

*Title:* Thomas Joshua Cooper | Scotland

*Summary:* In this episode, Thomas explains why he switched Northern California for Glasgow.

*Duration:* 16:34

*Contributors:* Photographer Thomas Joshua Cooper and Curator Anne Lyden.

### *Transcript*

#### *Thomas Joshua Cooper*

In my life I've had two projects; to work outdoors as a picture maker and to teach photography as an art form, a visual art form equal to and in my case really truly believing equal to drawing and painting in particular but also sculpture and laterally installation. So it was a chance of a lifetime.

#### *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.

In this episode, Thomas explains why he switched Northern California for Glasgow and how he balances teaching while maintaining his own photographic practice.

Thomas, could you start by telling me how you arrived in Scotland.

#### *Thomas Joshua Cooper*

In the summer of 1982 I was teaching a History of Photography class at the little university in Northern California that I was working for, Humboldt State University, to about 100 people when the telephone in the lecture room started to ring. It rang and it rang and I just

lost the plot. I tried to pull the telephone off the wall because it just blew the lecture down the drain and I couldn't get it off the wall. So, I finally answered it and it was my now friend and true mentor Tony Jones the great director of Glasgow School of Art in the middle of my lecture offering me a job, saying: 'Cooper, Cooper is that you'? And I was so astounded I didn't know what to do and he said: 'there's a job waiting for you in Glasgow. There's a business class plane ticket in your name. You have three days to decide. Call me back.'

By that time I was lost completely. I was so confused. I had to dismiss the class who were hooting with laughter at my embarrassment, and I'd never been in business class. I didn't think such a thing existed so I called the airport and, my God, there was a business class ticket waiting for me and I thought 'well this is going to be interesting'. So, I went over and was offered the job to my delight because it was time when Reagan was president. It was time to go. I never did like him and I left previously for various reasons earlier in my life and nobody cared but me of course but I just couldn't believe it. It was great. Scotland, how wonderful!

*Anne Lyden*

Was there something about the way your practice was being viewed in the States at the time that made it more appealing to be in Scotland?

*Thomas Joshua Cooper*

I'm an entire product of the university. So the university system which I'm also hugely dedicated to. But in those times and indeed previously when I left for the first time to go to work in England more or less 10 years previously there was a very strong belief that working outdoors as a picture maker, working as an artist was an irrelevant circumstance. There were all kinds of things that artists could do but working outdoors didn't seem to be one of them and it really irritated me and one of the great attractions to Great Britain for me was the fact that the major proponents of the land art movement obviously lived in England. I'm referring to Richard Long and Hamish Fulton and people like David Nash.

I was just thrilled by their work and I thought: 'this has to be the right place' and laterally I got to know Ian Hamilton Finlay a bit. My wife worked for him and did the first catalogue resume of his prints but I thought: 'these people - they know stuff' and the cultural ambiance seemed to be welcoming to people who practiced seriously outdoors as in their work as artists so I thought: 'here I come' and I really was tired of America at that point and needed, after having gone back and forth from 1972 or 1973 until 1982 when I came here, here meaning Scotland, I thought: 'okay, this is it'. I'm finally some place where I need to be, where I want to be and more importantly where I can work culturally unhindered. It didn't actually mean that I thought that there would be much interest in the work, which seemed to be accurate, it just meant that there didn't appear to be an antagonistic bias against working outdoors as an artist. So, I was in pig heaven and the opportunity to start a brand-new department of photography whose sole mission was to turn people who wanted to work with photographs into artists as opposed to anything else was kind of a life's project.

In my life I've had two projects; to work outdoors as a picture maker and to teach photography as an art form, a visual art form equal to and in my case really truly believing equal to drawing and painting in particular but also sculpture and laterally installation. So, it was a chance of a lifetime. I have to say that I turned down a job at Stanford University in California, to come here and although sometimes I've been bewildered by having done that, I realised that I absolutely made the right choice. Although it is increasingly difficult for anybody to work as an artist making photographs, it was a particular treat to be able to establish the first department of photography in an art school whose mission was to work as a fine art medium within the context of the other traditional arts and of course the only other sort of relatable department was the great Düsseldorf project that the Beckers developed and in the 1990s it was a great privilege for me to finally be able to meet Mister Becker at an exhibition I made in Düsseldorf where he was exceptionally unexpectedly gracious to me and so I thought: 'wow', you know, 'this is the place to work'.

*Anne Lyden*

You've dedicated decades of your life to teaching while also maintaining your own practice. How do you balance those? Does one inform the other?

*Thomas Joshua Cooper*

Thank you. It's a good question and I'm grateful for it. I'm a project-based human and I finally realised that I had some kind of purpose in life and that that purpose might be fulfilled through picture-making projects. The noun *art* is a short noun and *artist* a short noun in relation to photograph and photographer but they're bigger. They encompass more in my opinion.

So, it took me a while, but teaching was the way I felt like I could socially realise my obligation as a human being to the world and from very early on in my life, it sounds a little corny but I dedicated myself. I felt I had a vocation. Not necessarily that I was any good at it, by the way, but that I felt I had a vocation. So, I'm a certificated secondary school teacher and community college school teacher, and then obviously university-based but teaching is a project for me. It was purposeful. It never was incidental. I never, ever did anything in the world of teaching simply because it was a job. I was once asked by a colleague at Glasgow if I felt I had a career here. I didn't know what he was talking about. In part because it never dawned on me that a person could have a career doing the things, and I know this sounds kind of foolish, that you love more than almost life.

To more specifically answer your question I realised and, by the time Kate allowed me to join her life, she managed to allow me to continue that I would work ten to 12 hours a day as a teacher and then whenever I could on any days off or any weekends work out in what I call the field and then I would work at night from nine o'clock at night until three o'clock in the morning in the studio in the dark room. So I sort of more or less slept from four until seven in the morning and then I went to work and this was natural. I absolutely believe that if especially art teachers, fine art teachers, if they teach without a practice then it's scandalous. It's absolutely scandalous. It doesn't matter what the medium is, it strikes me, but if you're for instance going to teach a photography anything and you don't practice

some aspect of it then it's scandalous. However, I made a point of never once suggesting that any student should ever see my work. I thought that was improper too. Staff should never, ever suggest students look towards their things because that seems improper. It's socially improper, it's morally improper and students have enough hassles.

*Anne Lyden*

But they were aware of your work, right?

*Thomas Joshua Cooper*

Well, I never asked. What I used to do is keep exhibition announcements on my studio door so they had to pass by. I never once spoke about it that I know of. Maybe I did. If somebody asked me of course I would mention it. They knew that I worked every hour of the day because when I first opened the department much to the institution's chagrin I gave keys to all of the students. The deal was that they could work until midnight and I would be there, but they had to make sure after nine o'clock when the school officially closed that they locked the doors and if they didn't, I raised hell with them and took their keys back.

*Anne Lyden*

So you're really trying to encourage them to find their own vision.

*Thomas Joshua Cooper*

Absolutely. The individual voice. I didn't care what they made. As long as they found a way to find a voice that made them, if not happy, then convinced them that they weren't wasting their time. And that was all that I ever thought was necessary. And of course there's a huge variety of skills required to sort of enumerate that voice and it was exciting. Essentially it was a gigantic public experiment that for some reason thanks to God didn't go wrong and it was my particular privilege.

I've worked at the art school for 38 years and published 14 books and 13 of them have been made while I've been at the art school. So it's been a place to work and I wanted students young or old to realise that work was the reason to be there. It's more understandable in some ways that doctors have a practice and lawyers have a practice and maybe clergy have a practice but when we talk about art practice I wanted them, them meaning the students, the staff, me, everybody in the art school to realise that this meant as far as I was concerned every moment that you're awake you do something that's related to the work that you do. That could be reading, it could be laughing, it could be playing but it's work, work, work, work, work, practice, practice, practice, practice. Which means of course I'm a dirge and that's tedious but most people stayed the course and that was pretty wonderful.

To be absolutely sure though it must be said that and although it probably sounds like a cliché that the students were my great inspiration and when I left teaching to become this strange thing called a researcher it was a great loss in my life and I needed more time to do the things I was doing so I'm hugely grateful for that opportunity but it took me a while to recover from the fact that I became the recipient of probably the greatest reward that can

occur when students actually become the teacher's teacher and it's really quite beautiful for me.

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