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Microcosms of Scale South African Landscapes by Alexander Lindsay

4 September -18 October
MESSUMS WILTSHIRE

Alexander Lindsay's photographs are profoundly beautiful examples of a particular kind of British Romanticism. In stark distinction to the gritty urban realism of the Dusseldorf School of Photography and works by artists like Andreas Gursky, which focus on architecture and the dehumanising elements of city life, Lindsay's exalt Nature and the open air, seeing, like William Blake, 'a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower.'

Focusing in this exhibition upon the majestic terrain of Southern Africa, there are rarely animals or people in his pictures – just the rocks and fauna of a land that is dauntingly, almost celestially, beautiful. The series of 25 works vary in scale and all date from 2017 and 2018 when Lindsay was living in Cape Town, travelling to Lesotho and Namibia on month-long sojourns. One of the most arresting images is of a young shepherd boy, standing by a

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waterfall, the blanket he is wearing echoing in form and colour the rocks and cliffs around him. His face turned towards the camera he stands like a sentinel as much part of the landscape as in it.

Another work features the expanses of emerald grass of Kaokoland in Namibia below the Angolan border. It documents one of the emptiest, but most arrestingly beautiful, regions of the world prowled only by animals and the Himba Tribe. In the picture one senses the commanding voice of Nature where Man is humbled in scale and importance.

One of the most challenging shoots Lindsay did for this latest South African series was for the photograph he took high up in the Drakensberg Mountains. ‘I got hideous vertigo climbing the 30-metre-high vertical ladders made just of chains to get to the spot where I took this photograph. If someone else stepped on to the ladders they moved; it was really gruesome,’ he recalls.

On every journey he employs the services of a guide to discover the scenes. ‘On that trip we slept in refuge huts high up on the Drakensberg escarpment (Shield of Spears) with the young shepherds who are there for months on end tending their flocks of sheep and goats. They too helped me find the best spots.’

Alexander’s Southern African travels followed those of his ancestor, Lady Anne Barnard (néeLindsay), who arrived in Cape Town in 1797 as the wife of the British colonial secretary. Barnard immediately fell in love with the country and its people and encouraged by the explorer and diplomat John Barrow and his tales of ‘*The sublime and the beautiful, the tame and terrible*’regions of South Africa, she conducted a series of long expeditions in the Western Cape, recording her experiences in journals and watercolours. Her records show a fascination and admiration for all she encountered, and her watercolours are some of the most beautiful early records of the towns, countryside and inhabitants of the region.

Alexander grew up in the same house as Lady Anne in Scotland, where her paintings and writings provided seeds of inspiration for his lifelong passion for extreme travel, filming and photography. During her time in Cape Town, Lady Anne built and lived in the house that has now become The Vineyard, one of South Africa’s finest hotels.

An awareness of the passage of time and the raw knowledge and power held by the earth was thrown sharply into focus for the photographer, when, in his early twenties, he came under fire from Russian forces in Afghanistan. The experience made him feel stunned and suspended in time and has since pushed him to seek out the most remote and abandoned areas of the earth where he can capture a sense of the eternal moment. In the light of South Africa, so beautifully captured in his pictures, one senses the Sublime of paintings by Turner or poems by Wordsworth mixing thoughts and emotions to transport you to a place beyond normal experience.

‘All my photography is in the pursuit of wonder,’ he says. ‘People might think being a landscape photographer is tame. But to me, the absolutely real is much more interesting

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than anything created. I want to pay my respects to Nature through creating art from the real. My pictures are slices of time; we all live in time that never stands still and a photo gives that time significance. It is such a privilege to be alone - when one is truly alone - in landscapes like these. It's fantastically exciting.'

Born in London in 1961, Lindsay first encountered photography when he was at school and began taking pictures of the landscape. Aged 16 he won an award for making a film about the fishing villages of East Neuk in Fife near where he grew up. 'I was always fascinated by the mechanical side of photography. It was amazing to me that cameras could produce something so emotionally productive and I very quickly became obsessed with them.'

After a chance meeting with a photographer for National Geographic Magazine, he became her assistant and thereafter attended the Rochester Institute of Technology in America, where Ansel Adams and other celebrated landscape and portrait photographers like the Russian émigré Roman Vishniac, lectured.

In his early twenties Lindsay made three films about the Russian invasion of Afghanistan, one of which won the Royal Television Society's award for the best documentary of the year and in the early nineties he was the first person to enter the wreck of the Titanic which he photographed using lights bigger than any that had been dropped to the bottom of the sea.

In 1991 he made a film of the first Gulf War in Iraq but after losing many friends to the wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, and with a desire to control the medium more than he felt television documentaries could allow, he returned to his first love.

In addition to his ancestor, another key influence on the way he sees landscape was the Modernist house his parents moved to during the latter part of his childhood and the house he currently occupies in Scotland. This house has huge plate glass windows and a spectacular view looking down to the Firth of Forth and coupled with the influence of his godfather, the sculptor Antony Caro, it has bred in him a love of large forms within the big vista.

Lindsay is passionate about the quality of the printing of his works, which he does himself to an exactingly high standard. Using multiple images that he stitches together he generates pictures of extraordinary definition and detail allowing him to print on a large scale (some of his pictures are five metres long) without losing any definition of the tiniest details. Thus, a field of purple hibiscus flowering in the foreground of a picture of the Highlands of Lesotho are as detailed in definition as the mountain range behind them.

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Talk and Tour with Alexander Lindsay, Saturday 19 September at 11am

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M E S S U M S L O N D O N is modernist gallery space on Cork Street where the family have had a presence since 1992.

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