

## LAND'S END

By PAUL WEIDEMAN

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Thomas Joshua Cooper is a singular photographic artist. Through 30 years of explorations of the coasts surrounding the Atlantic Ocean, he has assembled a body of work numbering in the hundreds of images, each the only photograph taken at a given location. He calls the project *The World's Edge -- The Atlantic Basin Project: An Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity*, and although his almost-scientific methodology in carrying it out seems to shout “documentary,” that has been the farthest thing from his mind. “I was never interested in anything remotely related to the documentary. I only ever wanted to work as an artist,” he said in an interview from his home in Scotland.

Cooper's visual influences are painters, including Cy Twombly, Agnes Martin, Ad Reinhardt, Mark Rothko, and especially Morris Graves. “He and Mark Tobey invented white writing, this brushstroke style of almost lightning-like white marks to define figures and animals,” he said. “I was amazed by the mark-making, and I understood it as light creating form.”

Photographs from *The World's Edge* are currently featured in two exhibits in Santa Fe. Cooper is one of nine artists represented in *Manmade: Notions of Landscape From the Lannan Collection* at the New Mexico Museum of Art. And his work is featured in a one-man show opening Friday, Oct. 16, at the Lannan Foundation Gallery. The artist is scheduled to appear at the reception.

Lannan owns about 300 of Cooper's photographs, according to Christie Mazuera Davis, Lannan's program director of contemporary art and public programs. She is curating *Selections From True: Photographs by Thomas Joshua Cooper* at the foundation's gallery on Read Street. “The prints I'm showing are from a recent body of work taken at the north and south poles,” Davis said.

Cooper spent nearly two years on the polar photography. “I knew I couldn't go into the dark, somber picture world I was primarily interested in,” he said. “I'd have to work with bright white, and I knew I didn't want to make National Geographic pictures. I knew what I didn't want, and the rest was pure serendipity and accident.” He emphasizes that he is not an explorer, but he has had an explorer's adventures.

“The last part of the polar work entailed a nearly three-month voyage on a motorized sailing boat down the Antarctic peninsula in the worst weather in 30 years,” he said. “There were only four of us. We timed the trip to also take in South Georgia and the South Orkneys. We thought it would take 46 days and it took 83, and I was frightened and seasick almost the whole time.”

“There's a picture in the Lannan show of the northmost point of the continent, called Prime Head, which is a 250-foot-high ice wall. To get to it, we had to sail through what's printed as ‘Uncharted Dangers’ in red on the Admiralty charts [reference information for mariners compiled by the United Kingdom Hydrographic Office]. When you see that, it means that if you have trouble there, no one is obliged to rescue you, legally, and Lloyd's will not insure you.”

“There was a deep fog and a huge amount of ice floe, and at one point, we had to take the dinghy and drag the boat, depth-sounding every five meters to make sure we could find a channel. Finally the fog cleared, and we could see Prime Head. We abandoned the boat and made a dash in the dinghy. It was one of the most wondrous experiences in my life.”

“We escaped back out for refuge on a research island, and when we showed our log to the commander there, he said, ‘You do realize, don't you, that more people have stood on the moon than on Prime Head Point?’ ”

Not only has Cooper endured environmental hardships to make his dramatic pictures of the intersections of sea and land (and ice), he has done it all carrying a big tripod and a large-format camera: an 1898 Agfa 5-by-7-inch field camera. “It's the only camera I have, and it's the only one I've used in my 40 years as a picture maker,” he said.

The Cherokee-blooded native of San Francisco earned his master of art degree in photography at The University of New Mexico. Now a professor and senior researcher in fine art at The Glasgow School of Art, Cooper has been awarded fellowships from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (1997) and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation (2009).

His artist-heroes, besides painters, include master photographers Edward Weston and Ansel Adams. Adams actually wrote the letter of recommendation for Cooper's position at The Glasgow School of Art. “In my youth, I happened to pass by Ansel's house once, and he greeted me and let me show him pictures, and he and his wife sort of adopted me.”

Cooper's process mirrors his choice of equipment: slow down by using an old, clunker camera and a good, heavy tripod; concentrate on making one excellent photograph instead of snapping everything in sight; and then make only one print from each negative.

“There's never a second print,” he said. “When there's an opportunity for multiples, as far as I'm concerned, then the person is a taker: he snaps or shoots. What an appalling thing to call something made by hand—a shot.”

In the darkroom, he mixes his own developers in his quest for a print quality he described as “a minor-key palette, in musician's terms.” He uses Agfa Multicontrast Classic paper for his prints. “I was one of three photographers that, when we heard of

Agfa's bankruptcy [in 2005], bought the remaining supply of the paper. I have five years' supply of it, and when it's gone, I actually don't know what I'm going to do.”

His final photographic journey for the World's Edge project, which he hopes to make next spring, will focus on North America's east coast, from Labrador to Key Largo.

“God bless the Lannan Foundation,” Cooper said in discussing his ability to accomplish the decades-long undertaking. It all started in 1987, as he pondered the 1519-1522 circumnavigation of the world by the Ferdinand Magellan expedition. Bouncing off that historic enterprise, Cooper made circumnavigations of the city of Glasgow and of the “island” of Scotland. “I do think of it as an island,” he said, “because you can actually trail the border between Scotland and England entirely through waterways.”

He refined the project concept by “thinking about edges and the era of exploration and the idea of looking out from the Atlantic boundaries of Europe and Africa to the New World and wondering how culture develops,” he recalled. The concept finally took the form of a photographic circumnavigation of the extremities of the Atlantic basin. “I thought I had the Big Idea. I thought of something no one in the goddamn world has done. I was thrilled, and embarrassed that I would think such a thing. And I also thought it was impossible.”

His companion, the place he has begun every aspect of the project to identify sites, is the peerless Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World. Asked whether he has particular places in mind for his North American survey next year, Cooper said, “Geology, geography, and history sort of focus everything I do in terms of intent. I'm interested in the names of places, and in the fact that the chief cartographer for the Times Comprehensive Atlas said I will probably be the first to touch all the extremities around the Atlantic Basin, and I will certainly be the last, in part because within the next 10 to 15 years up to 35 percent of the low-lying sea-level areas will be under water. It's a fantastic kind of irony that some plunkpot like myself has managed to get to these wonderful, quiet, and in my opinion, deeply important places that are literally in the middle of nowhere.”

When the big project is completed, Cooper plans to work on a book with up to 500 reproductions of the *World's Edge* photographs. “It will be larger than the Times Comprehensive Atlas of the World, with pages big enough so that when you move them, the pictures of the water and the rocks will be reminiscent of the swelling of the sea.”