

OBSERVATIONS OF FOREIGN OBJECTS IN A REMOTE TOWN

March 8 – April 9, 2017

STUDENT GALLERY, RYERSON IMAGE CENTRE
33 GOULD STREET, TORONTO, ONTARIO M5B 2K3

BENJAMIN FREEDMAN

December 7, 1972, 12:33 a.m. (EST):

It's like daylight.

The countdown resumed and the light radiating from the Saturn V rocket gave the growing cloud of smoke a fullness that dominated the sky. Moments later, the Apollo 17 mission hurdled toward its ultimate destination—the Earth's moon. Hundreds of thousands of people in the area surrounding the Kennedy Space Center looked into the sky that night to see the shuttle launch. The rocket gradually faded into a red streak across the sky as it drifted farther into the unknowable, expansive, sublime. Approximately five hours and six minutes after the launch, as Apollo 17 broke through the Earth's atmosphere and into space, astronaut Jack Schmitt used a 70mm Hasselblad camera equipped with an 80mm Zeiss lens to capture the NASA designated image AS17-148-22727, more commonly known as *The Blue Marble*.

As the shutter opened, the film was exposed with an image of the Earth in its entirety for the first time—completely enveloped in space. However, more than a view of a planet, this image represented the first time that humankind was truly able to look at itself with an all-encompassing totality. Imagine Schmitt looking down through his Hasselblad viewfinder and seeing the Earth's mirror image—as the shutter closed, the concept of the sublime saw a similar reflection.

During the romantic period (approx. 1800–1850), artists rejected the scientific rationalism brought about by the enlightenment in favour of leveraging strong emotional experiences as aesthetic inspiration. The source of these experiences, termed the sublime, came from confronting the vast, unknowable qualities of nature. The sublime provided people with the faculties to stand on the threshold between the body and nature without being consumed by it. For the spectators staring into the sky it would seem that the crew of Apollo 17 was headed straight for the pinnacle of the sublime, and perhaps it was; however, the result of the mission, and the photographic moment to follow, shifted our focus of the sublime from looking out to looking in. After re-entry, and Apollo 17's splash-down in the Cook Islands, *The Blue Marble* quickly became one of history's most circulated images. As a result, it became clear that the pursuit of the sublime would no longer come from looking out at nature, or up at the stars; instead, it would come from an examination of the self. To imagine the 2,271 satellites currently orbiting the Earth, gazing down with acute views of humankind, it becomes clear that space after *The Blue Marble* was no longer a void—it was a mirror.

Viewed
from
Earth

Observations of Foreign Objects in a Remote Town, a new exhibition by Benjamin Freedman, presents a series of photographs and a wall-mounted vinyl image produced while in residence at the NES Artist Residency in Skagastönd, Iceland.

Scenes of scientists in clandestine laboratories, images of geological samples with unknown origins, and views of deep space act as constellations within an unfolding narrative. In their role as photographic markers the images illuminate a narrative within the exhibition space, one that amounts to a work of science fiction. Cosmic landscapes and classified buildings establish a setting that is both eerily familiar and utterly foreign. The scientists' faces are either obstructed or hidden, a gesture indicating an unwelcome presence. However, this raises the question of point of view: whose presence does the narrative seem to reject? An all-knowing, omniscient POV can be ruled out immediately due to the image's limitation to represent anything more than a single static perspective. Moreover, the apparent choice of the subject to turn away from the image frame indicates a lack of control on the viewer's part. It is possible to consider a first person perspective if the viewer is to trust the subject matter and believe that they are a character inside the narrative. However, perhaps more interesting is the potential for *Observations* to operate from a limited omniscient perspective—that of the artist.

To re-examine the images in *Observations* as evidence of the photographer's experience, and choices leading to the ultimate image capture, the narrative begins to wobble between fiction and nonfiction. Positioned as both creator and participant, the artist can question the validity of not only the narrative (subject matter) but also the image itself (structure). This reflective gesture complements the narrative genre of the subject matter. Termed "the literature of ideas," science fiction often uses subject matter as allegory, or metaphor, toward a more conceptual end. An obstructed view of a scientist is complicated by the invisible presence of the artist who is directing the subject to turn away from the camera in service of the developing narrative. Freedman uses the subject matter of space exploration, access to visually similar objects, characters and settings, as a way to leave cracks in the narrative, exposing the properties of the image.

Finally, Freedman asks the moon, a symbol of the narrative, to sit for a portrait—an explicit gesture that reveals the role of the narrative to be that of a reflector of the medium that depicts it.

Parker Kay, 2017

Benjamin Freedman (b. 1990) is an artist presently working and living in Toronto, ON. Freedman completed his BFA in photographic studies at Ryerson University (Toronto) after studying Cinema, Video and Communications at Dawson College in Montreal, Quebec. He self-published his first photography book in 2015, and has exhibited extensively across the GTA, most recently at 8eleven Gallery, Art Gallery of Mississauga, and Division Gallery. Freedman has been recognized by the Magenta Foundation and American Photography Magazine and has shared his work internationally, most recently at the Aperture Foundation in New York City.

Working in a range of mediums, including photography, bookmaking, film and installation, Freedman's practice questions photography's role in describing the world and its implications in a range of professional practices, particularly in history and science. While probing the relative truths and deceptions of photography, he purposefully adopts both science fiction and documentary style characteristics in an effort to create expanded narrative projects. Freedman is particularly interested in photography's role in mythologizing historical and contemporary events and its subsequent consequences.