

Antarctic Dreams

Gary Kolb and Jay Needham



Gary Kolb, *Antarctic Dream*, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Antarctica—an immense and nearly pristine continent—inspires imaginations, inhospitable yet enticing exploration, discovery, and artistic reflection. Governed through treaty by multiple nations that all stake political and research capital there, Antarctica is a contested space. With climate change and resource exploration leading to increased interest in the southernmost continent, we all live seemingly closer to Antarctica than ever before.

Antarctica's visual presence has become iconic through paintings by artists such as Frederick Church and in photographs by explorers such as Frank Hurley. These images evoke either the sublime qualities of the landscape or the heroic stance of man against nature. This is the Antarctica of imagination and myth: the unknowable, a place most of us are unlikely to experience in any other way than through mediated artifacts. Photographs and sound recordings provide some of our most direct analogs for sensory experi-

ence and thus serve as reliable transcriptions of the real. Yet they remain highly interpretive and coded representations of the visual and sensory world.

In December 2008, the two of us sailed from Ushuaia, Argentina, to the Antarctic Peninsula. We spent a week recording sound and making photographs along its northwest coast and on proximate islands. Of particular importance to our journey was Deception Island. It was formed when a large volcano erupted and then collapsed into the sea, forming a water-filled caldera with only one narrow entrance to a mountain-ringed central basin about five miles across. This provided an ideal safe, natural harbor for vessels and sailors seeking shelter from the fierce storms of the southern ocean. Eventually the whaling industry took advantage of this refuge, mooring factory ships in the harbor at a place called Whalers Bay and flensing whales of their blubber to be boiled down for whale oil. Cookers were constructed

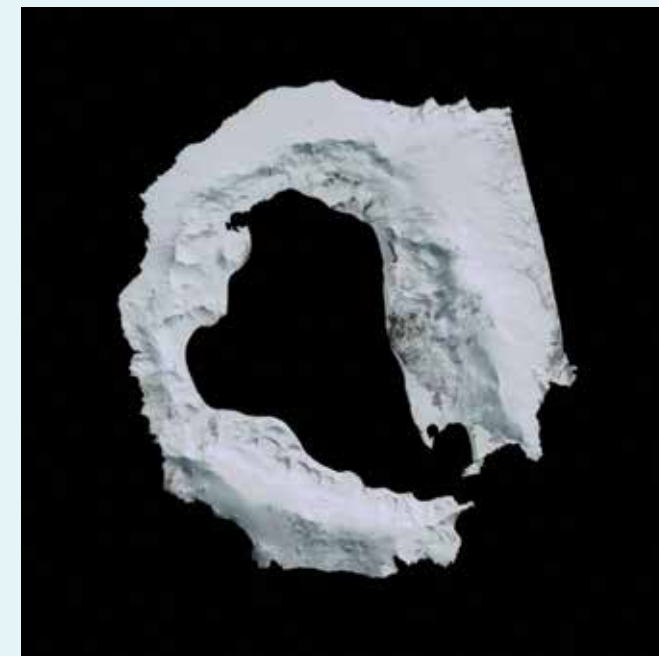


Gary Kolb, *Installation, Antarctic Dreams*, 2008, Courtesy of the artist

on land to boil down the whale remains and skeletons to extract the last bits of oil that were then stored in huge tanks. Over the years, tens of thousands of whales were processed at Whalers Bay, and their remaining boiled bones were scattered over the beach and in the waters of the caldera.

Deception Island's starkness was dichotomous. The island's geography presented an image of volcanic renewal, an active caldera in a cold sea. Yet the additional remnants of human industry on the island presented visual and sonic clues to its grisly past. Large eruptions in 1967 and 1969 created heavy mudflows that partially buried the rusting machinery at Whalers Bay. The dull iron hues of the sinking tanks resonate with microsonic pings from pebbles flowing in streambeds underneath. Although the island is a place of stillness, for us it was also a restless place that invited deep introspection.

When we returned, we had gathered more than thirty hours of recordings and over 2,700 photographs. From this, we mounted a major exhibition at the University Museum at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. The exhibition, *Antarctic Dreams*, had three major components. The outer walls of the gallery were hung with Gary Kolb's photographs of the landscape of the Antarctic. Re-purposed antique gramophone horns converted into electro-acoustic emitters with custom electronics hung throughout the gallery. The five horns each radiated a different sound work composed by Jay Needham from the Antarctic field recordings.



Gary Kolb, *Deception Island, Satellite (NASA), Construction*, 2010, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist



Gary Kolb, *Brash Ice*, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

The combined sound sculptures allowed museum attendees to experience an individualized soundscape as they moved through the gallery space. A central image installation and sound sculpture consisted of an octagonal room constructed in the center of the gallery with photographs on the outer and inner walls. On the outer walls were images of the remains of the whaling station at Whalers Bay on Deception Island. On the inner walls were images of whale bones originally found buried in the black volcanic sands of the Whalers Bay beach. In the interior of the room, with these photographs, was an additional gramophone horn sound sculpture that featured recordings of sounds emanating from the whale oil cookers and storage tanks at Whalers Bay.

Thus the exhibition contrasted the pristine landscape and soundscape of the Antarctic with the industrial age of whaling and resource exploitation of the early twentieth century. Juxtaposing these two “realities” allowed for a much richer understanding of the natural and cultural history of Antarctica and the collision between the two.

In the spirit of looking closely at one’s own “place,” Kolb has photographed extensively in the Shawnee National Forest in Southern Illinois. His images explore the varied topography of the forest and intimate details of its layered complexity. He has also incorporated objects from the landscape in studio still lifes and

digital montages. Needham’s creative focus is on the sounds of “place.” By composing with the sounds from specific landscapes he creates an imagined space, a composed soundscape that presents opportunities for listeners to consider the artistic and philosophical meanings of locality.

With this project, we follow a long tradition. The collection of “data” through drawing, painting, photography, and sound recording, to name a few media, has for centuries been part of aesthetic and scientific exploration of the natural world. These records have helped form the public conception of “unknowable” spaces that are beyond the reach and view of the average person. As the romantic, late-Victorian era faded into the twentieth century, scientific inquiry intensified and began to define our relationship to the natural world. Our conception of geographies, such as that of the Antarctic, is framed almost exclusively through media and scientific data that have been gathered over more than a century of exploration and study. We have introduced culture into nature and largely defined our understanding of the latter through the former. We found ourselves creating art at a place where historic exploration was implicated as an important component of our own creative and artistic responses.

Antarctica remains a contested place. Its future is open to many paths. Ultimately, it will be our emotional, as well as our intellectual, responses to such issues as climate change, resource development, territorial governance, human use and occupation, and cultural and scientific value that will determine the future of this remarkable continent.

Gary Kolb received a BA in religions from Northwestern University and an MFA in photography from Ohio University. In 1979, he was hired in the Department of Cinema and Photography at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He served as chair of the department, associate dean of the College of Mass Communication and Media Arts, and dean of the college until his retirement in 2012. He continues work revolving around landscape and its reflection in natural artifacts and cultural ideas. His photographs have been exhibited internationally, and he has published two acclaimed textbooks, *Photogravure: A Process Handbook* (Southern Illinois University Press, 1986) and *Photographing in the Studio* (McGraw-Hill, 1993). gpkolb@gmail.com.



Top: Gary Kolb, *Oil Tanks*, Whalers Bay, Deception Island, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Bottom: Gary Kolb, *Snow Pack*, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Jay Needham is a sound artist, electro-acoustic composer, teacher, and scholar. He utilizes multiple creative platforms, and his works often focus on recorded sound, archives, and the interpretation of artifacts. His sound art, works for radio, and visual art have appeared at museums, festivals, and on the airwaves worldwide. Through applied aspects of his research, Needham strives to affect positive change and bridge the gap between the arts and the sciences. His latest sound installation is on permanent display at the new Bio-Museo in Panama. His recordings of the Panamanian rain forest are arranged into a cycle that loops from sunrise to sunset inside the museum. He is the president of the American Society for Acoustic Ecology. www.jayneedham.net

Not North

Andrew Freeman

At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable.

—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, 1854



Deception Adventure

Gary Kolb and Jay Needham share the adventurer's itch. And I suspect if they could have traveled from the Tierra del Fuego shore to Deception Island on a nineteenth-century whaling brig they might have. Instead, Kolb and Needham traveled from the Argentine port Ushuaia to Deception Island on a decommissioned 275-foot naval cutter updated and designed with a modern understanding of endurance and survival in the Antarctic waters.

Deception Island (62° 57' S, 60° 38' W) is more accurately described as an active volcanic caldera. Somewhere between a crescent shape and a broken circle, the island has a history steeped in the residue of the whale oil industry, a contest among nations for its ownership, scientific research, and the aesthetic romanticism of a ghost town as played out in the tourism industry. Landing there as an artist requires focus, patience, and a strong sense of self. It also requires a way on and (more importantly) a way off the island.

Any idea of going to Antarctica has a romantic quality. As a remote and mysterious destination, Antarctica was replaced by the moon as “the place to discover” only in the mid twentieth century. It also must be said that the idea of *adventure* itself is the decided province of the colonist (pun intended), the well-funded, or the ideologically compelled.

And keeping in mind the inter-cultural cost of global adventure, in one lucky turn of human history, Antarctica had no indigenous populations to subdue or kill. We've all been saved that tragedy. Nonetheless, on this island we still face the artifacts of our deeds and the haunting footprints

Gary Kolb, First Land, South Shetland Islands, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist



Gary Kolb, Ruined Building, Whalers Bay, Deception Island, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist



Gary Kolb, Penguins, Ice Floe, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

etched into its otherwise unyielding volcanic and glacial surface. It is a place of harsh climate, a subtlety of texture, color, and life. Deception Island seems a place where a quiet and thoughtful meditation on the world, or one's art, requires the infrastructure of giants to protect us from the island's immense challenges. Only a few groups of people venture there: government employees, scientists, tourists, the working people supporting them, and artists. And although Kolb's and Needham's individual efforts take ultimate precedence as a best indication of their distinct commitment to making art, their collaboration in the exhibition *Antarctic Dreams* proves something of what can be done when discrete approaches from similar minds agree to perform together. At least this is what I gather from seeing Gary Kolb and Jay Needham's work and our ongoing conversation about their experiences together and alone.

Requiems Are for the Living

The contradictions or predicaments of history, global decay, militarization, eco-tourism, or the effects of traveling for one's art are not lost on Kolb and Needham. Some compulsions transcend our uneasy guilt over our carbon footprint and effectively hold at bay the irreconcilable sense that one's daily life is in direct conflict with our long-term survival as a species. It is an unsustainable trade that we make. It is a kind of bartering between the artistic and intellectual pursuits of the individual and the effects this has on our globe. It is a trade that is becoming an agreement sliced more thinly with each circling of the sun. As Gary Kolb pointed out while discussing our collective historic impact on Deception Island: the whale oil industry gave way only when kerosene, and following that, electricity took its place as the power source meeting our

insatiable demand to live in the light. The most aggressive whaling for oil largely died by mid century, but not until after it was used as sticky stuff in a treatment for trench foot during World War I and later as a component in automatic transmission fluid for automobiles through 1971 that we fully replaced its commercial uses with the current predicament of petroleum.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the bodies and bones of whales and people began to litter the shores of Deception Island. Large boiling kettles for rendering whale oil, small buildings, and the remnants of a military air station remain. The confluence of the remote beauty of such an alien landscape and the fact that what has transpired there (in the not-so-distant past) feels like a crime scene makes it seem obvious that two people with

an existentialist's edge or an empiricist's desire could see this arctic desert as fertile ground. This is the friction that artists often crave, and in the best of hands it heightens the conflicts, the compromises we've made, and provides a little space for thinking.

Kolb and Needham are composers. This is evident when one considers the visual arrangements inside each frame or the more difficult task of editing and sequencing images; and for Needham, collecting noise and articulating it as sound, and organizing each element into a receivable signal is the task at hand. It is the palpable and sometimes even melodic experience of his sound compositions that tests a successful translation. Through these acts a more complete thought is made available. These artists carry devices for synthesizing, not just recording, experience. Making art is a life of

the mind. We can argue its qualities and kinds, its instrumentalization or its self-referential even ontological leanings, but art remains a pursuit of the dedicated.

Together/Alone—In an Interview

Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then in dreaming,
The clouds, methought, would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.

—William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 3.2.135–142

Gary Kolb and Jay Needham's work in *Antarctic Dreams* is not a frigid *Heart of Darkness* redux. The installation simply conveys too much that is truly lovely to hear and see, and the work speaks too proudly of today to be that version of the dark. But a literary-like debt is being paid through Kolb and Needham's translations of a melancholy that comes from visiting a site that is naturally so cool to our presence. Deception Island is a place that has so much visible and audible past attached to its present that the island cannot escape being one of many litmus test sites of the environment. There is just too much blood on the tracks. And it is the sublime experience ("sublime" in this case should include both beautiful and grotesque references) that one can imagine, if not metaphorically taste, after visiting the exhibition that provides a conceptual or intellectually sensitive underpinning to Kolb and Needham's work from Deception Island.

Antarctic Dreams is in one sense a two-person show. The work of each artist clearly can stand on its own. And in fact, both Kolb and Needham have performed or installed their work in separate exhibitions. Yet in the case of *Antarctic Dreams*, the artists took the time to fold their ideas together into something that was mutually supportive and in which they capitalized on their experiences together as climbers in the Rocky Mountains, teacher and student, colleagues, and long-time admirers of each other's process as artists.



Gary Kolb, *Whale Bone 4*, Whalers Bay, Deception Island, Construction, 2010, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Gary Kolb's photographs are beautiful and articulate. They provide a window into his career as an artist, and they are his direct and thoughtful vision of what the medium can do in capable hands. His experience as an artist is primary, yet the years of thinking and teaching are easy to see. For the initiated and uninitiated alike, the landscapes and the deceptively monochromatic images of bones work as details describing both the actual and experiential ground Kolb has covered. His photographs are striking and ruthlessly clear when confronted in person. They are often compositionally or metaphorically layered (think landscape, then bone photographs), and the images give a sense of the stratigraphy of both geologic time and human artistic experience. One can see the studied and careful effects of Kolb's use and extraordinary understanding of the 4 x 5 and 8 x 10 field camera even if in his current work those cameras were not used. And when pressed, Kolb will relent to an admiration of and friendship with photographer Ray Metzker and a significant acquaintance with pianist Rudolph Serkin; both men are exceedingly bright lights in their respective fields. They both express themselves through a dedication to practice that prefers a masterful control of their medium. All three share a virtuoso's rigor



Gary Kolb, *Bone Cross*, Scanned Construction, 2009, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist

and thereby stay fluid and ready to produce for the big moments. In thinking of Metzker's and Serkin's works, other nuances of Kolb's seem more obvious: a devotion to detail, horizontality, and the layered and the specific invocation of a single form and medium.

The physical installation and sculptural elements of the exhibition *Antarctic Dreams* deserve particular thought. The sculptural and architectural elements act as a kind of reference for both the sound and the images. The horns that Needham provides as places to get close and listen to his mixes are obvious in their gestalt. The horns themselves are curious, old, hand-hammered objects, and in our more playful moments we wonder if we could sneak a yell into their bells or put our ears close to the funneled ends like the earliest of hearing aids. As such they are very successful in charming us into paying attention to the real work done inside them. Spread throughout the exhibition site, they physically locate the sound in the room, telling us where to go to listen. They also act to join the ideas of the two artists. Like a small rock wedged between two giant boulders holding them apart but articulating their mass and the inevitability of their comparison and sameness, each horn



Gary Kolb, *Whale Bone 1*, Whalers Bay, Deception Island, Construction, 2010, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist

becomes a syntactical hyphen for the show. Aesthetically admired, the horns provide a simple solution to a complex problem of installing a key element (sound) that innately has no visual presence.

In the center of the exhibition is a nine-sided room. For those of us who skipped geometry class, this structure is a nonagon. The unusual structure leads one to read the room as part nineteenth-century panorama, part curio cabinet, and part private meditation room. It has a modulated and modest authority yet voices the kind of spiritual intentionality that the Rothko Chapel in Houston exudes. This space within a space acts as a focal point for both artists. It is a place where Kolb and Needham's work is more lonely and contemplative, but it is also where their collaboration takes on one another's interests directly. One of Needham's horns hangs in the center of the room, spilling micro sounds of windswept sand and rock, the groans of corroding metal, and the restless ocean into the quiet small space, while Kolb's photographs of whalebones line the inner walls of the room. Both the sound and the images are hyper details—describing their subject carefully and combining into a collaboration that speaks of the history of the island at the scale



Top: Gary Kolb, *Monolith and Iceberg*, 2008, pigment inkjet print, 20 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist

of both human and geologic time. Kolb's images at first appear to be somewhat abstract because all one can see is the surface and contours of the giant mammals reduced to their archeological fragments. The photographs are deceptive in that they appear to be black and white. What the images show are bones weathered and gray from time on the hard shore. These are the last shards of some magnificent creatures, drained of color from exposure and scoured by sand. They are in an entropic repose as they slowly make their way back to the sea. In Kolb's images, the photographs of bones are stable meditations that seem similar to the history of the island. The bones seem both experientially or perhaps psychologically permanent as part of our experience, yet we know that both the bones and the island will erode, but in a timeframe that surpasses our possible experience of the island. The satellite image included

among the images of bones literalizes the comparison but leaves open the potential to consider physical distance and what might be too close or too far. Perhaps this is an environmental allegory comparing footprints on the moon to footprints on the island. In the show, the satellite image is aesthetically comfortable among the photographs of the bones. Kolb's installation in this instance performs a beautiful but disquieting comparison that, in the company of Needham's audio compositions, tells us something more—something about our modest relationship to the march of time.

In a time when both image and sound can be communicated and stored electronically, the idea of their physicality can seem superfluous rather than the experiential luxury it is. In their collaborative effort, Kolb and Needham offer us time travel. Kolb's photographs

are striking on my computer screen, but they are not as commanding of one's slower considerations without his decisions about scaling and sequence, pacing and interlude. And while Needham's sounds can be visited through the sites offered in this article, it is less possible to be in touch with the nuances and distortions he provides by his placement of them throughout the space of the exhibition. In one sidebar of our conversation, Needham mentioned how whiskey from the Ernest Shackleton voyage that stranded and crushed the *Endurance* in 1915 is now the subject of some weird and hedonistic salvage mission to find some of the dark liquor in the Antarctic ice and then replicate it for the drinking public today. As Needham pointed out, this is the idea of "being able to drink history" instead of being part of it, or reflecting on it. In this case we can simply be intoxicated by history.

Satellite of Love—The Mind's Eye from Above

Twenty-first-century viewers may believe that the volume and quantity of information that can be seen from the computer offers an experience that is close enough to the real thing. And art education or practice may not be entirely exempt from "online" fever. This is a kind of education that one can participate in from one's home and typically does not require special clothing to accommodate the weather. And while social media is clearly both social and an active political agent, it is not expressly interpersonal. Much of the imaging of experience that passes for information today relies on identifying with the person that posts it. And while it appears to be effective and true, and may in fact be about a kind of democratizing of information, its formulation in these sites is largely validated through its entertainment value. Kolb and Needham, however, have made a pretty good argument for the primacy of the field trip and the act of composing exquisite interpretive acts that result in images, objects, and sound compositions that are not surrogates but articulations of their subjective experience. Their work can be tested for clarity through a direct experience of their collaboration and exhibition.

Some older ghosts remain, too. Even now one can find oneself mired in a debate about whether the camera (or any recording device) is a barrier to participating in "real" life. Artists working with cameras can often be described as touristic, implying that we all agree on what the word "tourist" means and that it is essentially superficial. What this argument really puts forth is the idea that "recording = detachment." It is an overly simplified argument from people who

would like you to do something else. But have this conversation outside the devotees of the medium, among other thoughtful souls, and you might find that there is little patience for the thinness of it.

So the question is, "How does this work mean something?" not just "What does it mean?" The adventure takes us there, but the recordings bring us back. The idea of the record in the hands of Gary Kolb and Jay Needham is a thick description of glacial time and a human understanding of personal and historic distance. What it takes to bridge that gap is not a mere recording. A first-person experience of their work proves this. It is not evident that every viewer can agree that Needham and Kolb's is an infallible description, and it is in fact unnecessary for that type of agreement. Really there is no such thing as a simple recording of a place that encapsulates and fully describes it. Artists invest in the act of composing meaning, and that requires editing and focus. What is possible is an honoring of synthesis as a means to relate both tension and a fractured sense of peace.

Andrew Freeman is a photographer, writer, filmmaker, and occasional curator based in Los Angeles. He has exhibited at national and international venues, including the Belfast Biennale (2008) and the Center for Creative Photography (2010). He has received grants from the LEF Foundation (2002 and 2003), the Graham Foundation (2003), and the Center for Cultural Innovation (2009), as well as having been the recipient of the City of Los Angeles Cultural Affairs Individual Artist Fellowship (2007). Freeman's work was recently featured in the exhibition *Construction/Deconstruction: Defining Architectural Photography* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 2013, and he recently finished a new book entitled *This Year's Irony* (Golden Spike Press) in conjunction with an exhibition at the University of Redlands, California. His book *[Manzanar] Architecture Double* was published in 2006 (RAM Publications/Center for Land Use Interpretation) in conjunction with the acquisition of the work by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. He has taught in the Photography and Media program at the California Institute of the Arts since 1990, and from 1995 through the present has helped direct the Community Arts Partnership photography program. www.andrewfreeman.net