

Maureen Drennan Meet Me in the Green Glen, Island Kingdom and the sea that surrounds us

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Plus: The Blue of Distance on view at Transmitter Gallery



I first met **Maureen Drennan** at **Review Santa Fe** in 2010. She had a secret project about a pot farm back when marijuana was illegal in California and was an even more taboo subject. I wondered at her access and her ability to not only find the hidden acres of weed, but also how her subjects felt so comfortable with her that they allowed her to photograph them in bed and in the bath as well as lovingly tending their prohibited plants knowing then that if she told the police where they were growing, that their lives would be ruined. And yet they let her in.

I had this same feeling when I met her. That if she asked me to tell her something that no one else knew, that I probably would have divulged the information. Readily, without coaxing. This project, "**Meet Me in the Green**

Glen," was a revelation when I first viewed it seven years ago. It wasn't just about the plants and the people and the industry, but the way Maureen Drennan saw it and documented it. Lush and wild and a literal secret garden (well, a secret many acre farm), where men roamed the countryside (where were the women?) and produced plants much taller than them and woke in a mystical place and set off in aging pick-up trucks straight out of a Hollywood movie and drove through the dust to the fields and valleys. I live in California and until recently, I hadn't driven through Mendocino county to reach Humboldt county where the thick clouds of fog lay low over the land and the scent in the air was vaguely, but consistently, like a skunk. (My 12-year-old commenting in the back seat how there were a lot of skunks in the north. Well, yes, perhaps...).

Here is what Maureen had to say about her long-term project:

"Meet Me in the Green Glen is an intimate photographic look at a reclusive marijuana grower in California. He is an isolated man whose environment is both ominous and verdant. We met several years ago and through this project have become close. I have been photographing him for nearly six years and the laws and stigma around marijuana cultivation has changed in California. Although marijuana is legal to grow and use within guidelines, there are situations in which it is still illegal. It is still not culturally acceptable to grow or sell large amounts despite the fact that many people in the area grow pot and it is a considerable part of the local economy. Every year this grower, Ben, hires young men to help with the harvest season. They work for about one month and then he is alone again on his farm with his animals.

"Ben occupies an ambiguous position in his community; growing pot in California is legal but still carries a sense of social and cultural stigma. A tangible melancholy pervades Ben's life: his guard dogs, geese, and the pot plants he tends are his only steady companions. He is deeply connected to his environment and insulated from the clamor of the outside world.

"American Literature, in particular Flannery O' Connor and Annie Proulx, have had a significant influence on my imagery. In describing the landscape both writers evoke a psychological and emotional sense of place in which the environment becomes a character unto itself and amplifies the aloneness of the characters.

"I am drawn to narratives, photographic, literary, cinematic, or documentary- in which characters are crafted out of place, or in which places actively become the characters themselves.

"I work with photography to understand people – to merge with them psychologically and place myself in their environs. I hope that viewers see my projects not only as documents of time and place, but also as avenues for self-reflection."

For me it's the image of Ben walking through the golden grass of a California summer, leaning a little too much, off on a trail that only he knows about to tend his flock. He is about to disappear into the landscape and I feel the weight of his life choices as he meanders away. With one of Maureen's postcards from this series pinned to my wall for years (it's the man in the welding mask...what does the welding mask have to do with pot farming? I'll never know...but I like the mystery of what is happening in that place). Anyway, I've thought of this artist for years because of the visual evidence of her talent tacked to my wall. As I was packing up my collection of images upon the closure of RayKo Photo Center, I reached out to Maureen to find out what she'd been working on lately.

I had expected perhaps a new body of work from Maureen, but no, there are actually multiple projects. One just opened this weekend in New York City. "The Blue of Distance" curated by Kate Greenberg is on view from September 15-October 15, 2017, at **Transmitter Gallery**. This show features images by Maureen Drennan as well as Martha Fleming-Ives, Melvin Harper and Matthew Harvey. These artists disrupt conventional notions of identity and address themes of alienation in their work, by operating within the space between connection and distance. Taking its title from an essay by Rebecca Solnit, which explores the color blue's role as a metaphor for longing and desire, this exhibition features works reflecting personal narratives of isolation from larger communities due to race, gender, religion, mental health, or social inequality. As the gallery notes, Maureen has always been drawn to vulnerable people or communities that are isolated from mainstream society. Earlier this year, she met and photographed Arab women who have all endured various types of discrimination. In photographing young Arab-American women, she was interested in dispelling otherness. In *The Blue of Distance*, Maureen's work focuses on one of her subjects, Adam. Adam is hijra, a transgender female of Pakistani descent. If you happen to be in New York in the coming weeks, definitely check out this beautiful and intense show.

As Maureen is currently living in New York, she has continued to document her surroundings as part of her practice. One of the other projects she shared with me is "**Island Kingdom**." I looked at the pictures first before reading her statement and wondered at what island it could be. Having lived for years in Maine, I wanted it desperately to be an island off of the coast of my former state, but the land was too flat. It was as foggy and rough as many a lobstering town in midcoast, but this was different and I sensed it in its beauty and its devastation.

Here is what I learned from Maureen:

"Through my photographs, I seek out the vulnerability and fantasy of living in a small island community seen through the eyes of the young women and girls who reside there. The community is Broad Channel, Queens and it's a lifestyle conditioned by water, vulnerable to storms, tides, changing weather, and yet, in close proximity to one of the largest urban centers, New York City. Broad Channel is a multi-generational, mostly blue-collar neighborhood with a rich history of being resistant to change. There is this enduring fantasy of living near the water that is in direct opposition to the reality. The residents love living by the water, but there exists a delicate balance between the community and the natural environment. As the effects of climate change shake this balance, the community has been confronted with the harsh reality that their home and community may not be as secure and idealistic as they think it to be.

"I began documenting the community in 2012, several months before Hurricane Sandy imbued the project with unforeseen turmoil. Flooding from the storm devastated the community; many lost their homes and possessions. The arduous recovery underscores the conflict of living close to the water, especially when leaving, to them, is not an option.

"I am particularly drawn to the young girls and teenagers in Broad Channel because, like their environment, they are in a transitional place with an uncertain future. There is a subtle border between defiance and vulnerability. The fragile state between adolescence and adulthood mirrors the changing environment that is affecting this island community. "The settings and themes I seek out are those of change or transition, often to imply notions of loss and hope at once. I investigate what it means to live a life removed. I work with photography as a lens for understanding people, to merge with them psychologically and place myself in their environs, and I hope that viewers see my projects not only as documents of time and place, but also as avenues for self-reflection."

The last project that Maureen Drennan shared with me is titled, "the sea that surrounds us." For many moments I stared at the silhouetted map on the cover of her **book** of the same name and tried to figure out what place this was. (Not Maine with that peninsula that swept northward and looked like a bird's outstretched beak). What I did recognize from the pictures is that this was another intimate story, one of love, but also of struggle. One about a person, but also about a place. The images resonate with a sense of desire and longing and careful observation and even more cautiously held hope. Maureen revealed this about her ongoing series:

"The title of this photographic series, the sea that surrounds us, comes from a love poem by Pablo Neruda and suggests the isolation and protection one can simultaneously experience within a relationship. In trying to comprehend my husband's vulnerability due to a severe depression, I made images of him and a landscape familiar to me, Block Island, RI. When I was seven years old and my parents separated, I lived there for a year with my father. It was a lonely time, the windblown landscape on Block Island is beautiful but deserted and watching the dissolution of my parent's marriage was sad to see. When my own marriage was in turmoil, I returned there to photograph. The landscapes work both as self-portraits and as ruminations on isolation and distance. I have often photographed my husband, but this felt different. I was watching him more carefully, trying to understand him. I felt untethered and helpless observing him and trying to comprehend his inner turmoil. The intimacy of making the photographs together during a challenging time was restorative. Where words failed us, the pictures filled in the blanks."

I know there is even more coming from this prolific artist and I wait with anticipation for another landslide of photographs to come my way the next time I ask Maureen Drennan what she's been working on.

Biography:

Maureen Drennan is a photographer born and based in New York City. Her work has been included in exhibitions at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C., Aperture Gallery, the Tacoma Art Museum, Chelsea Art Museum, the Museum of Art at the Rhode Island School of Design, Silver Eye Center for Photography, Newspace Center for Photography, Colorado Photographic Arts Center, and RayKo Gallery. Her images have been featured in *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *California Sunday Magazine*, *Photograph Magazine*, *Huffington Post*, *American Photo*, *UK Telegraph*, *Refinery 29*, and the *Economic Hardship Reporting Project*. She has received awards from Aperture, The Photo Review, PDN, The Photographic Resource Center of Boston, Humble Arts, Artist as Citizen, the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, and the Camera Club of New York. She currently teaches at LaGuardia Community College in Queens, New York.

Exhibitions (news):

- 2017 Aperture Summer Open, On Freedom, Aperture Gallery, July 13- Aug 17, NY, NY
- Portals, Transmitter Gallery, Aug 4- Sep 10, Brooklyn, NY
- Art Museum of South Texas, Corpus Christi, Texas - June 2 to September 10, 2017
- Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri - October 6, 2017 to January 7, 2018

◉ All about Maureen R. Drennan

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