

DAVID B SMITH GALLERY

Kim Kever
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David B. Smith Gallery
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Exhibition Essay by Leanne Haase Goebel

One summer more than 20 years ago, while traveling through the Andes Mountains of Ecuador, Kim Kever began to question: Where did these changing landscapes come from? Why is there such a great differentiation between mountains, oceans and river systems? Why do the Andes jut up between the Pacific Ocean on one side and the nearly endless Amazon River Basin on the other? When he returned to New York that fall of 1989, he began an autodidactic study of geology.

It is from these questions, with the mind of an engineer and an objective, scientific, yet creative approach, that Kever came to create his large C-print photographs. They are constructed images. The artist works with a 6-foot-long, 200-gallon aquarium, building dioramas within the tank. Sometimes he uses pillow stuffing behind the tank to create cloud banks fading to the horizon. On other occasions, he builds additional dioramas in front and behind the tank. The tank is then filled with water, and paint pigments are added and pumped around with special tubing to create an atmosphere of surprisingly realistic quality. Then he begins to take hundreds of photographs.

"It is amazing how some things mimic examples in the real world. Paint will flow through the water like cloud formations we see every day." It's a perfect example of fractals, where the mathematical and visual mimicry of large and small systems come into play. A rock can look like a mountain, and a mountain can look like a rock. One hundred miles of coastline can look like ten thousand miles of coastline or vice versa."

Little things caught the attention of Kever as a young boy growing up on the Eastern Shore of Virginia. His father's house overlooked an estuary that met a beach surrounded by sea grass. At low tide, thousands of little fiddler crabs would move up and down the beach, scouring the sand for invisible motes of food left behind by the ebbing tide. If he got close to them, they would scatter and drop into holes in the mud. He was amazed by these miniature worlds in which he could not physically fit. But he could conceptualize that diminutive dimension. Then, in first grade, he realized he could do something better than the other children — make art. He lived with his father until he was nine, and then

with his mother in Chicago, where he spent time at The Field Museum and sometimes the Art Institute of Chicago. “I remember the dioramas at the museum, where I could look into an imaginative world of miniature Indians camped in a pine forest and feel like I was there. It was fascinating to peer into these odd windows of the world,” Kever said.

He studied art in high school and went on to get a Bachelor of Science degree in engineering from Old Dominion University, continuing to make art on the side. It was in graduate school, while studying fluid flow and boiling heat transfer, that he saw a film about Picasso. The artist was in his late 80s, painting on clear Plexiglas. The audience viewed him through the material. It was the expression of joy and happiness on his face that made Kever realize he wanted to feel that way when he reached Picasso's age.

Not long after that, Kever dropped his academic studies and became an artist. He was primarily a painter, but dabbled in printmaking and sculpture, while also making countless drawings. His subject matter focused on figures in the landscape. However, he got bored with the materials and the ways in which he had been working. During this time, he admired the constructed photographic process Cindy Sherman used for her work. He made the shift to create his own constructed photographs, determining that his constructions would not reference people, but would show the beauty and catastrophic elegance of the natural world. Most of his various series of photographic prints are landscape-based, without figures.

When viewing his photographs, one is peering into a conceptual landscape — a world that doesn't exist, but might. Kever is less a magic realist than Didier Massard, who invokes specific and iconic places like India, China, Holland and the cliffs of Normandy. Kever is often compared to Caspar David Friedrich, the German Romantic painter who is best known for allegorical landscapes featuring contemplative figures silhouetted against skies, mist, barren trees and gothic ruins. Yet the most familiar link between Friedrich and Kever and between J.M.W. Turner, John Constable and Kever is the notion of a reevaluation of the natural world.

“I'm trying to create other worlds,” Kever said. “They are not necessarily on other planets, but may exist in the here and now and may seem very familiar. Most people readily have an answer as to where these places are. I sometimes think of them as dreamscapes.”

His landscapes are inspired by nature programs, magazine articles, films and the artist's own fertile imagination. But they also explore concepts in geology. One body of work called "Wildflowers" explores the origination of flowering plants. Kever created a diorama from hundreds of tiny plastic flowers he collected over time. According to early 20th-century plant hunter Ernest H. Wilson, China is the “Mother of Gardens.” China is home to some 31,000 native plant species, a third more than the U.S. and Canada combined. Gardens throughout the world today are graced with flowering plants — forsythias, peonies, lilies, magnolias, primroses, rhododendrons and more — that originated in China and were dispersed to England, Europe and America during the empire building of the 1800s.

Similarly, he creates erosion in his fabricated worlds by combining different types of plaster. In his latest series, a mountain range made of weak plaster is constructed

directly over a mountain range composed of strong plaster. The weak plaster is eroding to reveal a sturdier mountain range underneath. The process takes only a few weeks in the water tank but involves millions of years on earth.

He created a series of images called “Shell Man” and “Eroded Man,” where landscape-like constructions erode and evolve to make faces. These works are comparative to the Rupestrian sculptures of Ana Mendieta, who created silhouettes in sand, dirt and grass, and earthwork sculptures echoing prehistoric figures.

Besides plaster, Keever uses other materials, including various pigments, herbs and items found on the sidewalk in New York. His process is intensely involved with lighting, incorporating colored gel coatings for effect, as well as working with pigment-filled bottles to introduce clouds into the water. He works with a digital Hasselblad 50 megapixel camera. The camera is much faster than using film, and he can get an image on the screen every few seconds. It's very handy to get as many images as possible because the view is constantly changing as the paint moves around in the water.

There is a theatrical element focused on the importance of creating the correct amount of light and shadow. Keever may use as many as a dozen lights for one shot, moving the light sources and changing the colors of the gels. However, Keever's process, while akin to creating a still life, is in some ways like the dioramas created by Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre in 1822 (who went on to co-invent the daguerreotype, the first widely used method of photography). A diorama was a theatrical experience, viewed by an audience. As many as 350 patrons would file into a proscenium to view a landscape painting that would subtly and dramatically change appearance; then, after a 10- or 15-minute show, the audience rotated on a massive turntable to view a second painting, hand painted on linen, transparent in selected areas. A series of these multi-layered, linen panels was arranged in a deep, truncated tunnel, then illuminated by sunlight, which had been redirected via skylights, screens, shutters and blinds. It was the skillful manipulation of light that caused the scene to appear to change. The astounded public believed they were looking at a natural scene.

The difference between what Daguerre created in the original dioramas and Keever's landscape constructions built in an aquarium is that Keever is not trying to recreate nature, but to create a mirage of nature. “I'm trying to escape the typical images you see over and over that become boring,” Keever said. “By excluding humankind from the landscapes, I try to make them timeless. The photographs could take place now, a million years ago, or a million years into the future.”

In the end, Keever creates landscapes that are mesmerizing. The viewer stops, ponders, frozen in her tracks. Where is it? What is it? Have I been there? Will I go there? It's familiar, yet strange. Real, yet an apparition. A Kim Keever photograph is prehistory and post history, the epoch and the apocalypse.