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Building the Natural World

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Viewed from a distance, Kim Keever's large photographs are of moody, damp environments - mist hovers over boggy ground, tropical plants crowd the embankment, streams snake across the dirt - and everything is oppressed by an uncommonly active sky with thick clouds that stretch for miles and then close off the view.

Fallen Tree, 2005, C-print, 47 x 71 in. Courtesy Kinz, Tillou + Feigen, NY

Yet there is something disquietingly artificial about these landscapes - the ground's pigmentation is several tones too bright, and plants in the middle distance have sharp contours, throwing off our sense of spatial relationships.

Up close, the trees appear too rigid under this turbulent cloud ceiling and there is residue of an elaborately staged production. These are photographs of an environment Keever has constructed inside of a fish tank - algae grows on the tank's interior, and droplets of water run down the outside of the glass.

The method is no secret. At the entrance to Keever's recent exhibit at the Kinz, Tillou + Feigen gallery in New York, there was an explanatory wall text and a behind-the-scenes photograph illustrating how it's done. Inside a 100-gallon aquarium, Keever creates the topography miniature mountains, trees, plants and rivers - with plaster, reflective Mylar and other materials; he then fills the tank with water, dropping in pigments to create the swirling movement of the sky. He lights the tank with colored gels and then photographs it with a large-format camera. The resulting C-prints are similarly large, some 51 x 68 inches and have the disturbing effect of seeming both enormous and miniaturized simultaneously.

Keever's work is often described as having a sci-fi, or post-apocalyptic feel, evident in the most desolate landscapes, like Fallen Tree. But what we identify in the result is also part of the concept-the act of re-creating and presenting a natural environment as if the actual one no longer existed. Dioramas also have that purpose - they re-create that which we are unable to experience firsthand. It's a long-standing means of representation, and the tactility of this method of work makes it recognizable to us in a way that digital manipulation would not be. Along with the collocated titles, Ocean 28, Estuary 12, these prints suggest a natural world we have already lost, or are in the process of losing.

American landscape painters of the early to mid-19th century recognized the pull of land on the collective consciousness. The country's inconceivably vast and varied terrain was shaping a national identity, and the painters of the Hudson River School captured this in scenes of exploration and settlement, in the detailed

Palm 62, 2005, C-print, 34 x 41 in. Courtesy Kinz, Tillou + Feigen, NY

renderings of flora and fauna, and the peaceful coexistence of humans and nature. The sweeping vistas of post-Civil War paintings, the rushing waterfalls and looming mountains, offered visual proof of the country's resplendency and of its promising future.

Keever's work is frequently compared to this age of painting, and in George Inness's Sunset over the Sea or in Albert Bierstadt's roiling skies, we may catch a ships glimpse of Keever's bank of clouds. What these paintings were suggesting to their audience, however, was nature as a reflection of the spiritual world in all its majestic power and essential mystery.

So what, exactly, does our land suggest to us now? We are saddled with environmental problems that we are having difficulty ignoring - recent natural disasters and extreme and unusual shifts in the weather; we have an uneasy and partial understanding of global warming and its potential impact. Towards our environment, we gush shame and love and greed and fear, and then we manage to forget about it all for a little while. More than anything, our relationship with the earth depends on a certain level of functioning denial, as in any relationship where selfishness keeps winning out over guilt.

But what we possess in a less complicated form is the love of the synthetic, of the terrifying and benign spectacle - the manufactured earthquake and the movie set hurricane. Despite everything, we are helplessly drawn to nature, to its splendorous and catastrophic power, and want to experience, in a controlled way, all that mystifies and frightens us.

Keever's manipulated environments are eerie and beautiful, and one has to marvel at the technique - simulation still has the power to mesmerize. But there's also little here to make us feel good about the real thing, and this is as close of an expression of our troubled relationship to nature as art has recently been able to provide.