

Kim Keever

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Imagine falling asleep in a High School geology class. As the teacher's voice drones on about magma chutes and tectonic plates, you start to doze. You dream of rock formations and volcanic upheavals, but these visions are clouded by the sickly candied hues of dreamland. A Technicolor haze settles across your field of vision, lending a smoky tint to all you see. Though such geologic reveries represent an extraordinary level of intensity, the same visceral elements and sensations can also be found in the photographs of Kim Keever.

Living and working in New York City, artist Kim Keever has created an impressive body of staged cibachrome photos. For the past decade he has used a large format camera that creates four-by-five inch negatives with a tremendous amount of detail. Working within hundred gallon homemade fish tanks, the artist builds landscapes of desolation and splendor out of little more than plaster, tap water, and colored dyes. He then photographs these staged tableaux and prints them on a scale large enough to swallow up the viewer in their dreamy deceit.

Rather than constructing them, it may be better to say Keever presides over the genesis of these realms. Invariably these fantastical places are not peopled by any recognizable life. We are seeing Martian landscapes of low oxygen content, secret Mediterranean caves where sea monsters sleep, and bombarded Lunar planes of ancient planets rotating around dying suns. Although not lands we will ever set eyes on, these terra incognitas, display a degree of verisimilitude that reminds one of known and experienced places. Everything is familiar, but backlit in garish and unearthly hues.

For all this effort to deceive, the artist doesn't make much of an effort to hide his hand. If one looks closely, geological formations start to reappear, scavenged from one photo-shoot to the next, only to be lit

differently, albeit conveying completely different sets of associations and inferences. Ghost images of the photographer and his camera will occasionally drape entire landscapes, revealing them to be merely dioramas in reflective glass cases. The same large format of these works that draws the viewer in only serves to point up their fakery. There is something of the mad scientist in the amount of effort that Keever exerts in building these worlds, only to leave their seams showing ever so slightly.

Harking back to the Romanticism of the Hudson River School of painters, these works celebrate and commemorate the beauty of the natural world. They are also loaded with a darker and more ominous meaning. With eloquent and yearning titles like *Buried Dreams* and *Around a Memory*, Keever's photos speak of loves lost and Paradises destroyed. Far from idyllic, these blasted and ruined lands, devoid of life, chill us with their desolation and remind us of the finiteness of this world. In a poetic and flowery manner, the artist confronts us with very real and painful issues of environmental use and abuse. This is not Oz and we are definitely not over the rainbow.

Originally working as a painter, Keever more directly addressed the make-up and composition of terra firma. In these earlier works, he gave us bisected views of land masses straight out of textbooks. Taking on the same issues as a geologist would, the artist portrayed rich veins of Mother Earth. Lava and oil bubble up and intertwine before escaping into the atmosphere of these daring paintings. The glacial pace of these works brings up another point Keever is making. Their antediluvian and inexorable majesty draws attention to the brevity and frailty of our own lives. We are unsure which will disappear first, this terrain or ourselves.