Kim Keever: Fluid Dynamics

Photographer Kim Keever exploits the properties of paint and water in his enigmatic creations.

For nearly 177 years, photography and painting have been engaged in a complicated but ultimately fruitful relationship. They started out feeling threatened by each other: Painting wondered, will photography put me out of a job? Photography wondered, will the art critics ever take me seriously? Today, those questions are, if not resolved, at least less urgent, and the two media have drawn so close that they often seem to merge. We have paintings that look like photographs and photographs that look like paintings. Among the contributors to the contemporary art world's boundary-breaking experimentation in media, Kim Keever has hit on something truly unique—a photographic art in which paint itself is both the medium and the subject.

Kim Keever, Abstract 10166, 2014;





The New York-based artist's latest series of large-scale C-prints depicts amazing microcosms of swirling color and form that could just as easily be abstract paintings as abstractions found in nature, like Stieglitz's "Equivalents." The color combinations vary from soothing consistency to outrageous contrast. Contemplating Keever's pictures, the viewer may see flowers blooming, landscapes above or below the sea, mushroom clouds, or storms in the atmosphere of another planet. The overall impression is one of vastness—aided by the fact that the photos are printed large, on glossy sheets 44 inches across—but actually, as Keever is happy to disclose, the action all unfolds inside a tabletop fish tank. The artist pours paints into it and, using a digital Hasselblad camera, photographs the pigments as they diffuse through the water, interacting with each other in countless, ultimately unpredictable ways.

Keever has control over the choice of colors, the lighting, and of course the moment of exposure. He also has created a mirrored backdrop inside the tank on which he can make marks with paint before the water goes in. Other than that, though, he relinquishes control and lets the laws of physics go to work. Sometimes the clouds of suspended paint come together to form something wonderful; other times, nothing much gels. Keever delights in the unpredictability. "It's all random," he says. "There are just so many possibilities. It goes its own way, and I have no control once I've poured in the paint. You can't stir it or it just goes to mud." When the paint is "flowing nicely," he says, he'll keep up a steady pace of shots; the day I visited his studio, in an East Village walkup, the shutter clicked about once every two seconds for a minute or two.

In general, Keever approaches his work with the wide eyes of an explorer. "There's a dialectic in this between solid form and randomness, and you can get this 'how the hell did that happen' effect. These forms are so strange, which is what I'm always after. They're mesmerizing to watch." Not surprisingly, Keever has scientific training; he got his degree in thermal engineering and briefly practiced the profession before becoming an artist. He thinks about what goes on in his tank in terms of the science of fluid dynamics (the physical laws that govern how liquids behave) and Brownian motion (the random motion of particles suspended in a liquid, caused by collisions on the molecular and atomic levels). But if the behavior of his raw materials is random, the choice of which configuration to isolate and turn into an artwork is anything but.

At first Keever was a painter, concentrating on landscape, a genre to which he feels a deep connection (born in Manhattan and raised mainly in Chicago, he lived on a farm on the Eastern Shore of Virginia for a few formative years as a child). However, he says, "I got bored with painting and was surfing around in my mind, trying to find something else. I started making tabletop models of landscapes, but couldn't get any atmosphere. Everything looked like Mars." A friend of his was throwing out an old tank, and that gave Keever an idea. He thought back to something his father showed him when he was a little boy—the way Carnation condensed milk behaves when poured into a glass of water. "Suddenly it made sense to me to take it all and put it in the tank," he recalls. "The water disperses the light in a way that a landscape does. Water is compressed vapor, which is what we see when we look across the landscape. Maybe I'm compressing all that space and moisture into those two feet of the tank."

After the tank-immersed landscape dioramas, Keever made some geology-influenced constructions, such as a mountain that eroded over time under water, which he photographed in progressive stages of decay. He then did the same for a sculpture of a human head, which perished similarly. Lately, he's been experimenting with placing still life elements in the tank and letting the paints swirl around them. One of these was recently commissioned by The New Yorker, as an illustration for an article about edible seaweed. "They brought this big bag of seaweed from Connecticut," says the artist, "and I just put it in the tank." The result looks like the "forest primeval" displaced to the floor of the ocean. Keever also did a record-album commission last year; he did the design and illustration for indie-rock neo-folk musician Joanna Newsom's Diver, which includes several tipped-in miniature versions of Keever's most recent series of paint photographs. His works also appear in Newsom's video for the album, directed by Paul Thomas Anderson (of The Master and Boogie Nights fame).

Keever's work has often been compared to that of the Hudson River School and German Romantics such as Caspar David Friedrich, but he is more inclined to cite Cindy Sherman and Roxy Paine as influences. He accepts the comparisons to classic landscape painters, but says, "It was more accidental; they just came out that way. My work basically came out of my own head." He recalls, "When I was a kid, I would draw and sometimes copy things, and my dad would sort of shame me and tell me not to copy. I always wanted to make something new, and once I started working with tank, I felt I had reached the point where I was."

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Author: Art & Antiques Magazine | Publish Date: March 2016