- do you agree with that comparison? What influenced you visually in your evolution as an artist leading to where you are now?

The Hudson River school is the main reference I hear about my work though I also hear the names of William Turner and Caspar David Friedrich. I'm fine with that comparison. Though I also like to think of the work as having a conceptual bent (which is occasionally mentioned) the reference to these 19th century artists with my own conceptual method of using mainly common materials to compose a photograph gives my work quite a range of relationships.

Your work definitely has a timeless, almost utopian quality. Is that deliberate?

The timeless quality is certainly something I try to achieve. I try to make generalized landscapes that could relate to millions of years in the past or now or well into the future. I do this by limiting any reference to people or constructions by people. Some people believe this is a crucial missing element. Sometimes the work is viewed as catastrophic because there are no people. I have even been asked if I was a misanthrope. I am not. But whenever I go into the real landscape, I try to find places where everything is as natural as it might be if there were no people around. For me this is a beautiful feeling I can very much enjoy since I never allow myself to get too far from the restaurants and the air conditioning. I guess that doesn't make me much of an adventurer but I'm not particularly interested in walking from A to B in the shortest amount of time. I would just as soon find a quiet place away from the crowds, sit down, and look and listen.

In terms of a utopian quality is related to the natural world, I would say yes, there is that feeling in the work of beauty for beauty's sake, which suggests an ideal world. This contrasts with some of the images that are inherently beautiful but have intentional surface flaws which relate to algae growing on the inside of the tank or various remains that don't get cleaned off when the tank is refilled. This is another reason why the work is sometimes called catastrophic. If the work is utopian and catastrophic at the same time, I am very pleased. Sometimes I look at great paintings in a museum and note the craquelure and other flaws in the work and imagine what a great painting it must have been at one time. I sometimes want people to look at my work and have that same feeling. A feeling that if only the surface was clear, there must be something very beautiful beneath it.



Has your background as an engineer been helpful in creating the tanks? How much trial and error happens or do you pretty much know what will happen with each “effect” you introduce into a tank?

Yes, having an engineering background has certainly been helpful. I can quickly and inexpensively build things that will hold up for as long as I need them to. If you learn anything as an engineer, you learn to analyze problems in the real world and think about how the issues can be resolved. There is plenty of trial and error in what I do. There is a lot of experimentation in terms of moving things around in the tank, changing colored gels on the lights, moving the lights around, and getting streams of paint into the water. I always start off with a general idea of what the piece will be and then let it go its own way so to speak. The way the paint spreads through the water is relatively uncontrollable in any case. But this is really what I like. I want a lot of random qualities. I think it's the randomness that makes the work more interesting. Of course these qualities don't always come out so there are hundreds of photos taken to get an interesting piece. Each photo is like a quick drawing and the more photos I have, the more there is to choose from. How long does it take to create a landscape so it's ready to be photographed? Do you have a set idea of what you are hoping to see or do you allow things to happen as they may? I often think of ideas for several years and finish building the model within a week. Then I'll take photographs for up to six months with just a few final shots in the end.

Kim Keever's exhibition runs through November 19th at David B Smith in Denver.

