

## The Edge of Emptiness

by Laura Gonzalez



It is well known that Thomas Joshua Cooper is a landscape photographer: he travels around Britain, documenting with his camera the existence of remote locations, hidden natures and places that the majority of people rarely have the chance or will to experience.

His observational work debates between the objectivity of the place described and the testimony of a traveller-artist. We don't know very well what kind of photographs these are or what their purpose is. As Tom Lubbock already pointed out the actual sense of place of Cooper's images is weak if it was not for the titles. First, we can recognise a journey and the natural beauty of the destination. Then, only after the title is revealed, we can experience the consciousness of being there. What we see are the northern and southern-most points of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the extremities of a geography, the astonishing textures of the seas and rivers we all studied when children and whose photographs were never shown in our schoolbooks. Meaning has been restored to the cardinal points, ordering the sense of time and space. The titles also identify a certain point in the day, year and sometimes history but not having the possibility of recognition within the image is, in my opinion, the reason why these locations become emotional. Once we know, they gain a geographical, more universal characteristic.

Roland Barthes, in his last book *Camera Lucida*, argues that the specific function of photography is simply stating the existence of something: 'that-has-been', an irrefutable proof that the photographer saw what he photographed. Under this light, Cooper is not only a landscape photographer as I stated at the beginning of this reflection, but also a testimonial scientist revealing the landmarks that signal the limits of certain territories.

What the photographs also reveal is the trouble Thomas Joshua Cooper went through to get to those however meaningful places and photographing them with the 100 year old plate camera, skilfully and carefully, making all of the above a mere post hoc justification. Basic manuals for film scriptwriting tell us

that, in order to obtain his goal, the hero has to overcome a series of obstacles, the last one being a face-to-face with himself in whatever form this might take. In his work, we can easily picture a motioned Thomas Joshua Cooper walking, ascending, climbing, perching, balancing and resting in order to get to the spot immortalised by the photographs. I suspect that the literal outcome of the photographs, however, is not all that he wanted to show us.

The aim, the secret, the revelation seems to lie somewhere behind or under or beyond or below what is photographed, just one last action away. To find it, he would only have had to walk a little bit further, tear apart, look up or down, wait. There is the sense in these images of being near something significant. Often, I must admit, it is just the feeling of discovering a human presence in such isolated geographies... Some other times, it is the sense of a possible a narration, the rests of an action that took place there or premonitions of a future one. But whatever that is it seems he did not have the energy to overcome a last difficulty and face himself. So, in a way, it feels like these photographs are the failures of the photographs he wanted to get... The end of the world is bound to be disappointing.

Thomas Joshua Cooper knows that revealing what he knows would be completely pointless. The photographs, with their tensions and the gaps they leave, work better as they are, provoking feelings and thoughts. It is not important at all what they could be because these images are fed by the process of being at arms length of something significant, knowing it is there, very very close and then deciding not to look. Exposing it could bring, in the best of cases, indifference and disappointment; whereas ignorance, if it means the possibility of many things, could be stimulating and advantageous. It takes considerable courage to consider the task finished at precisely that point, (before the sheriff hands a significant cash reward or the pretty girl looks at us in awe, to follow the film analogy), even more so than to get to those remote places.

The photographs, one could argue, depict landscapes of emptiness. But what is at the end of emptiness? 'Settlement', quoting Thomas A. Clarke, is Cooper's answer. If we followed the clues and coordinates described in the images and titles we could perhaps arrive to those precise locations. If we then performed that last action (jump, tear, turn, look, face ourselves...) settlement in all its ambiguity – a community, a resolution, an agreement, calm – could be our reward. The promise is in the photographs.

Thomas Joshua Cooper combines creativity with a commitment to education, just as Roland Barthes did. Both, belonging to an academic world that rejects the Soul as an intellectually un-rigorous idea, set themselves the task to look for it. In both cases, the works are generous, moving and opened, offering space to readers/viewers and their personal histories. Thomas Joshua Cooper's photographs are as much landscapes as the foliage or the sea reminds one of human skin and the rocks, of hair.

Laura Gonzalez

Above image: *South-most-Arrival-The English Channel, At the hour of the total solar eclipse, but on the day before, Bumble Rock, Lizard Point, Cornwall, Great Britain (Plymouth) August 10, 1999*. Silver gelatin print.

<sup>1</sup> Tom Lubbock, *Alone, alone, all, all alone, alone on a wide, wide sea*, The Independent, December 16, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*, Random House, London, 2000, pp 76-77.

**Back to Features**

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