

# KINZ, TILLOU + FEIGEN

## KIM KEEVER : SUSPENDED STATES

by Lena Vigna, Curator of Exhibitions/Department Head

John Michael Kohler Arts Center

*exhibition catalogue in conjunction with Kim Keever: Suspended States at the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, Sheboygan, WI, 2005-2006.*

Kim Keever tricks us, but we do not mind. The world that he proposes in his large-scale photographs - hazy, mist shrouded mountainscapes and lush valleys blanketed in fantastic clouds - is so beguiling that it ultimately does not matter that it is not a real place (except that the images are capable of filling us with an aching or melancholy that is not always a welcome emotion). While Keever is clever with his manipulations of place and space, the micro and macro, he is also sincere - his work extends from a deep seated interest in the natural world, and his current photographs are the most recent manifestations of his desire to explore how human beings experience, understand, and relate to nature.



*Bad Marriage in Maui, 2003, C-print, 31 x 44 inches*

The subject of Keever's photographs, while absolutely based on the idea of the world in which we live is entirely fictional. In fact, each photograph is the end product of a lengthy process (lasting approximately 1 month) that starts with the crafting of a diorama from paper, plaster, reflective mylar, and other materials in an aquarium tank about four feet long by seventeen inches wide. After filling the tank with water and arranging special lighting - often using theatrical gels to achieve saturated coloring - Keever injects liquid pigments into the water and takes a series of photographs as the color disperses over a period of five to thirty minutes. By capturing this transformation on camera, Keever is able to suspend the ephemeral, literally and metaphorically. This adds up to a remarkable circumstance where past, present, and future seem to exist all at once. *Bad marriage in Maui* with its pulsing yet subdued yellow glow and luscious "blue" mountains recalls the volcanic topography of Hawaii that has existed for millennia but is constantly in flux. The photograph itself with its marred surface suggests a historical daguerreotype (but with color), and any concept of when this image was actually taken is questioned. Although the viewer may have difficulty locating these works in time, Keever never hides his artifice. The "surface marks" of this photograph are actually the result of algae buildup on the walls of the aquarium tank.

While Keever's work is not specifically inspired by the majestic paintings of the Hudson River School, the pioneering photography of the American West, or the compelling landscapes of the European Romanticists of the 19th-century, it is hard not to think of these historical precedents. Additionally appropriate might be a reference to the earthworks artists of the 1960s and 1970s who went out into nature and "made their mark," sometimes in a slight manner and sometimes in very dramatic ways, and whose projects often only exist today in photograph (by design and by nature of the ever-changing earth). Recent discussions of work relating to the landscape, such as these examples, draw on notions of the sublime and the picturesque, and it seems worthwhile to consider Keever's photographs within this context as well. Contemporary literary and social theorist Susan Stewart suggests a useful framework for basically understanding both concepts: the sublime (as drawn primarily from romantic manifestoes) is characterized by surprise and possibly even terror - "the grandeur of scenery [depicted] results in a

sudden expansion of the soul and the emotions" <sup>1</sup> - whereas the picturesque "is formed by the transformation of nature into art and thus the manipulation of flux into form, Infinity into frame." <sup>2</sup> Keever, I would argue both echoes the sentiments and defies them. His photographs have the power to raise great emotion within the viewer (as well as being emotionally charged in and of themselves) and are compositions of nature simultaneously idyllic and ideal. However, even if Keever does have the concern of the natural world at heart (as did so many of these other landscape imagists), he is also doing something slightly different by "creating" the natural world himself in this very particular way. He is not taking what is before him and manipulating it (either in paint or in earth itself). Rather, he is out-and-out making it up, purposefully constructing a world that is both rooted in the familiar and eerily strange - a place that might have existed a million years ago or could exist a million years from now.

Keever's own response to nature is awe mixed with slightly scientific analysis (surely a fact that is not wholly unconnected to his schooling in engineering). His notion of constructing a model or diorama on which to base his photographs relates to the concept of the fractal system. A fractal can be broken down into parts, which are smaller copies of the whole, i.e., the fronds that make up a fern leaf look exactly like the leaf itself, only smaller. Within the context of natural systems, fractals are used in computer modeling to represent those phenomena that do not have simple geometric shapes such as clouds, mountains, and coastlines (not coincidentally the very subjects of Keever's work). With a slightly different application of this concept, Keever presents, in his own words, the "illusion of the grand landscape in a small space." From his perspective, he has created his own fractal system with his photograph of a miniature space that actually appears to be "miles and miles deep." <sup>3</sup>

The incredible atmospheric qualities of works such as *Turtle Skull Rock*, with its slightly foreboding mix of clouds and, *Shelter*, with its deeply poignant blues, are complemented by the sense of wonder that Keever instills in the photographs. Initially, the photographs reconcile the unpredictability, beauty, and awesome power of nature. Yet, once Keever's process is revealed, the focus inevitably shifts to the surprising and curious circumstances tied to the creation of the images. The wonder inspired by the first viewing is still present, just shifted. Following Susan Stewart's discussion of the miniature, the model/diorama itself provides an air of the mysterious (further complemented by Keever's own manipulations). Stewart suggests, "the miniature has the capacity to make its context remarkable; it's fanatic qualities are related to what lies outside in such a way as to transform the total context." <sup>4</sup> Keever plays off of a seemingly inherent human interest to re-create the world in miniature (even though his is technically an imagined space) - adding layers of complexity to the situation through his particular handling and presentation of that model. Keever's model is both real (as an object itself) and not real (a fantastical landscape that seems real, at first). The constant flux of "states of being" - the ambiguity of their very "realness" - makes the work infinitely compelling.

Kim Keever's photographs are enchanting, poetic, and powerful. They remind us that, no matter our modifications of land in the uses we design for it, nature is truly beyond our control. For even when Keever is creating a landscape - controlling its production - he still has to give himself over to the unpredictable: the dispersal of pigments, the unknown of the final product. And, perhaps, more importantly they remind us that our knowledge of the world is owed not only to those things we actually experience in life but also those things we imagine. As he suggests, "I look at a lot of photographs of nature and I often imagine that... most people would not think they [the landscapes] existed if they hadn't seen the photos. Most of us, including myself, have not seen that many places with our own eyes."

<sup>1</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. (Durham, North Carolina Duke University press, 1993), 74-75.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 75.

<sup>3</sup> the whole concept of fractals is raised and discussed by Keever himself - per an e-mail conversation with the author, July 2005.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart, 46.