

ART REVIEW

## ‘Thomas Joshua Cooper: The World’s Edge’ Review: Photography at the Extremes

A collection of images captured by the artist, who travels—sometimes at great physical hazard—to the ends of the land masses around the Atlantic to take pictures with his cumbersome vintage camera.



Thomas Joshua Cooper's 'Hurricane Thunderhead, Looking toward The New World—The Gulf of Paria and the Caribbean Sea, Boca Grande, Bocas del Dragón, La Lue Point, Chacachacare Island, Looking at the Promotora de Paria and the Península de Paria, the Isle of Trinidad, the Lesser Antilles' (2005) PHOTO: THOMAS JOSHUA COOPER

By William Meyers  
Oct. 8, 2019 5:46 pm ET

Los Angeles

**Nature is terrifying:** The roiling waves and intimidating ice floes in the “Thomas Joshua Cooper: The World’s Edge” exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art testify to the natural world’s indifference to human well-being. The 61 large-format black-and-white prints and the 71 smaller prints were selected by curator Rebecca Morse and Los Angeles County Museum of Art CEO Michael Govan from the more than 700 images in Mr. Cooper’s project “The World’s Edge—The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity.” Since 1987, Mr. Cooper (b. 1946, U.S.) has been traveling, sometimes at great physical hazard, to the extremities of the land masses around the Atlantic Ocean to take pictures with his cumbersome 1898 Agfa Ansco wooden view camera. At any one time at the designated spot he makes one—and only one—negative, which he later processes and prints in his darkroom in Glasgow, Scotland. He has lived and taught in Scotland since 1973, but learned photography in California and New Mexico. His encounter with master printer Ansel Adams is one reason the prints on display at LACMA are of such high quality.

### Thomas Joshua Cooper: The World’s Edge

Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Through Feb. 2, 2020

“High Noon, Day Two—The Caribbean Sea, Cabo San Román, the Península de Paraguaná, Falcón, Venezuela, the Northeast-Most Point of Continental South America” (2005) was pointed out to me by one of the museum guards, who volunteered it was her favorite. The rocky ridge at the bottom of the frame has a fiercely

jagged texture, and beyond it the blurred waves are streaked with light. As is Mr. Cooper’s usual practice, there is no horizon. He typically composes his pictures by first finding one edge and then working his way around to complete the frame; the middle he lets take care of itself. He shoots with the camera’s diaphragm set at f/64, a very small lens opening that renders everything that is still in great detail and with subtle gradations of tone; but it requires a long exposure, so things that are in motion—the waves here—are blurred. The chlorobromide gelatin silver print, on a 40-by-54-inch sheet, is selenium- and gold-toned, which adds richness and depth.



Thomas Joshua Cooper's 'Along the Frozen Rimtop of Horseshoe Falls—The Niagara Falls Basin and the Niagara River, Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada' (2015) PHOTO: THOMAS JOSHUA COOPER

Another picture taken at the same spot, this time at “Evening, Day Four,” is similar, and shows the different effect of the light at nightfall on the texture of the rocks and the aspect of the sea.

There are no people in any of his pictures, but Mr. Cooper identifies with the great explorers—Columbus, Magellan, Leif Erikson, Francis Drake—and many of his pictures were taken at the spots where their voyages began or ended. “The World’s Edge, Remembering Magellan—The North Atlantic Ocean, Five Capes, Cabo da Roca, Lisboa, Portugal, the West-Most Point of Continental Europe” (1994) was shot looking down from a height; in the foreground are some rocks surrounded by swirling surf and, in the distance, a vast expanse of sea. Before setting off in 1519 on his voyage circumnavigating the globe, Magellan made a 24-hour vigil at this site.



Thomas Joshua Cooper's 'Drowned Trees along the Mississippi, from the Source to the Sea—Hot Afternoon—Drowning Trees, the Confluence of the Dubois and the Lower Mississippi Rivers (East Bank), Madison County, Illinois, United States' (2010) PHOTO: THOMAS JOSHUA COOPER

Mr. Cooper made another picture at the site at midnight; it is black overall, mitigated only by a hazy, slightly lighter band in the middle, presumably the surf seen by starlight. “Dreaming the North Polar Winter Solstice—The North Pole, the Arctic Ocean, 90° N” (2007) is all black, too, with even less of an ethereal band, and “Dreaming the South Polar Winter Solstice—The South Pole, the Polar Plateau, Antarctica, 90° S” (2007) is virtually all black. “Whiteout—The Continental Ice Shelf, Patriot Hills, Ellsworth Land, Antarctica, 80°17.994’ S” (2007-08), on the other hand, is all white with some minimal vignetting.

Mr. Cooper has Cherokee ancestry and, as a young boy, he lived for two years on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in North Dakota. As related in the catalog, a tribal elder there taught him, “Every human has an eye that sees and a seeing eye.” Mr. Cooper interpreted that to connote the difference between looking and seeing. Seeing his all black and all white images is a challenge.

More accessible is “North! The First Landing Site, Afternoon Drifting Fog, the Spring Equinoctial Ice Flow—The North Atlantic Ocean, L’Anse aux Meadows Natural Historic Site, the Northern Peninsula, the North-Most Point of the Isle of Newfoundland and the Site of the First Known European Contact with The New World, Canada” (1998): Leif Erikson landed there in the year 1000; delicate sheets of ice floating on the dark water in the foreground disappear in a far white haze. And “Moonlight—The Mid-Atlantic Ocean, Cape Manuel, Dakar, the South-Most Point of the Cape Verde Peninsula, Senegal” (2004) is typical of the way Mr. Cooper renders nature as abstraction; a dramatic, triangular pile of rocks thrusts up against the backdrop of a calm sea—but who drew the straight white line with angle brackets at either end on one of the rocks? And why?

—Mr. Meyers writes on photography for the Journal. See his photographs at [williammeyersphotography.com](http://williammeyersphotography.com).