

Title: Thomas Joshua Cooper | Climate change

Summary: In this episode, Thomas Joshua Cooper describes his experiences of witnessing the effect of climate change in person.

Duration: 13:28

Contributors: Photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper and Curator Anne Lyden.

Transcript

Thomas Joshua Cooper

My pictures are if you will just about rocks and trees and bits of ice but that's what they picture. But their intent and their purpose is to picture through those things as metaphors which I realise is a dangerous word to say out loud. Something more about what it is and what is at stake about being a human in the early part of the twenty-first century. And believe me the world is changing.

Anne Lyden

Over the course of the last three decades, Thomas Joshua Cooper has circumnavigated the globe making photographs of the most extreme points and locations surrounding the Atlantic Ocean. The result is an episodic journey that covers five continents. He has set foot on uncharted land masses, contributing to cartography and earning him naming rights of previously unknown islands and archipelagos.

I'm Anne Lyden, curator of an exhibition of Cooper's work at the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh.

Anne Lyden

When Cooper set out to do this project thirty odd years ago we didn't even have the term climate crisis. And now we know that the reality is that every single cardinal point he recorded over the last three decades will be under water within 35 years as a result of the impact of our changing climate. I asked the photographer to describe his experiences of witnessing the effect of climate change in person.

Thomas Joshua Cooper

So I've seen it. I became friendly with the senior cartographer at the Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World and by the late 90s he for some reason he liked my pictures and he loved the idea. I was in Bishopbriggs which I used to go with Kate once every five or six months just to learn stuff from these guys. They know so much stuff and he took me aside and he said: 'you know, Mr Cooper you may be the first but you will certainly not be the last

person in the world to do this kind of project' and I was taking a back. I didn't know what he was talking about. He said 'the world's changing, the world's getting warmer'. The map of the world which of course is what the Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World is entirely about is changing. And he said to me definitively, and this was in the late 1990s, that every single cardinal point of every continent that I worked on would, within his estimation, in 35 years be underwater and that the map that we know of the world would no longer be recognisable as the map that the Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World drew.

I was stunned and he also told me that 95% of cartography now is done via satellite. There is no contact but I have contacted. I have physically touched every one of these sites and that physical touch is part of the human quality that is brought to the spaces that I make pictures in. I circumnavigate them. I look at them. I try and find a place to make a single picture, to become acquainted through the picture-making process with a space and in a place well enough that I can, and I mean this very intensively with the greatest humility, literally ask the place for the patience to put up with me while I make this one picture. I never take any pictures. That's theft as far as I'm concerned of the most notorious kind and I would rather actually shoot myself with a gun than shoot a picture.

So there is no theft and there is no death but there is a very purposeful request to become acquainted. I'm interested in acquaintanceship and how that might be established between what seems to be non-sentient circumstances. Although, perhaps because I'm probably an animist at heart, I believe that everything has a living quality to it.

But the approach to sight requires some kind of permission from sight to be anything other than abusive. So I spend time and try and not irritate whatever is there to make some kind of acquaintanceship and through that acquaintanceship establish some kind of familiarity with the extremes. In the belief that if an extreme of any kind can be located then very, very certainly the extreme is not the end of anything. It's the beginning of something. Something past the extreme which is my kind of life's interest. This thing that I designate perhaps not necessarily articulately enough or clearly enough as 'emptiness'.

A state exists past extremity that is a transformative state and it on occasion can be viewed and measured. I set out very early on to find the extreme edges of the cultural world, of western culture that I inherited as a kid in the new world and learned more about as an adult in the old world where it originated. And how that culture has changed by simply looking at the edges of the sea, with my back to the land mainly, trying to consider what happened in those 500 years between an occurrence where the world changed almost unknowingly to the time now where the world is changing absolutely knowingly and potentially irreparably.

So you know my pictures are if you will just about rocks and trees and bits of ice but that's what they picture. But their intent and their purpose is to picture through those things as metaphors, which I realise is a dangerous word to say out loud, something more about what it is and what is at stake about being a human in the early part of the twenty-first century. And believe me the world is changing.

When the world's largest ice shelf, the Ross Ice Shelf on the east coast of Antarctica, starts to break as it is and once it starts to break, once it starts to move, once it starts to melt, that changes the Atlantean Basin forever. 11% of the world's freshwater is locked up in the Greenland ice cap. In your lifetimes the Greenland ice cap is going to melt. I was on a glacier in northern Greenland trying to make a picture when I ran into three glaciologists. I asked them what they were doing and they told me and it blew my mind so much I actually couldn't believe it and this was in probably in 2008. They were measuring the density of ice caps and trying to estimate what would happen and what is actually happening at this moment as the Greenland ice cap overall is melting and what happens when the loss of density at this area occurs. And what will happen to the orbital spin of the globe of the world when that actually happens because it will change the spin and the way the earth orbits which will change the poles again. This is big stuff and it's so potentially theoretical. No-one talks about it but I was floored. Who would have thought it possible? You know, the ice cap melts, hell it's ice. Who cares? But Jesus when that weight has a significant effect on what the world is as we stand on it. Wow. And when it disappears that effect changes. It makes perfect sense. I would have never in my lifetime thought of such a thing and it will have a consequence and what is going to be the nature of that consequence? Boy, I can ask the question but I can't even imagine the answer. And you young ones, you're the ones. You're going to experience the consequences. I'm going to be dead. It won't matter goddamn to anybody but boy oh boy. People need to wakey, wakey, wakey. And it's not just do good or nonsense. It's just, this is it. This is a beautiful place.

There's so many wondrous small and large, amazing things that have happened in the world. It's so humbling and so, so overwhelming, so easy to forget which I try also to talk about in my work. The fragility of something that seems so huge and so all-encompassing as the planet that we don't have to worry about it. It'll take care of itself. Well hopefully it will but it'll work a hell of a lot better if we help it take care of itself as well. I believe that art helps redeem human life from its potential ordinariness to something spectacular and that artists have a chore, if what I say isn't total codswallop, to help ensure that redemption. To help us do something. To help us to help us make the invisible more visible, to help ensure that life becomes a little bit better. I've been practicing for 52 years non-stop along with a teaching project that was one of the great joys of my life. And although you can honestly say it hasn't amounted to much, I never gave up any of it. I've expended myself and my family for something that doesn't mean much to anybody in truth and it's not poor mouthing. You either have to dedicate yourself to something or let the world pass you by. I'm one of those that said both as a teacher and as a maker, it doesn't matter what you dedicate yourself to. Just do it. Dedicate to something. Stick with it or change it and do something new, different, better, more. Do something. Don't ever, don't ever give up.

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