

review *Ultima Thule* by
Tiina Itkonen at
Michael Hoppen
Contemporary

CAPTURING THE SERENE AND IMMENSE LANDSCAPES OF A DISTANT WORLD, FINNISH PHOTOGRAPHER TIINA ITKONEN IS EXHIBITING HER LARGE-SCALE PHOTOGRAPHS THIS MONTH. MARINA SYRMAKEZI EXPLORES THEIR PURPOSE AND MEANING.

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Tiina Itkonen's imagery is a serene and lyrical documentation of the lives of the Inuit people. Depicting the immense landscapes of the cold North in extraordinary simplicity, by gazing at these large-scale photographs one can clearly see that the artist's intention was not just to document and present a culture that bears no resemblance to ours; it is also a creation beyond reason and outcome. It is clearly a tribute to these people and their culture.

Itkonen has not just captured the magnificence of nature; she has created articulate imagery using the medium of photography in a very precise and effective way. Her picturesque imagery deserves the title of quality artwork while she has approached her subject matter with great respect. The outcome is a painterly quality to her work, which communicates a wide range of states and emotions.

"When I close my eyes I am in Thule, and the silence is perfect. Bluish light dances across the snow; the icebergs glow turquoise. The silence is broken by a loud crack.

An iceberg splits, creating new smaller icebergs. In an instant, the light transforms the landscape from beautifully mellow to frighteningly sombre. In Thule there are no roads that I could take to get away. I follow my own paths. In Thule there are no trees: I can see the horizon far off in all directions. I am incapable of judging distances. I am not used to seeing this far."

This is as much a personal journey for Tiina as it is about making art. Her work illustrates a very personal relationship with her subject matter, skilfully communicated in her photographic imagery.

Since the 1990s, Tiina Itkonen has been searching for her own 'Ultima Thule', for her own place in the Far North. In 1995, she began her journey at the northern part of Greenland, home of the Polar Eskimos. Inspired by the Greenlandic legend of 'The Mother of the Sea' she set off, spending four months on each visit.

'Mother of the Sea' is one of the most important myths in the culture

of the Thule people. Living so close to nature-inspired legends strongly reflects their superstitious approach to natural phenomena. Such a myth challenges the imagination of a westerner and can act as an inspiration to artists.

The legend's universe is fantastic and colourful. Tiina found that "the story of how the girl was thrown over the boat and how she lived in the bottom of the sea governing sea animals was so impressive that I wanted to make a photo of the Mother of the Sea in 1995." There is a moral message in this tale; people must not be greedy and they must observe and preserve customs and traditions. Myths like this one were created under the magical glow of the northern lights through the ages and have challenged the imagination of many, Tiina's amongst them.

It is easy to draw connections between this myth and others in Western Europe; they all have an intimate connection with nature and inspire respect for it. There is a lesson to be learned from these tales and more often than not it has to do with

Man's behaviour and respect for the world around him/her in order for survival to be achieved. Nature has always had to be respected. And even though we as a society have moved on, these myths are still applicable today.

One of the inevitable outcomes of a body of work depicting a different culture is the sharp contrast that exists between the imagery and the concept behind it. Such a contrast is evident in Tiina's work. But it is not one that will complicate the

imagery and reduce its purpose. This contrast in fact adds to the process of bringing the images alive in the viewer's imagination – you can hear the whirling winds of the vast snowy landscape in the background.

The perception of a landscape, in the western world, whether it is a city or the countryside, is one of a relatively static area deeply affected by man. It is a very different feeling observing an arctic landscape, knowing that the horizon does not stand still in the ever-changing land

and that man, in a reverse of fortunes, is the weaker part of the equation this time. This is a land with different rules and nature defines them. Time and space operate according to what nature allows.

The Polar Eskimos live according to the weather and the seasons. Decisions on when to hunt, travel or visit relatives are determined by the weather and its sudden changes. Nobody is ever in a hurry and there is time for things to be done as and when required.



Tiina captures the moment a storm is about to set off, the reflections of an iceberg glowing under the cold sun. She will wait for the right time to shoot her photograph, sometimes for hours or days so that weather conditions are either cloudy or foggy or landscapes lit under the bright sun in order to capture the variations in light quality.

"It is fascinating and comforting being able to see far away. No trees or tall buildings to block the view. A broad view can be hard to capture

in a single frame. The picture does not tell what is far and what is near, nor what is large and what is small. An iceberg is the size of a house of flats. An island that looks like is two kilometres away is actually ten times further. Even my eyes cannot tell these things."

Tiina Itkonen is a contemporary Finnish photographer. She trained at the School of Art and Design in Helsinki and was winner of the *Finnish Young Photographer of the Year 2003*. She has been exhibiting

in Finland and abroad since 1996 and her photographs can be found in collections at The Finnish Museum of Photography, Fundacio Foto Colectania in Barcelona, DZ Bank in Germany and at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm amongst others.

For the past decade Tiina has been extensively photographing Greenland and its natives. Asked if her work is a document of the lives of the Thule people, Tiina replied that this was the case in her previous project. "I finished the portrait



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project in North Greenland in 2002 and the project resulted in a book called *Inughuit* in 2004. However, since then I have been taking photos of landscapes in West Greenland." Her main subject matter currently is the landscape and icebergs.

One of the biggest challenges Tiina found when creating the work was the "time to find the perfect spot to take the photographs. It is not easy to travel in a country where there are no roads between towns. I explore the villages' immediate surroundings by foot. When further out, I use hunters' boats and dog sledges. By sledge, the journeys take several hours. In Greenland the weather can change surprisingly quickly. During bad weather nobody travels anywhere. "Immaqa agaqu..." – maybe tomorrow." She only once took an assistant with her and she prefers traditional photographic methods. "I work mostly with manual camera, tripod and light meter. I have used mostly Fuji GX 617 panorama camera and tripod in the last few years. I have used a Mamiya 7 and a

Hasselblad as well. I have started to use some digital equipments as well, but I still prefer traditional ones."

Tiina's work will be hosted at Michael Hoppen Contemporary Art Gallery until 7 October. The gallery is wholly devoted to photographic image as art and Tiina's work represents such a concept well. The gallery's main goal is to encourage the appreciation, love and collecting of carefully selected artwork. The gallery's aesthetic principle does not just stop at the image but emphasises the vital role of photography in today's contemporary art with a passion to excite and inform. Such context does justice to Tiina Itkonen's art.

The large-scale C-type prints will play with your emotions and the visual feast will attempt to transport you to an environment that through its simplicity, offers so much more.

"On my first trip to Greenland, I was told I would definitely be coming back. According to Greenlandic tale, a human being can turn into a qivigtop, run around the fells, live

there and finally die there. My desire to return to Greenland goes beyond reason. On one of my trips there I tried to shake off this madness and leave wandering in the northern landscapes, like a qivigtoq. I did not succeed."

'Ultima Thule' by Tiina Itkonen is on show at the Michael Hoppen Gallery, London SW3, until 7 October 2008. For more information visit www.michaelhoppencontemporary.com