

Exhibition: *Thomas Joshua Cooper: The World's Edge*

On View: September 22, 2019–January 26, 2020

Location: Resnick Pavilion



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(Los Angeles—July 22, 2019) The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) presents *Thomas Joshua Cooper: The World's Edge*, marking the artist's first large-scale museum presentation. For 50 years, Thomas Joshua Cooper (United States, b. 1946, active Scotland) has been making photographs outdoors. Often realized through intense physical travel to remote and isolated sites, these stunning, large-scale, black-and-white photographs encapsulate the psychological impact of each place through geographic and atmospheric details. The exhibition comprises 140 works, showcasing Cooper's *The World's Edge—The Atlas of Emptiness and Extremity*, a project to chart the Atlantic basin its most extreme northern, southern, eastern, and western points that he began in 1987.

The World's Edge is co-organized by Rebecca Morse, Curator in the Wallis Annenberg Photography Department at LACMA, and Michael Govan, CEO and Wallis Annenberg Director of LACMA. Following the presentation at LACMA, the exhibition will travel to the National Galleries of Scotland (July 31, 2021–January 16, 2022).

"This exhibition marks both the 50th anniversary of Cooper's practice as an artist and the 500th anniversary of the beginning of Ferdinand Magellan's circumnavigation of the world—an expedition that Cooper has taken inspiration from in his own travels and photographs," says Michael Govan. "While Cooper has lived in Glasgow, Scotland, for 37 years, his formative years were spent in California, so we are particularly pleased to organize the show and open it here in Los Angeles."

"Cooper's first large-scale museum exhibition has been years in the making," says Rebecca Morse. "Since 1987, Cooper has been traversing the Atlantic basin and

creating photographs. He calls this the Atlas project and he has amassed over 700 photographs doing so. LACMA is the first institution to host such a large presentation of this project.”

About the Exhibition

In order to make his outdoor photographs, Thomas Joshua Cooper travels to remote, often isolated sites. He makes one negative per location using a 19th-century Agfa Ansco view camera, then prints each photograph by hand in a traditional darkroom in his studio in Glasgow. Typically, each photograph includes neither a horizon line nor the terrain below the artist’s feet, focusing instead on what Cooper calls the surrounding “sea space.” He composes each scene by determining its edges, one at a time. The resulting black-and-white photographs capture the psychological impact of these places through geographic and atmospheric details. They are not documents, but open, expansive artworks that are free to receive the viewer’s imagination.

In *The World’s Edge*, Cooper charts the Atlantic basin from its most extreme northern, southern, eastern, and western land points. He began this project of circumnavigation in 1987 and has since made more than 700 contributing photographs, traveling throughout the United Kingdom and to northern Europe, the west coast of Africa, the east coasts of South and Central America, the United States, Canada, and both the North and South Poles. He is the only artist to have captured all of these sites along the Atlantic basin. As climate change causes sea levels to rise, many of the land points pictured in Cooper’s photographs will soon be underwater and no longer accessible.

Exhibition Organization

The exhibition is organized regionally, with 65 large-scale works reflecting the way Cooper made the photographs via extended trips to each area. It begins with a group of works that belong to the theme **Ancient Beginnings**, which introduces Cooper’s early inspiration to make *The World’s Edge*: the legacies of 2nd-century Greco-Roman geographer Claudius Ptolemy and 6th-century Irish monastic Saint Brendan the Navigator. Their contributions to mathematics, geography, and navigation pushed Europeans to consider the world beyond themselves, to the west, north, and south.

Thematic cases throughout the exhibition feature a total of 75 eight-by-ten-inch photographs the artist uses as guides for making his larger works, with sections including:

Observations on an American History of Place, made in 2009 along the southeastern edge of the U.S. between Virginia and Florida. These photographs trace nearly 300 years of history and follow Europeans' occupation of the region, including the site of the first colony established by Spanish settlers in 1565 in St. Augustine, Florida; the site of the Battle of Yorktown, which won the American Revolution; and the site of the first battle of the American Civil War, in Charleston, South Carolina.

The **Vikings** are the earliest explorers with whom Cooper feels a regional kinship. In the 8th century, they ventured beyond their homes in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden to parts of Europe and Russia. They colonized Ireland and Scotland as well as the surrounding Atlantic Islands and, over the next two centuries, set off on sea voyages across the Atlantic Ocean to Iceland, Greenland, and Vinland (known today as Newfoundland, Canada). In this section, Cooper captures the vistas and geographical features the Vikings likely saw on their travels.

Throughout *The World's Edge* Cooper has photographed the sea from remote land points and the edges of continents, but the works in **North America/Borders** were made along the continent's interior borders. Nearly half of the border between the U.S. and Canada is composed of aqueous barriers such as waterfalls, lakes, and rivers. To the south, one great river, the Rio Grande (known in Mexico as the Río Bravo), creates a natural barrier that constitutes about one-third of the total southern border between Mexico and the United States.

In his body of pictures the **Columbian Epic**, Cooper traces Christopher Columbus's journey to the Americas. Seeking a water trade route from Europe to Asia, the Italian explorer and his crew set sail from Palos de la Frontera, Spain, in 1492. Rather than traveling along the western edge of Africa and around the Cape of Good Hope, as the Portuguese had done, Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic. He and his crew first arrived in the Americas at the Isle of San Salvador in the Bahamas two months after their launch. This voyage began centuries of human migration across the Atlantic Basin and the European colonization of the Americas. In 1522, Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan and his crew became the first people to circumnavigate the globe, also in search of a western trade between Asia from Europe. Cooper has said that these Renaissance figures' journeys led him to adopt exploration and circumnavigation as an art practice.

Cuba is the largest landmass in the Greater Antilles and the Caribbean Sea. Cooper traveled to the island nation in 2007, making pictures at its farthest points north, west, east, and south; in the Bay of Pigs; and in Guantánamo Province.

The section on **Mexico** includes pictures Cooper made on the north side of the Rio Grande in Texas, and on its south side in Chihuahua, Mexico. His photographs of the river and surrounding desert feature severe rock, harsh brush, and tumultuous rapids, revealing the inherent threats contained in this historically and politically contested region.

Cooper made photographs of **Northern and Southern Islands** in both regions' hemispheres. Those made in the north, where early Viking exploration occurred, are rocky, icy, and severe. Those made in the south include waterfalls, eddies, and pebbled beaches, and primarily depict locations off the coast of South America.

Exhibition Catalogue

Thomas Joshua Cooper: The World's Edge

Essays by Michael Govan, Rebecca Morse, Anne M. Lyden, and Christie Davis, with an annotated bibliography of the artist's monographs by Dhyandra Lawson.

192 pp; 146 illus.; 9¾ × 11 in.; hardcover (no jacket); \$60

Related Programming

Michael Govan and Thomas Joshua Cooper in Conversation

Thursday, September 19, 2019 | 7 pm

Resnick Pavilion | Free, tickets required

Credit

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About LACMA

Located on the Pacific Rim, LACMA is the largest art museum in the western United States, with a collection of nearly 140,000 objects that illuminate 6,000 years of artistic expression across the globe. Committed to showcasing a multitude of art histories, LACMA exhibits and interprets works of art from new and unexpected points of view that are informed by the region's rich cultural heritage and diverse population. LACMA's spirit of experimentation is reflected in its work with artists, technologists, and thought leaders as well as in its regional, national, and global partnerships to share collections and programs, create pioneering initiatives, and engage new audiences.

Location: 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036. lacma.org

Image captions:

(Left): Thomas Joshua Cooper, *First Light—The South Indian Ocean, the Cape of Good Hope, #2, South Africa, the Southwest-Most Point of Continental Africa*, 2004, Collection Lannan Foundation, © Thomas Joshua Cooper, photo courtesy of the artist; (Center): Thomas Joshua Cooper, *Moonlight—The Mid Atlantic Ocean, Cape Manuel, Dakar, the South-Most Point of the Cape Verde Peninsula, Senegal*, 2004, Collection Lannan Foundation, © Thomas Joshua Cooper, photo courtesy of the artist; (Right): Thomas Joshua Cooper, *North! The First Landing Site, Afternoon Drifting Fog, the Spring Equinoctial Ice Flow—The North Atlantic Ocean, L'Anse aux Meadows Natural Historic Site, the Northern Peninsula, the North-Most Point of the Isle of Newfoundland and the Site of the First Known European Contact with The New World, Canada*, 1998, Collection Lannan Foundation, © Thomas Joshua Cooper, photo courtesy of the artist

Press Contact

Erin Yokomizo | Senior Associate, Communications | eyokomizo@lacma.org | 323 932-5825

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