

Title: Thomas Joshua Cooper | Making photographs at the world's edge

Summary: In this episode, Thomas talks about the some of the challenges he faced when making pictures in extreme conditions and the life-changing moment he fell through sea ice at the North Pole.

Duration: 18:19

Contributors: Photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper and Curator Anne Lyden.

Transcript

Thomas Joshua Cooper

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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. The only artist to have ever made photographs of the two poles, Cooper refers to the body of work as *The World's Edge – The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity*. Professor and Senior Researcher in Fine Art at the Glasgow School of Art, Cooper lives in the city with his wife, author Kate Mooney.

I'm Anne Lyden. In this series of podcasts, I catch up with the photographer to learn more about his exploration, his practice and how he has seen first-hand the effects that climate change is having on our planet.

Cooper's exploration to chart the Atlantic Basin was inspired by explorers such as Ferdinand Magellan and Sir Francis Drake, who circumnavigated the globe. In this episode, Cooper talks about the some of the challenges he faced when making pictures in extreme conditions and the life-changing moment he fell through sea ice at the North Pole.

Thomas, how did you decide to set out on your exploration to chart the Atlantic basin?

Thomas Joshua Cooper

I'm a project-based artist so whatever is on my mind and for 32 years what was mainly on my mind primarily was the atlas of emptiness and extremity that laterally has become the kind of shorter form 'the world's edge'. It was part of the ongoing titles from the beginning which also then included the Atlantic Basin Project. For 32 years that was my primary goal. So, I had an idea about the nature and notion of circumnavigation, inflicted that idea on my family and friends and we began by testing it by circumnavigating the city of Glasgow to see if I could make pictures at the cardinal extremes of the north, south, east and west-most of the city and there's over 400 miles in circumference which shocked me. That's a lot of miles for a town, it struck me then. I think it's smaller now weirdly.

I thought 'that went okay' and I thought 'oh, something's going to happen here, I can use the idea of circling something in general,' and then the extreme sites of the cardinal points in particular came to be acquainted with a space of opportunity. Within that space south, east, west and sometimes historical points leading up to it and away from it make the singular picture that I always make when I'm out in the field. I only ever make one picture in one side. Part of the discipline.

So then I thought maybe I can circumnavigate what I thought to be and prove to be so in a kind of weird way the island of Scotland and that work and the early work called *The Swelling of the Sea* which is exceedingly dear to me. It was the first of what I hope will be a group of four Scottish projects. The second one is *Scattered Waters*. The National Galleries of Scotland is, to my gratitude, going to publish my wife's project *Desire Lines: The Celtic Saints of Caledonia*. There should be another one, the final one, *The Islands and Edges of Scotland*.

In making the circumnavigation of Scotland you realise that the northmost point of mainland Scotland and indeed the islands of Scotland are the northmost points of Great Britain. The Westmost point is the Westmost Point of Great Britain. I thought: 'God, this is fantastic'. I don't know why. It just thrilled me to be on the outer edges of an entire country. That is unbelievably thrilling to some geeky type person like myself. And to find these edges and to realise that I'm there and can do something with them was just thrilling.

So I complete *The Swelling of the Sea* in 1990. I been reading a lot about in particular Magellan and his feat of circumnavigating the world which he began in 1519. Although he was killed I think in 1520 his lieutenant brought the one of the ships home in 1521. So, 500 years ago this year, the completion of the first voyage around the entire globe occurred and I thought: 'this is not just a physical occurrence of astonishing interest, it's a metaphor for a wild group of amazing possibilities'. As an aside, obviously the second person to do so was the Englishman Francis Drake in the *Golden Hind*. Magellan went through the Strait of Magellan and Drake went through the Drake Passage, the most horrendous sea passage probably that I know of. The point was that in circumnavigating the world the sailors brought the world into one human grasp for the first time and that just amazed me and I thought 'okay there's a project here'.

Anne Lyden

So Thomas when you were starting out how long did you think this great exploration of five continents - Europe, Africa, North America, South America, and Antarctica - was going to take?

Thomas Joshua Cooper

I thought I'd finish this in seven to ten years. I promised Kate that I would finish this in seven to ten years. It seemed doable. You can look at an atlas and by the way my favourite book is The Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World. It is *the* great atlas, period. But without question the greatest English language atlas ever, ever made. It is published in Bishopbriggs. So it's six miles from here. You open it to any page and there's the coastline of Europe. So you take your hand and it's two hand spans or there's the coastline of Africa and it's two and a half spans. It's so simple. It gets a little more complicated as you cross the ocean and I don't speak any language but American. I don't even speak English which confuses a lot of people!

It's very problematic but I just thought: 'no problem. Everything has to do with money. I thought I could spend the first seven years financing this travel along Europe and Africa with what I could scrape together from my salary with Kate's permission. By then I had kids as well and grants and then I realised it was going to take forever and it did. But I thought seven to 10 years and in the seven to 10 year zone I managed probably to get Europe done. Then where I was going to go from the northmost point of Europe? There are places that I missed. Russia was a problem for me. I had a hard time getting visas. There's an island called I think it's Victoria Island in the Arctic that is the actual westmost point of Eurasia and I couldn't get a visa. It's so irritating. And the Russians are really picky about it. They were aggressive, at least to me.

Anne Lyden

But you did manage to get to both poles though didn't you?

Thomas Joshua Cooper

Indeed and also weird places that you read about. Franz Josef Land. I mean nobody gets to Franz Josef Land because it's Russian. Very difficult but oh the North Pole, God it was thanks to the Russians again, weirdly. I knew if I was lucky I could get to Europe, Africa, South America, North America. It never, ever dawned on me it was humanly possible for me to get to the North Pole let alone Antarctica, the South Pole.

It was unheard of and also phenomenally expensive. There are tactics and strategy. Everything if you're working out in the wild as I have for so much of this project is about preparation. So, in my case I never thought it was possible. I was remarkably underprepared. Embarrassing. Which is lethal. You can have all the gear you need but if you don't have your strategic plans sorted out, well, you die very quickly out in the wild.

I finally I managed through my great polar guide based in Svalbard, Longyearbyen, one of the great guides in in the polar world, to get me over north of eighty degrees. A degree is sixty nautical miles. You get north of eighty and you're as far north as almost anybody can get to. The furthest north inhabited town in the world is this place Longyearbyen and I think it's 79° so getting further and further that is closer and closer to the North Pole is just amazing and I finally got access through my guide to leave on the flagship of the Russian icebreaker fleet, the *Yamal*, the most powerful nuclear ship in world that keeps the northeast passage open for the Russians. You may recall when the Russians sent a two-or three-man sub down to the basin the floor of the Arctic Ocean to claim its mineral resources. A scandalous thing to have happened. But they did it. They had to bring the sub back. I mean it could pop back up. It's 4,000 meters deep. There's no land on the North Pole. That's a major difference between the North Pole and the South Pole. It's sea ice which I fell through on my first outing out there.

Anne Lyden

Tell us a little bit about that. I mean because you put yourself into these extreme conditions.

Thomas Joshua Cooper

There's a lovely question about the differences and similarities between the North and South Pole. The South Pole is the coldest place I have ever been in and maybe in general the coldest place in the world. The North Pole is cold but it's sea ice. So there are no mountains. There are ridges of ice called Sastrugi and I'm on this icebreaker that has never been stopped. There's a deal in the Russian icebreaking fleet - a captain can be stopped by ice once in an icebreaker and that's forgivable. If he's stopped twice he's fired and can never work again so these guys are the best sea pilots in ice that there are in the world and they're unstoppable and the *Yamal* is the most unstoppable.

So we get to the North Pole and they're busy. They're picking up the sub, the mini sub and so I'm sort of tagging along and nobody's paying any attention and I didn't have any ideas. I had my parka and I didn't have any crampons. I just got off the ship and started to walk towards the direct north pole without thinking and I fell through the goddamn sea ice. I was just shocked and I'm carrying a 16kg tripod on my back and all my gear's in waterproof bags and I just fell straight through like a rock. I gloved myself up, really scared and not realising of course how cold it was then and I managed to hold on to this hole. It was cold enough that the hole didn't break easily around the edges which is what normally kills people that fall through the ice that can't get back up and I'm all by myself.

There isn't a goddamn soul around. And I finally come to my sense that I got this giant weight on my back and I managed for some reason to have the peace of mind to not just drop the tripod straight down into the sea but to get it off my shoulder and to throw it onto the ice and then over about an hour tried successfully and remarkably fortunately to struggle up on land and I'm very ungainly and it's really hard to climb out of a hole in the ice when you're wet and the wet keeps you heavier than you would be and of course the bags are on the ice immediately. I managed to get out and I knew that if I went back to the ship that they would sort of lock me in a room for being a fool. So I thought: 'I have to make

these pictures.; I was cold but I didn't think much of it and then I started to get cold. It's incredibly varietal. There was almost no wind. If there had been the kind of wind that occurs at the South Pole I would have been dead very, very, very quickly from hypothermia and exposure.

So it's more or less twenty-four-hour daylight and I started making these pictures and getting colder and colder and colder. I just made these pictures and I think that the only thing that warned me I did manage to have again the purpose of mind, I took off my top clothes and rung them out so that at least I wasn't sopping and realised that North Polar chill to your bare skin when you're wet as well is a shock even when you're really cold but I rung them out and put them back on and I just continued to work until I almost was unconscious and I made I made some of the best pictures of my life there because I thought maybe my life might disappear. I was 3 days under medical attention because I was pretty far gone by that time.

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