

Detail from *Augury Engine*

KAHN & SELESNICK

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Curated by Maura Coughlin and Mark Adams



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KAHN AND SELESNICK



Richard Selesnick and Nicholas Kahn

Richard Selesnick and Nicholas Kahn have been collaborating as Kahn and Selesnick since 1988 on a series of complex narrative photo-novellas and sculptural installations. They were both born in 1964, in New York City and London respectively. They met at Washington University in St. Louis, MO in 1982 where they collaborated informally as photography majors. After several of years of showing their art separately, they migrated to Cape Cod to work on an evolving series of photo-based projects involving fictional attributions, narratives, sculpture, and painting.

Kahn and Selesnick's works are tactile and bodied, offering sleight of hand and the quicksilver flash of inspiration as interruptions to our habitual ways of seeing, instead encouraging us to feel the Earth and its history and to know our part in its unfolding story. The results are masterfully executed non-linear tales that appear to dream themselves.

Kahn and Selesnick have participated in over 100 solo and group exhibitions worldwide and have work in over 20 collections, including the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Brooklyn Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Houston Museum of Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the

Smithsonian Institution. They have also performed artist's residencies at Provincetown's Fine Arts Work Center and 20 Summers, Toni Morrison's Princeton Atelier, the Lux Art Institute, the Djerassi Foundation, and the Addison Gallery of American Art. In addition, they have published 3 books with Aperture Press: *Scotlandfuturebog*, *City of Salt*, and *Apollo Prophecies*. Their latest book, *100 Views of the Drowning World*, was published by Candela Books in 2017. They have received grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation and the Provincetown Arts Council, and have been featured in documentaries produced by Voom! and PBS.

Kahn lives in Ghent NY, and Selesnick in Barrytown NY. They have been making photographs on Cape Cod for over 30 years.

From Curator Maura Coughlin

Early collaborative photographic projects by Kahn and Selesnick were staged in rural English landscapes—moors, inlets, bogs and swamps that were so very different from the suburbs of their childhoods. One of many reference points was the work of 19th-century British Pictorialists who used new photographic techniques to construct alternative realities rather than to merely document the

visible. Fearlessly manipulating analog images through craft and knacks and work-arounds, Kahn and Selesnick developed an aesthetic approach to altered images that preceded the nimble mutability of digital photography that we already take for granted, anticipating the electronic future of the medium. In their Siberian expedition series of 1998, for instance, images shot on film were blown up on a color photocopier, painted, cut out, and recombined on a vast scale. This handmade, improvisational bricolage approach to the photographic image has remained central to their aesthetic even as digital photography has exponentially expanded in technical sophistication.

During one early shoot, a close friend (while costumed as a shaman) challenged them to reconsider the politics of their nostalgia for a mythical English countryside. Working through series of false histories and games about museology, they arrived at something far more theatrical. In 2014, naming their absurdist actors 'Truppe Fledermaus' (from the German vaudeville farce, *Die Fledermaus* or 'revenge of the bat') the performances of their band of characters grew into the series, *The Carnival at the End of the World*. From thereon, this costumed brigade has enacted a theatre of crisis, offering incongruous allegories and unscripted iconographies.

Their ever-more-pointed environmental and political ethics have drawn energy and inspiration from the variable ecologies of tideline, wetland, marsh and dune on the Outer Cape and elsewhere. These marginal places shared a neither-this-nor-that mutable status: psychologically these are liminal spaces of dream, transformation and loss. Ecologically, they are places of possibility, biodiversity, rapid change, absorption, rot and sequestration. In these landscapes, spiritual performances, strangely removed from modern culture work through the grief of our catastrophic loss of biodiversity, our viral entanglement with endangered

non-human animals like bats and pangolins and the devastatingly transformative, rising waters of climate change.

The carnivalesque absurdity permeating Kahn and Selesnick's work has often been a vehicle for dystopian political allegory, whether in 16th-century Shrovetide spectacle, the paintings of Pieter Bruegel or the imagery of Dada and Surrealism. The Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin described the world of carnival as a socially ambiguous space where hierarchies (of all sorts) are inverted for the duration of the festival. Carnival culminated in Mardi Gras and functioned as a public safety valve for the release of tension and anxiety. It sanctioned the free flow and mingling of hierarchies and categories such as gender, class, and biological taxonomy, and encouraged the profanation of the sacred. At times, the critical message of carnival became so subversively dissident as to be banned. In *World Upside Down* broadsheet images, published in 16th-century Amsterdam, the ox flays the butcher, the peasant rides while the king walks, the sheep eat the wolf, fish nest in trees, the wife goes to war... and so forth. Gender binaries and biological taxonomies are mixed, conflated, remade. The ambiguously porous nature of these old images can suggest foolishness to some viewers, yet to others they might indicate a desired future or a call for revolution. What carnival shares with marginal ecological spaces is its potential as a transformational space where concurrent or even violently contradictory differences overlap or are accommodated.

If this festival world only temporarily suspended everyday class structures and legal codes, the images of Kahn and Selesnick project the carnivalesque into a future-present in which its persistence is given. They channel its energy into a fearless absurdity, capable of weaponizing our anxieties of climate crisis, viral pandemics and rising fascism. As theatre in nature, their images permit us to radically

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Detail from *Cart Pullers*

imagine (and perhaps inhabit) a world not-yet forged, emerging from social and environmental collapse. Their aesthetic of retro-futurity pictures ways of living with the mess of a damaged planet, miles away from the neo-liberal faith in ‘resilience’ that advocates business-as-usual. It hardly seems coincidental that the hardy souls in *Truppe Fledermaus* congregate with their animal familiars in makeshift scenarios in heterotopias of transition. Are these the wastelands of extractive capitalism? As in the alternative worlds proposed in speculative fiction, we are permitted to linger in a space where nature and culture are no longer divided or commodified, where creative play flourishes, messily patched together or elegantly excessive. *Carnival at the End of the World* is both an elegy for a paradise lost that needs reimagining and a ritual space in which new communities, drawn together by radical and creative bonds of kinship, may commune with the ecological disaster that surrounds us.

From Curator Mark Adams

The fantastical narratives of Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick portray hope, folly and demise in rich multi-dimensional tableaux. The settings of bog, marsh, ocean and desert

exist in a time of real inundation and plagues. The folk motifs of nature worship grew out of times of uncertainty, the flirtatious masks and foolery their poetic response, a relief to the chaos. There’s a real map underlying this work. The places they inhabit are as familiar as childhood memories but faithful to real geographies.

As in the vignettes of “High Water Mark” or “Prophet of the Ditch”, the *Truppe Fledermaus* characters both ennoble and mock the scientists that I work with at the National Park Service. None of our maps are much good without a field expedition, a dune walk dragging a Radar sled or a boat trip with sonar over submerged sand bars amid breaking waves. The visualization of nature in art can be an inspiration to scientists. The landscapes in these panoramas: Cape Cod, the UK, Scandinavia, and Mars, are the front lines of our confrontations with nature and a tinge of melancholy shadows our data. Kahn and Selesnick’s pageants remind me often about the unexpected displacement of so many people in the world—how the flow of refugees, driven by our misunderstanding of climate and ecology. We ferry our possessions across the flood in vain



Detail from *Currency Birds*

attempts to ignore the changes around us, the characters with leather valises and waistcoats, dragging trains of gowns.

Their working partnership has endured longer than most rock bands, a genuine harmony of sensibility and skills. Their circle of friends, conscripted to slog in costume through dunes and chilly marshes, getting stripped, feathered and dunked on tortuous romps. Floating figures, dreaming or dead, surrounded by abundance, convey a willing surrender to tragedy and a chilling exposure for the friends that posed. This work is made via personal grit, has their dirty fingerprints on it: distressed fresco, a porcelain plate, a grainy video, a vintage uniform, a bit of couture.

Poet Nick Flynn remembers: “It was always a day-long project, we’d hike into beautiful spots... on the Pamet, in the dunes of the Province Lands, and at ponds and rock falls in the Hudson Valley. The period costumes were from 1800s—or from 2050. They like putting bodies and fruit and flowers in water. Kahn put me in a long white nightshirt, holding a book, wading in the pond—it was always freezing with Kahn—then he set the book on fire. The

pages floated up and into the sky and across the water...”

They are students of natural history, myth and imagination, turning it all into a feast of grotesques and memento mori. This is a field campaign in ruinous extravagance and sartorial virtuosity, draped with scarves and hats, a billow of fabric. The stereoscopic format reads like a proscenium stage.

Each nod to Archimboldo or Tiepolo, the Bloomsbury romantics, or Natural Philosophers is a note in an improvisation that celebrates nature’s endgames. In keeping with Strauss’s *Fledermaus* operetta, the drunken bat is a figure of deception, revenge and ultimately forgiveness because at last, all the revelers are hucksters and fools.

Personally, I relate to their celebration of noble failure, the rapacious collecting of amateur naturalists. The core thread of nature and animal lore, the half beasts they become and the pan-gods they conjure. Kahn and Selesnick are believers in their dreams and deft at invoking ours.

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Selection from *Carnival at the End of the World*

Selections from *100 Views of the Drowning World*, 2007–2020
Archival inkjet prints, 17" x 22" each

A Jolly Company, 2012
Archival inkjet prints, 49" x 49"

A Ship of Fools, 2014
Archival inkjet prints, 49" x 49"

Augury Engine, 2011
Archival inkjet prints, 49" x 49"

Balog, 1998
Archival inkjet print, 13" x 10.5"

Battle of the Shamans and the NKVD, 1998
Archival inkjet print, 8" x 72"

Costumes from *Carnival at the End of the World*, 2007–2020
Mixed media, variable dimensions

Cart Pullers, 2012
Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"

Chudleigh, 1998
Salt, dough, nails, 12" x 7" x 8"

The Circular River, 2007–2020
Hand-bound book with archival Archival inkjet prints, 77" x 35" x 3"

Currency Birds, 2008
Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"

Currency Balloon, 2007–20
Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"



Selection from *Carnival at the End of the World*

Kit Inspection, 1997

Archival inkjet print, 8" x 72"

*Objects from the Collection of
Peter Hesselbach*, various dimensions

The Ornothopter

Over the Marshes, 1997

Archival inkjet print, 8" x 72"

Portrait of Peter Hesselbach, 1997

Flashe on plaster, 12" x 12"

Radar Men, 2005

Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"

Royal Excavation Corps Insignia, 1997

Flashe and gilding on canvas, 12" x 12"

Ship of Fools, 2008

Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"

Theater of Operations, 1996–2020
Mixed media, variable dimensions

Voyage of Greenman, 2012

Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"

We Recross the Circular River, 1998

Archival inkjet print, 8" x 72"

Wing Launch, 2005

Archival inkjet print, 10" x 72"

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