

## Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis

Catalog Essay from the "Unreal Exhibition" curated by Mel Watkin

Hudson River School painter, Frederick Edwin Church comes to mind when viewing Kim Keever's images. Keever's work gives the impression of being flawless paintings of nature's power and majesty. Perhaps these are grand and desolate places where few people dare to tread. In truth, Kim Keever's work raises that old existential question: What is reality? What are we looking at here?

The first area of confusion is caused by the surface of Keever's images. They have an ancient quality, like the wall paintings of Pompeii or perhaps egg tempera frescos on plaster, but they are none of these things- they are documentary photographs. While there are areas of this planet that look like Keever's images, in our Photoshop culture we know better than to assume that every photograph is a straightforward depiction of reality. These scenes just seem too dream-like to be real. In actuality, Keever's scenes are not imaginary, but created in a 100-gallon tank of water-images that New York Times critic Ken Johnson referred to as "sublime visions in a fish tank".

We are all familiar with artists spend hours of studio time creating dramatic setups for the purpose of shooting a single photograph (Cindy Sherman, Yasumasa Morimura and Gregory Crewdson are among the best known). Like these artists Keever photographs "real" scenes that exist only briefly in our space and time. But these other artists' works are intentionally fake and theatrical. How is it that Keever's work is so convincing? The scale of Keever's landscapes seem impossibly grand; they capture all the romance and vastness of the Hudson River School's idealized west. These works could be used as teaching tools for art history students learning about perspective. The mountains in his photographs get smaller as they recede into space and, like Leonardo da Vinci, he employs sfumato (the misty, vague quality of distant views). The one clue to Keever's deception is that the grains of plaster used to create these scenes are too large for the scale of the mountains they depict. It seems as if we are looking at a tiny Mt. Everest made out of sugar or salt crystals.

Keever spends about a month working on each scene he photographs. He forms mountains by hand and arranges them carefully in his fish tank, which is only about 17 inches from front to back. Each scene is carefully lit; all of the color in his photographs-ominous gray-green clouds, brilliant golden sunsets, deep royal

blue deltas-are a slight-of-hand created with theatrical gels. Lighting is a trying and time consuming task, but once done Keever sets up his large format camera, squirts a plume of white liquid pigment into the water above the mountains and shoots photographs as fast as he can change four by five inch film holders. Keever can only shoot for five to 30 minutes per session. He invariably ends up with hundreds of photographs, of which one or two are of interest. These images are scanned, cleaned up in Photoshop and enlarged to a scale that all but engulfs the viewer. The unusual surface quality of Keever's photographs mentioned earlier is created primarily by the build up of algae on the 1/2" thick glass of the fish tank. Blue Delta (2002) has the steamy quality of a primeval world. The algae clouds our vision giving the work a cracked and aged look.

The content or meaning of Keever's work is a deep veneration of natural forces. Keever, who grew up on the Eastern shore of Virginia, watched nature go through its paces often as a child. He is especially aware of the brute force of major storm systems, the sheer muscle of wind and water erosion and the monstrous ability of microbes, bacteria, algae and other flora to multiply and accrue. Cloud formations (liquid pigment) play the lead dramatic role in Keever's work, but sedimentation, accretion and erosion are its supporting cast. After a month of shooting, pigment, plaster and algae build up on the surfaces of Keever's set-up and the scene begins to "take on a life of its own". Two photographs in this exhibition, Turtle Skull Rock and Red Sky Morning, are essentially the same scene shot several months apart. These works are a study of nature's handiwork on a small scale- how pigment moves through water, how erosion and accretion create form. As any child who has played on a sand table knows, water has enormous power to tear through matter, leaving its victims pockmarked and winnowed down by the process. Eroded matter washes down stream and builds up elsewhere making beautiful new forms. Painters like Albert Bierstadt, Frederick Church and Thomas Cole specialized in depicting the ideal in nature and also used ominous natural forces for dramatic impact. Like them, Keever sticks to the ideal. He does not show us the mosquitoes and poison ivy, but he does imbue us with awe and leave us with a strong sense of the dangers we face if we push nature too far.