



The Edges of the World

P H O T O G R A P H S B Y

Thomas Joshua Cooper

BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, BRUNSWICK, MAINE

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On the cover

4. ***An Indication Piece***

The English Channel...

16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches

Courtesy Hallmark Photographic Collection,
Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri

The Edges of the World

P H O T O G R A P H S B Y

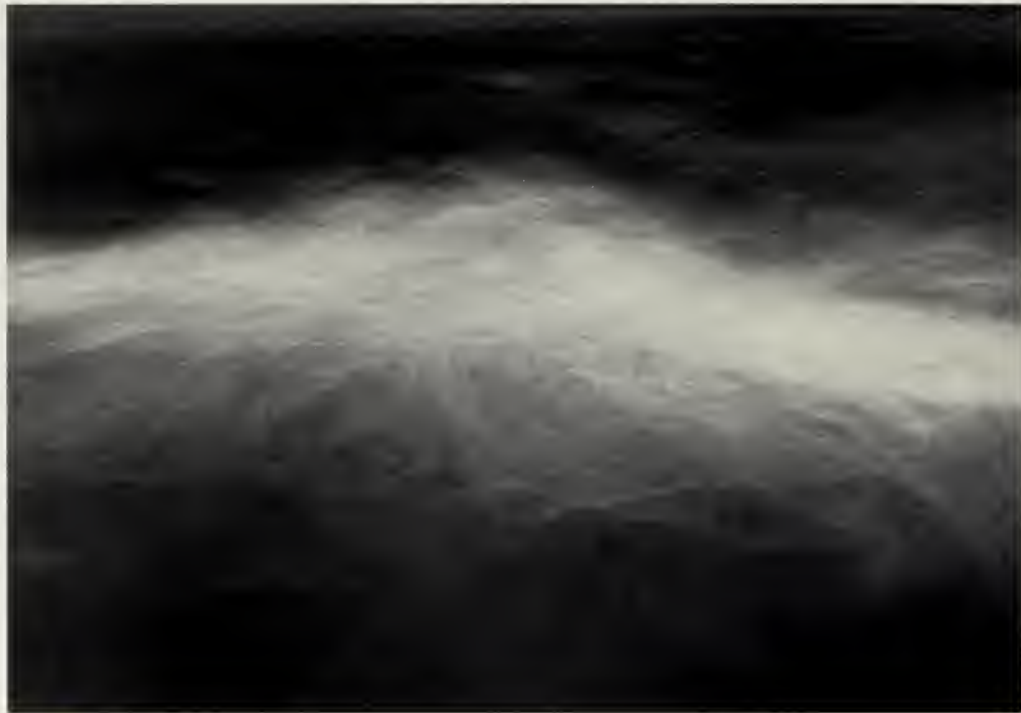
Thomas Joshua Cooper

The Edges of the World: Photographs by Thomas Joshua Cooper is the fourth in a series of summer exhibitions organized by the Bowdoin College Museum of Art showcasing unconventional depictions of the Maine landscape. This year we feature the photography of Thomas Joshua Cooper, in which the rocky coast of Maine and its seas are seen within the larger context of the edges of the world. The body of work exhibited here was conceived and begun when the artist visited Maine in 1996.

Thomas Joshua Cooper's series of approximately 100 photographs, of which this exhibition includes nine, depicts the water and shores of Great Britain, Greenland, Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, and Massachusetts. These glimpses of land and significant seas are similar to those that the English settlers would have seen as they journeyed to the New World on the *Mayflower* in 1620. Using an 1898 field camera, a large, cumbersome piece of equipment, Cooper usually makes pictures from just off the shore or right on its edges, often from the most extreme points of the coastline. While the sites are described in detail by Cooper in the title of each work, the locations themselves at first look eerily similar—the same barren, jagged rocks, the same vast bodies of grey water. Rather than trying to capture the discrete nature and character of the different coastlines—a task that

artists have been assigning themselves for centuries when depicting Maine—Cooper is clearly more interested in the recurring rocks and desolate cliffs, as well as in the subtle distinctions of the ocean, captured as it passes through one of its constantly fluctuating moods.

There are few better ways to describe Cooper's photographs than haunting—a word to which a number of critics have resorted. To some extent this quality comes from the tremendous silence found in Cooper's images of the sea. Compared, for instance, to nineteenth-century American renderings of the sea in which artists strove to capture everything from the smell and warmth of the summer sea air to the loud crashing waves of a stormy sea (Winslow Homer is only the first example to come to mind), Cooper's work offers no such overt drama. Instead Cooper asks himself "How little information can I have in the photograph while still retaining aspects of realism?" For instance, in Cooper's photographs we tend to see waves as they are forming far out at sea; instead of witnessing the dramatic climax of the wave's passage as it collides with the land, we observe its eerie, noiseless formation. In addition to the silence of these photographs, we notice the often precarious position in which we are placed (via the precarious position in which the photographer must have placed himself) to view these silent



8. *A Premonitional Work*
Muskeget Sound and the North Atlantic Ocean...
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Courtesy Hallmark Photographic Collection,
Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri

seas. This sensation is intensified by the fact that the horizon lines found in most traditional landscapes are absent in Cooper's photographs, which further contributes to the sensation of being imminently engulfed by the sea, or of observing the water from dizzying heights.

Cooper's distinctive methods give us some additional purchase on the tremendous spiritual presence found in his work. Cooper visits the site where he is going to photograph a number of times before making the picture. He observes it at different times of day and under various weather conditions. When the right moment finally arrives—a moment his long experience has trained him to recognize—he makes one and only one exposure. Cooper's intellectual and emotional understanding of the places he photographs, and the manner in which that understanding is transmitted through his work, are similar to the work of the nineteenth-century photographer Timothy O'Sullivan, who greatly influenced him. O'Sullivan, who photographed extensively in the American West, felt a close connection to the land, which is evident in his photographs, a connection that was, as Peter Bunnell observes, less about the land as place and more about its spirit.¹ Cooper, too, in an almost ritualized manner, identifies simultaneously inviting and forbidding places and represents them as sacral sites.

The intensity we find in Cooper's pictures is increased to a degree by the artist's darkroom technique. Cooper frequently photographs in the fall and the winter when the light is especially crisp, even severe. The severe light, which allows him to capture deep contrasts and the strong, intricate lines of his forms as well as the textures of the water, is transformed into differently dramatic

moods by Cooper in the darkroom, primarily by his chemically over-painting the images—that is, laying down tones of indigo and burgundy after exposing the images onto the paper.

In addition to the technical and physical feats he performs to execute his photographs, Cooper alludes to a history that is rarely, if ever, evident on the surface of the Atlantic Ocean, but whose ghostly presence is embedded within the sea. Cooper's views of the New World are usually titled "Indications" or "Premonitions," suggesting both anticipation and the fear of the unknown, emotions probably felt by the passengers of the *Mayflower*. Examining Cooper's photographs from that perspective, we could, for instance, interpret the spectral form in the water produced by a very long exposure in *A Premonitional Work: Muskeget Sound and the North Atlantic Ocean, Looking N., N. E.—Yet Again, Towards the New World, From Sunset to Full Moonrise, Wasque Point, Chappaquiddick Island, Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, USA 2000–2001, (The Southermost Point of Chappaquiddick Island)* as representing the way that the Pilgrims may have imagined their nebulous future while on board the *Mayflower*. Interspersed with works titled "Indications" and "Premonitions" are others titled "Looking Towards the Old World." One can imagine these same passengers looking back with ambivalence towards the motherland from which they were forced to break ties. In *Looking Towards the Old World: The Atlantic Ocean, The Bay of Fundy, West Quoddy Head (The Eastern Most Point of Continental America), Maine, USA, 1996–1999*, the surging sea perhaps functions as a metaphor for the Pilgrims' internal feelings of deep and irreparable loss. The most unusual photograph of this series, *A Premonitional Work:*



1. *Looking Toward the Old World...Maine...*
16 x 23 inches
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

Cape Cod Bay—Looking N., N.E.—Towards the Old World, First Encounter Beach, Near Eastham, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, USA 2000–2001, (From this site the Pilgrim Settlers first encountered Native Americans), depicts dune grasses bent down toward the ocean by force of a receding wave, reminding us that this land did indeed have life on its shores before the Pilgrims arrived, a life that the Europeans would alter forever.

It would be easy—perhaps too easy—to reduce Cooper’s photographs and readings of them to the fact that he is part Native American and spent his youth on reservations in the West. While Cooper’s background certainly informs this particular body of work, it is important to point out that most of his work over the last fifteen years has dealt with seas and rivers in relation to the history of human migrations, including migrations of the Scots, Irish, Portuguese, Scandinavians, Germans, and Mexicans, to name only a few. In Cooper’s hands bodies of water are fraught with ambiguity: he politicizes the sea even as he creates some of the most beautiful images of it. Cooper also seems to be reminding us with these images that history, before it is secured or reduced to words, can be understood as similar to vast bodies of water that are continuously in motion and can neither be easily contained nor defined. In this manner, Cooper breaks with traditional modernist depictions of the ocean while at the same time embracing the formal innovations that can be found there. Ian Jeffrey explains that the modernists preferred legible responses to nature in which the subject was already framed and represented, already part of the culture, already within the realm of the understandable. “A modernist landscape,” he writes, “is already a cul-

turally justified work and thus not to be questioned as to its *raison d’être*.”² Cooper celebrates the grandeur of nature while simultaneously making clear that it cannot be understood as a neutral or stable phenomenon.

The sea represented the unknown and the ungraspable to the Pilgrims. Cooper’s photographs of the sea, in turn, provide us with the opportunity to revisit this particular historic journey, less to review its facts than to be reminded of the Pilgrims’ fear, foreboding, resignation, anxiety, hope, loss, and the eventual cataclysm for the Native Americans associated with that journey. These photographs suggest that the “promised land” may not have always looked very promising to these seafaring refugees of the seventeenth century. Simultaneously, they intimate something of the impending tragedy that would take place as a result of this journey, and in doing so they capture a moment of American history at once inaugural and terrible—a story, therefore, that we are compelled to return to again and again.

— Alison Ferris

1. Peter Binnell, “Thomas Joshua Cooper: The Temperaments,” in *Thomas Joshua Cooper: A Simples Contagem Das Ondas: Simply Counting Waves*, (Lisbon, Portugal: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, José de Azeredo Perdigão Center for Modern Art, 1994), 142.

2. Ian Jeffrey, “Intimations: The Art of Thomas Joshua Cooper,” in *Thomas Joshua Cooper: A Simples Contagem Das Ondas: Simply Counting Waves*, (Lisbon, Portugal: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, José de Azeredo Perdigão Center for Modern Art, 1994), 148.



9. *A Premonitional Work*
Cape Cod Bay...
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Collection Sophia Collier and Chula Reynolds

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Image measurements are provided and starred works are illustrated.

- *1. *Looking Toward the Old World—Furthest East—the Atlantic Ocean, Bay of Fundy, West Quoddy Head (the Easternmost Point of Continental USA), Maine, USA, 1996–1999*
silver gelatin print, selenium and gold chloride toned
16 x 23 inches
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
2. *Looking Toward the Old World—Furthest East—the Atlantic Ocean, Bay of Fundy, West Quoddy Head (the Easternmost Point of Continental USA), Maine, USA, 1996–1999*
silver gelatin print, selenium and gold chloride toned
25 1/2 x 34 1/2 inches
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
3. *Landfall and the New Found Land—NE—the Atlantic Ocean Cape Bonavista, the Isle of Newfoundland, Canada (The Landfall of John Cabot's Discovery of the New World for the English) in the week of Spring Equinox, 1998–1999*
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 x 23 inches
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
- *4. *An Indication Piece*
The English Channel—Looking S., S.W.—Towards the New World Rame Head (Number 2), Near Plymouth Cornwall, England 1998–2001 (The Last View of the English Coast that the Pilgrim Settlers would have had upon their leave-taking from England for the New World)
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Courtesy Hallmark Photographic Collection,
Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri
5. *An Indication Piece*
The Gulf of St. Lawrence—Looking N.N.E.—Towards the Old World—Cape St. Lawrence, Cape Breton Island, Nova Scotia, Canada 1999–2001 (One of the two Northernmost Points of Nova Scotia—and along the site of both Jacques Cartier's and Samuel de Champlain's Canadian coastal discoveries and explorations of the New World for the French)
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Courtesy Sean Kelly Gallery, New York
6. *An Indication Piece*
The North Atlantic Ocean—Looking N., N.E.—Towards the Old World Cape Sable, Cape Sable Island Nova Scotia, Canada 1999–2001 (The Southernmost Point of Nova Scotia—and the Point from which over 1000 ships have been lost at sea—including those caught in the so-called "Perfect Storm," which originated around this site in 1991)
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Courtesy Hallmark Photographic Collection, Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri
7. *A Prenomitional Work*
The North Atlantic Ocean—Looking N., N.E.—Towards the Old World Race Point, Cape Cod Massachusetts, USA 2000–2001 (The Northernmost Point of Cape Cod)
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Collection Sophia Collier and Chula Reynolds
- *8. *A Prenomitional Work*
Muskeget Sound and the North Atlantic Ocean Looking N., N.E.—Yet Again, Towards the New World—From Sunset to Full Moonrise—Wasque Point, Chappaquiddick Island Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts USA 2000–2001 (The Southernmost Point of Chappaquiddick Island)
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Courtesy Hallmark Photographic Collection,
Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, Missouri
- *9. *A Prenomitional Work*
Cape Cod Bay—Looking N., N.E.—Towards the Old World—First Encounter Beach, Near Eastham Cape Cod, Massachusetts USA 2000–2001 (From this site the Pilgrim Settlers first encountered Native Americans)
silver gelatin print, selenium toned
16 1/4 x 22 3/4 inches
Collection Sophia Collier and Chula Reynolds

THOMAS JOSHUA COOPER

1946 Born San Francisco, California
Resides in Glasgow, Scotland

EDUCATION

1972 University of New Mexico, M.A., Art with Distinction in Photography,
Albuquerque, NM
1969 Humboldt State University, B.A., Art, Philosophy, and Literature, Arcata, CA

PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

1998 Appointed Honorary Professor by Glasgow University at Glasgow School of Art
1982 Founding Head of Department of Photography, School of Fine Art, Glasgow
School of Art, Glasgow, Scotland (to present)

HONORS

1994 Major Artist's Award, Scottish Arts Council, Edinburgh, Scotland

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

2004 Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth, Fort Worth, TX
2003 *Thomas Joshua Cooper*, Los Angeles County Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA (with catalogue)
2002 *The Edges of the World: Photographs by Thomas Joshua Cooper*, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, Brunswick, ME (with brochure)
2001 *At the Very Edges of the World*, Tate Gallery, St. Ives, England
Moving West—Being West: New Photographs from the Atlantic Coast, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY
The Grand River: Rio Grande River Crossings from the River to the Sea, James Kelly Contemporary Art, Santa Fe, NM
1999 *Work from the New Found Land*, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY
Where the Rivers Flow, Esbjerg Museum of Art, Esbjerg, Denmark
Thomas Joshua Cooper: Photographs, Galerie Franck und Schulte, Berlin, Germany

1998 *Backwaters: Landscape Photographs by Thomas Joshua Cooper*, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, OH

Thomas Joshua Cooper: The Temperaments, Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, NJ

Riverworks—America—Scotland, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY

1997 *Where the Rivers Flow*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, Scotland
Border Crossings, Konsthallen-Bohuslans Museum, Uddevalla, Sweden

1996 *Rivers and Rituals*, Sean Kelly Gallery, New York, NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2002 *Snapshot*, Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, KS
2000 *Land: Thomas Joshua Cooper, Richard Long, and Paul Nash*, Ingleby Gallery, Morayshire, Scotland
1999 *Eclipse: Thomas Joshua Cooper and James Turrell*, Michael Hue-Williams Fine Art, London, England
1998 *Sea Change: The Seascape in Contemporary Photography*, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ. Traveled to International Center for Photography, New York, and Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA
1997 *Location*, Usher Gallery, Lincoln, England
1996 *Longing and Belonging—From the Faraway Nearby*, Museum of Fine Arts and SHIF Santa Fe, Santa Fe, NM

PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois
The Arts Council of Great Britain, London, England
Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
La Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France
Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona,
Tucson, Arizona
City Arts Centre, Edinburgh, Scotland
The International Museum of Photography, George Eastman
House, Rochester, New York
The J. Paul Getty Museum: The Sam Wagstaff Collection,
Los Angeles, California
Museum of Modern Art, Oslo, Norway
Museum of Modern Art, Fort Worth, Texas
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada
Oakland Museum, Oakland, California
Philadelphia Museum of Art: The Dorothy Norman Bequest,
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
The Polaroid Collection, Frankfurt, Germany
Princeton University Art Museum, Princeton, New Jersey
Scottish Arts Council, Edinburgh, Scotland
Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh, Scotland
The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England
Wadsworth Athenaeum, The Sol LeWitt Collection,
Hartford, Connecticut

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

Gerry Badger and John Beuton-Harris, *Through the Looking Glass: Photographic Art in Britain 1945–1988*. London: Lund Humphries Publishers, Ltd., 1989.

Stephen Baum, *The True Vine: On Visual Representation and the Western Tradition*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Lewis Biggs, Richard Francis, and Nicholas Serota, *New North: New Art from the North of Britain*. Liverpool, England: Tate Gallery, 1990.

William Bishop and Paul Hill, *Realising Personal Truths in Photography*. London: Inscape, 1997.

David Brittain and Sarah Stevenson, *New Scottish Photography: A Critical Review of the Work of Seventeen Photographers*. Edinburgh, Scotland: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 1990.

Peter C. Bunnell, *Photography at Princeton—Celebrating Twenty-five Years of Collecting and Teaching the History of Photography*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Art Museum, 1998.

Keith Davis, *An American Century of Photography—From Dry Plate to Digital—The Hallmark Photographic Collection*. New York, NY: Hallmark Cards, Inc. in association with Harry Abrams, Inc., 1999.

Robert Keziere, Lucy Lippard, Ressa Greenburg, and Bruce Ferguson, *Longing and Belonging: From the Faraway Nearby*. New York, NY: Distributed Art Publishers, 1996.

Jorge Molder, Peter Bunnell, and Ian Jeffrey, *Thomas Joshua Cooper: A Simple Contagem Das Ondas: Simply Counting Waves*. Lisbon, Portugal: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Jose de Azeredo Perdigão Center for Modern Art, 1994.

Free



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