

Nicholas Muellner

*In Most Tides An Island:* Nicholas Muellner

Tim Clark

In most tides: an island. A lonely bluff, populated only with men. It is the job of these men to nurse and translate the stories. Each man is the same: tall, lean, tan. Each of the stories, suckled into being, is new. But they do not come easily.

Every story is born beautiful and incomprehensible on the island: like a fresh-hewn locust log. Pocked with small thorns, and speckled with fragrant white blossoms—flowers that fall off easily with a gesture of the hand or gentle shaking.

Sometimes, images are born in and with the stories. It is necessary for the men to wean these pictures from the words, and tease them from the logs. But it is not necessary to know when the log becomes a story, or when that story, which is also a baby, becomes a beautiful, longhaired boy.

When the stories are deciphered, they are harvested. Is that the right word? Prepared and exported to the world of people, they always attain great acclaim. But the strange sanctuary remains obscure.

Once these little boys—that is, the stories—reach a certain age, they become poisonous. There is nothing for it, and the tall men must dash their dangerous little heads against the big rock to still them.

They say it sounds like a ripe coconut dropping on wet sand.

So reads an excerpt from an unlikely bedtime story, summoned mid-way through Nicholas Muellner's recent photobook *In Most Tides An Island*. Deftly fusing image and text, the series is a poignant exploration of love, desire and loneliness in the digital age. It's compelling work that emerges from the fault lines between violence, longing,

solitude, resignation and hope, all the while meditating on the processes of poetically intertwining photography and literature, as well as their limits and possibilities.

Photographed in the Black Sea regions of Russia, Ukraine and Russian-occupied Crimea, and on the islands of Kronstadt, Russia and Little Corn in Nicaragua, the project has been guided by dual impulses: to bear witness to the real lives, stories and environments of closeted gay men in provincial Russia, longing for connection yet prevented from openly demonstrating their feelings, and the imagined tale of a solitary woman on a Caribbean island.

At once travelogue, document, autobiography and fictional construction, *In Most Tides An Island* resists any straightforward definition. Its parallel stories are structured into 12 chapters, over the course of which the viewer–reader is taken on a dizzying descent into the lonely, unintended consequences of our isolated yet hyper-connected lives.

The idea of the island as a complex and fitting metaphor runs throughout. Whether conjuring up notions of isolation where people seek refuge from society or invoked to speak to the experience of entrapment, it is the central protagonist in Muellner's arena. The tropical island in question is a seductive place, yet lurking behind its surfaces is a chequered past, one tied to histories of colonial oppression and rule, having served as a slave plantation. It has also functioned as a sanctuary for their descendants, a place for pirates to hide out, a prison for Nicaraguan political prisoners, as well as a hippy paradise. Muellner also sees the island as the individual, safe behind a laptop screen.

Ice is another enduring subject of a number of what we might interpret as 'diaristic' photographs, which Muellner depicts in various abstracted states or at a disorientating scale, accompanied by his meditations in writing.

What lies within Lake Ladoga's ice? I cannot know. But it feels like the idea of other consciousness, crystallised, impenetrable, its insular presence glimpsed but never known. The ice feels like Russia, in which the isolated seizure of the other is always on display, and rarely penetrated; a constant pageant of internalisation, the grand parade of icebergs.

Later in the same chapter, Muellner refers to ice as ‘not a friend, but a thread of solitude through the labyrinth of childhood’, recalling walking home from the bus, along an icy canal at dusk where, in a measure of his solitude and absorption, he would kick a little block of ice all the way to school, without ever breaking his stride to make contact. It is this layering of political and personal narratives drawn together by the voice of the wandering narrator and subtle visual connections based on form and content and symbol between vastly different continents that are the work’s lynchpin. Furthermore, woven into this fabric is an alluring mix of photographic expression. On one level, luscious black and white imagery of sun-drenched island views teeter on the threshold of visibility, building an atmosphere or what Muellner calls a ‘tropical gothic’ mood. Elsewhere, straight colour photography of people and places in Russia operate in a more documentary storytelling vein and reveal Muellner’s inner journalist. But in the visual editing it’s the additional appropriated chat room images culled from the digital sphere that emerge to add another level to the divergent stories. Pictured with either their backs to the camera or faces obscured, and seen often gazing longingly out to sea or at other vanishing points, these lone individuals cut solitary figures.

Such a range of visual vocabularies and promiscuous use of the medium overturns traditional genres to the extent that landscape almost becomes portraiture, and portraits are metaphors, and metaphors are dead ends. Photography’s capabilities for emotional realism are thus called into question, and so too are the transitory spaces between images, which, alongside his photographs, both informative and allegorical, asks us to consider the domination of photography by language: in memory, association and interpolation. Flourishes of words and images jostle for attention, one often standing in for the other, since the communicative power of an image often expresses that which cannot be articulated in words, while on occasion the two appear simultaneously across page spreads, collapsing any hierarchy of the disciplines. This co-occurrence, side by side, of the two forms of expression creates a strange sort of double vision.

Unsurprisingly, Muellner has solidified a reputation for his brand of hybrid photographic literature, an art practice that explores clever combinations of image and words, as exemplified in his critically acclaimed books *The Amnesia Pavilions* (2011) and *The Photograph Commands Indifference* (2009). Equally integral to establishing a narrative, in his hands the pictorial and the textual are a means to move between the

visible and invisible, knowable and unknown, like ‘two lovers lying next to each other in bed who can never know the other’s mind’. By natural extension, as one of the directors of the Image Text MFA at Ithaca College in the US, a degree programme focused on the intersection of writing and photography, his teaching and research interests represent a steadfast commitment to harnessing new approaches to bridging the muteness of images and inadequacies of language. As Muellner writes towards the end of his book, ‘The words are a faulty memory: *we are together alone*. Or was it: *together, we are alone?*’, before leaving us with a photograph of five sullen palm trees set in stark relief against a stunning blue sky.