

Unnatural Formations

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In 2012, the American-Scandinavian Foundation celebrated the 100th anniversary of its Fellowship Program with the exhibition *Unnatural Formations: Three Contemporary Photographers*, with works by three recent ASF grant recipients — Stephen Hilyard, Simen Johan, and Lydia Anne McCarthy — who have emerged as innovators in the field of contemporary landscape photography.

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The ASF Fellowship Program is the Foundation's longest-standing commitment to cultural and educational exchange, cultivating enduring academic, professional, and personal ties between the United States and Scandinavia House through programs of study, research, and practical training. In *Unnatural Formations*, curated by Pari Stave, the 25 works on display represented discrete series of works from each of the artists' fellowship experiences working throughout the Nordic countries.

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In these three series, the exhibition explored the ways that each of the artists engaged with unique aspects of Nordic terrain and climate for expressive effect. Through hybrid landscapes, disparate and sometimes dissonant images were woven together to create new, hypothetical landscapes.

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Using various techniques of photographic manipulation, the artists combined images to create simulated environments that appear at once familiar and alien, ultimately calling into question perceptions of reality and artifice.

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Inspired by cultural fascination with the glamour and allure of risk-taking, artist Stephen Hilyard's "Rapture of the Deep" personifies eight prominent British high-altitude mountaineers of the 1970s and 80s, set within imagined landscapes.

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To create the series in 2009, Hilyard traveled to Iceland's Silfra Ravine. Lying under 60 feet of water at the bottom of Lake Thingvellir — where frigid waters provide the greatest possible underwater visibility — he was able to capture underwater landscapes, which he later digitally combined with Icelandic skyline images as well as photographs of the climbers in order to subvert the viewer's reading of their location.

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The effect has been compared to the dramatic vistas and highly precise renderings of natural formations found in the 19th-century Romantic landscapes of artists such as Caspar David Friedrich and Johan Christian Dahl: hybridized landscapes that both celebrate and subvert the idea of the sublime in nature.

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Each of the photographs is named after the climber depicted as well as the location of his death, such as this work named for the climber Peter Boardman, who was last seen on a failed expedition on Mount Everest in 1982.

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The title of the series, “Rapture of the Deep,” was coined by Jacques Cousteau and is a reference to the nitrogen narcosis — the life-threatening sense of euphoria experienced by divers who go to extreme depths.

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Comprising both photographs and sculpture, Norwegian-born artist Simen Johan’s ongoing series “Until the Kingdom Comes” creates mythical habitats that hover in a space between reality, fantasy and nightmare. In creating hybrid worlds where animals roam in non-native landscapes, Johan strives to create tension and confuse the boundaries between opposing forces such as the familiar and the otherworldly, the natural and the artificial.

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Merging traditional photographic techniques with digital methods, Johan’s works begin with film-based photographs of land formations, plants, and animals — either live animals found in zoos and nature preserves, or taxidermied animals found in dioramas or set up as studio tableaux.

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Photographs are then scanned and painstakingly recombined in the computer for consistency of light, shadow, scale, perspective, and image density, resulting in seamless, large-scale compositions that appear deceptively real.

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During his 2009 ASF Fellowship, Johan traveled to Iceland, where he gathered photographic material such as images of volcanic grounds, fjords, glaciers, waterfalls, and caves, as well as the atmospheric effects of fog and smoke, to later weave together with other images in his studio.

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This enabled him to later create works such as his *Untitled #131*, in which a llama proudly wanders the landscape of a remote Nordic tundra.

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During the course of her fellowship in 2011, American artist Lydia Anne McCarthy traveled to the Tjeggelvas nature preserve in northwestern Sweden to access the remote Scots pine forests that are ancestral homelands of the Sámi peoples. There, she worked closely with forest historians to photograph the phenomenon of “culturally modified trees” — the scarified remains left over from the Sami practice of harvesting pine bark for consumption.

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Drawing on the influence of spirit photography, McCarthy used multiple exposures in order to create composite images in the camera, resulting in portraits of nature that are both animated and disorienting. The works were later collected in the series on view in the exhibition, titled “In a Northern Country.”

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In the process of recording these “biological archives,” McCarthy worked to create multi-layered images that tell the story of a place while evoking a human presence through the psyche of the viewer.

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In works such as her image *Above and Beyond*, pictured here, the pine forests appear to exist simultaneously in two places; both immediately in the foreground, and in a more mystical, dream-like landscape rising up from beyond the skyline.

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Each year, ASF continues to award fellowships and grants to over 80 individuals working in fields ranging from academic, to professional, to artistic. With the exhibition of these valuable works in *Unnatural Formations*, we were glad to be able to showcase the continuing, and enduring, importance of international study to the arts.

CREDITS:

Artwork images courtesy of Stephen Hilyard, Lydia Anne McCarthy, & Simen Johan/Yossi Milo Gallery.

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