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FLOUNDER LEE'S BIG ADVENTURE

HERRON PROF USES ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY TO REVEAL GLACIAL MELT

BY DAN GROSSMAN





FLOUNDER LEE'S BIG ADVENTURE

HERRON PROF USES ART AND PHOTOGRAPHY TO REVEAL GLACIAL MELT

BY DAN GROSSMAN EDITORS@NUVO.NET // PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HOEFLE

You can usually find Flounder Lee, an assistant professor of photography at IUPUI's Herron School of Art and Design, somewhere around town, either in a classroom or the gallery he co-founded, SpaceCamp MicroGallery. But Lee periodically takes trips far afield — from Alaska to Northern Europe and beyond — to explore the borders that divide nations and peoples from one another.

Lee's latest excursion to the Juneau Ice Field in Alaska, from Oct. 14-24 — which he thoroughly documented with video and photography — will form a new body of work yet to be completed. (The trip was supported by a research support funds grant from the office of the vice chancellor for research at IUPUI.)

Like other glacier systems around the world, the glaciers of the Juneau Ice Field are retreating because of the current warming trend in atmospheric temperatures. Lee wants to use his art to reflect this trend.

"It's similar to what I've been doing in the previous four years," he says, "but this is pushing it in an environmental direction."

During their 10-day-long trip Lee, along with his assistant and Herron grad student Michael Hoefle, explored glaciers in the Juneau Ice Field, which is surrounded by mountains and, in the lower elevations, a temperate rain forest. The weather was overcast and drizzly and they were lucky to

see the sun peak out of the clouds once or twice during their trip.

"The first day we were there we just drove out; seeing Mendenhall Glacier for the first time was amazing," Lee recalls. "It was so big and loomed over the valley. The next day we went back to that same glacier and hiked out the West Glacier Trail."

They followed the trail up onto the massive glacier.

"It was terrifying at first," Lee says. "But we'd been told that during this part of the year the danger is the least and we had ice cleats on, thankfully."

Later in the trip, they approached Mendenhall Glacier both by kayaking to the base of the glacier and by helicopter, and they documented this journey with video and digital photography. They borrowed the kayaks from the University of Alaska South, where Lee had

the opportunity to lecture on his work to faculty and students.

"He was received really well," Hoefle says. "There were a few students there who definitely understood what was going on with the work. A lot of his earlier work that he showed happened to deal with Native American treaties. It's kind of a hot issue in the Alaska area."

During the trip, Lee and Hoefle explored the ramparts of three glaciers. Sometimes the weather got in the way of their itinerary, however, especially when traveling by helicopter.

"On the trip to the second glacier we just circled around and that's where it felt like we were getting way too close to the mountainside," Lee says. "We could see the sheep out there and they were like, 'you guys are crazy.' I'm glad we didn't land, because it was hairy. ... The winds were coming off the top of the glacier, just bailing down. Way too dangerous to land."

GLACIERS IN RETREAT

In Lee's previous projects, the cartographic boundaries incorporated into his art have been political ones. But in this case he was looking for natural borders — the previously mapped lines (termini) of glaciers in fast retreat. These imaginary lines indicating past measurements of a glacier's reach might be found in the middle of a lake or a talus slope. Not only are these lines often more tenuous than political boundaries, they're also more difficult to locate.

The ultimate products of Lee's art will likely show maps revealing the growth or contraction of glaciers. These might be superimposed or juxtaposed with his photography documenting his trip.

The maps of the Juneau Icefield do not accurately reflect the ongoing glacial retreat, according to Lee. It's a problem he hopes to address with a system of orientation combined with photographic documentation he has developed over the past decade.

"For the first few years, I used a hacked together system on my cellphone with a

Bluetooth GPS. Now, through the grants I've received, I have a more rugged GPS that is waterproof and daylight readable. I use it as sort of a puzzle edge in my work. I shoot four pictures in each direction and then the GPS to indicate that those are the ones to be included."

With the help of GPS, Lee was able to successfully navigate the rugged Tongass National Forest, but there was a limit to how useful it could be.

"The lines [on the maps] would be the previous terminus points," he says. "But the landscape was so rough that I couldn't go to all of these places. It could be in the middle of a river or a lake or up the side of a cliff. ... I wasn't able to follow the termini precisely like I'd planned because real world obstacles were a lot more difficult in Alaska than anywhere I've been."

"Alaskans also don't think of them as issues. One forest ranger told us that crossing 30-foot logs over a raging river wouldn't be 'that bad.' We didn't do it!"

But the quest to find, and to walk along, previous glacial termini — successful or not — is in itself part of his art.

"Anytime I'm walking these sort of spaces, it's sort of a performance," Lee says. "I'm looking for [my photographic and videography work] to be the final product, but they're also a documentation of the performance to an extent."

Any way you look at it, there's a lot of work — footwork and otherwise — involved in creating this type of art.

Way too dangerous
to land.

— Flounder Lee



GROWING UP

"I grew up on a chicken farm," says Lee, 33, who was born in Cullman, Ala. "I guess it gave me a strong work ethic more than anything else. In high school I was a yearbook photographer, but even before that, I was just doing photography. For as long as I can remember I always wanted to do something with science. I wanted to be an aerospace engineer and I had a full scholarship to the University of Alabama for aerospace engineering. And I went there for a year and as a job I was doing party photography."

But Lee soon found he hated his coursework in aerospace engineering nearly as much as he loved taking photographs. So Lee left the University of Alabama, moved to Florida and took art photography courses at a community college.

"Once I started taking art classes it was all over," he says with a laugh. "I just went straight through from there and got my undergrad at the University of Florida and I graduated with an MFA from Cal State Long Beach. And that was in studio art in the photography area."

But his interest in photography spilled over outside the classroom in college just like it had in high school. "Back when I was working for the [high school] yearbook, I was taking just hundreds and hundreds of photos," he recalls. "And I was even in this contest where I took something like 400 photos in one day or something like that. ... Even back [in the early 2000s] I was carrying my camera — I was like the only

person to begin with that was carrying my camera, like going to these parties and things like this and no one carries a big SLR camera to a party but I do anyway. I was going out dancing and things like that. I was either documenting or filming for our social groups."

This was well before the social media explosion.

"Fifteen years ago you'd have the same roll of film for Christmas as you would for your summer vacation," says Lee. "Now people take hundreds in a single day. It's just a complete change in mindset."

Lee was somewhat prescient, then, in deciding to document his interest in photography in the most comprehensive way possible.

"My thesis project for my MFA was dealing with sort of not editing all that out and having it all," he says. "So I included every photo that I ever had from certain years, from like 2000 to 2005. I scanned in all my negatives, all my digital files, and all my friends' files that I had. So I just included them all. The title was 'All my photos.'"

Lee's MFA thesis, completed in 2007, was the prototype for much of his work that contains photographic mapping.

"When I didn't have the digital files I just scanned it in as close as I could to chronological order," he says. "And they were shot chronological order left to right, top to bottom; so that's the first project I did that involved grids. You see that in my work now. Pretty much all my work now has grids in it. Even if I change topics

and change methods, I try to have some parallels between my previous and my new work. ... These grids, they're contact sheets basically, made in Photoshop, automatically in chronological order. One of the other pieces I did for that same thesis show documented all my Internet surfing for three months and it was over 60,000 images in chronological order, top to bottom, left to right."

MARRYING ART TO THE INTERNET

Lee received his MFA in photography and digital art in 2007. He joined the faculty at Herron that same year. The year before, he legally changed his first name from Adam to his nickname Flounder.

"If you Google 'Adam Lee,' Lee says, "the top ten things that come up are ten different people. Number one is a famous balloon twister."

The Internet — and new media in general — is a topic that Lee has explored extensively in his artwork.

In Lee's 2009 "Marriage of Art to the Internet" performed at the Big Car Gallery in Indy's Fountain Square — and simulcast to galleries in Houston, Miami, and Brooklyn, N.Y. — he officiates a marriage ceremony between two entities in hopes of promoting a certain philosophy of preserving artwork. In this video, you see him decked out in a white lab coat and, apparently, reading from *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

"For things like new media art and performance art, if that stuff is to survive and become part of the canon, then the big collectors and museums have got to dedicate themselves to keeping this stuff and keeping it in its original form," Lee says.

For a given exhibition, he'd rather use an intact Atari play station to play video games, as opposed to buying an Atari app for an iPhone.

"They've actually got to take a computer from now and set it aside so it doesn't change, like operating systems don't change," he says. "So the art of these new media artists still works. It's important to capture actual performances so you're not just looking at documentation of something so that you're actually looking at the thing in its original form."

Video is also a medium that Lee has explored to amazing conceptual and aesthetic effect. Take, for example, his loop video "U.S. Tribal Treaties 1794-1895" in which you see an outline of the United States filled with blue toy soldiers and yellow toy Indians. In the one-minute video, yellow is steadily overtaken over by a wave of blue as if in a time machine in fast-forward.

WAVES OF PEOPLE

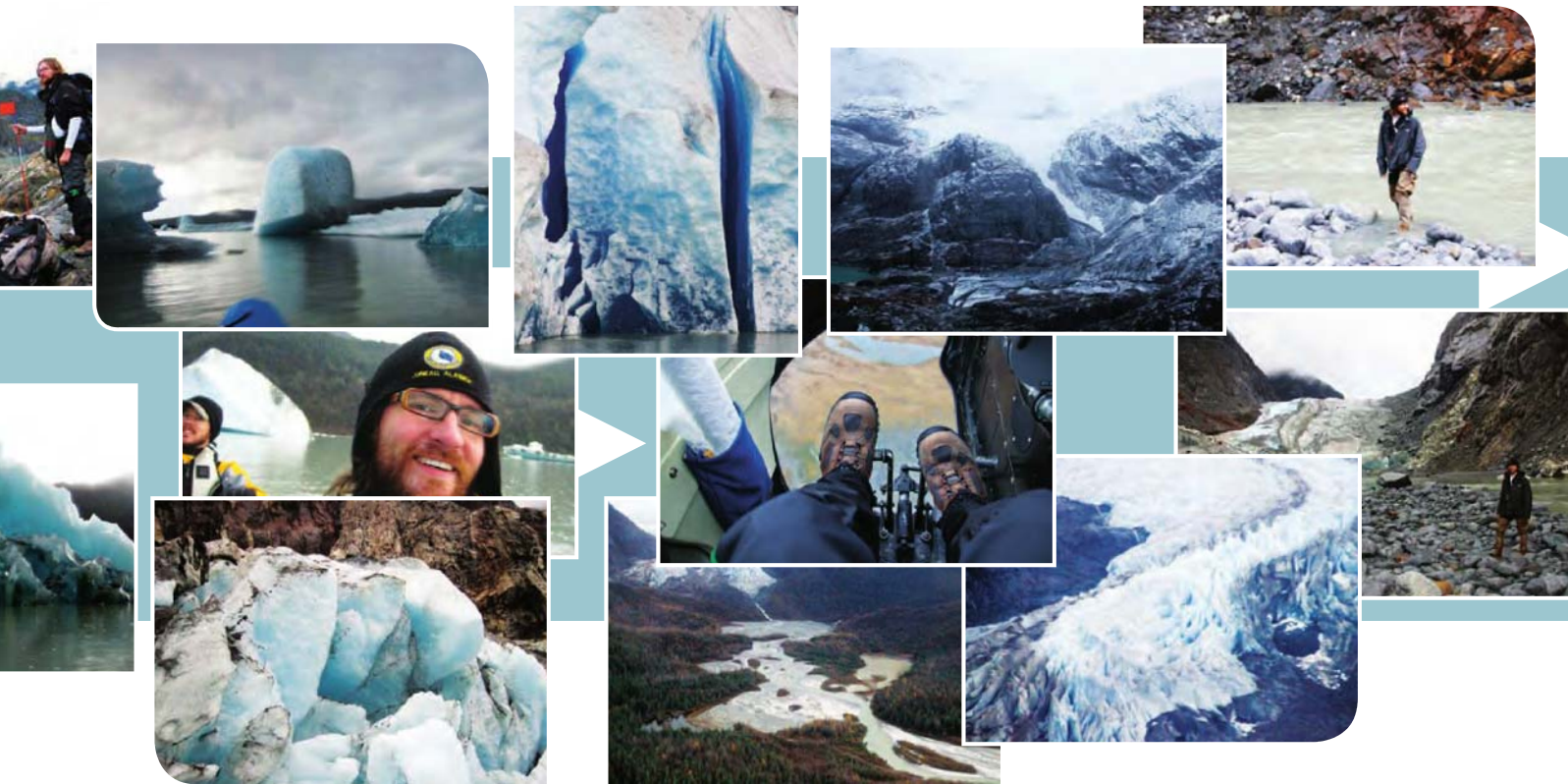
Lee's art began to address immigration after he moved to Indiana from Los Angeles.

"I started thinking about the history of Indiana," says Lee. "And I pulled up these maps and these old treaties and I got to thinking about how my family was not from up here but from down South. ... My family, basically, we acted like we were American for like as far back as you could go. I started doing research on it. We knew that there was some Scotch-Irish in my family. And we knew there was some Cherokee in my family. But when we started digging into it ... some of my family arrived in Alabama in like 1840s like very beginning of Alabama. Some of them arrived in the U.S. in like the 1630s. Then some of them were natives. And there's waves of people that make up all of us that we don't really think about."

"I don't claim to be a native artist," Lee adds. "I just claim to be interested. ... So thinking about that even further is why I did that work in Europe the first time

I wanted to be an aerospace engineer and I had a full scholarship to the University of Alabama for aerospace engineering.

— Flounder Lee



because I was thinking about how do you just pick up and move across the ocean to a brand new place that almost nobody knows anything about? It's a mindset that we can't even fathom now."

Perhaps Lee was in that mindset when he created the art for a recent display in the window of the DXDX Design Studio Group in Plymouth, England, entitled "Plymouth, Also."

"I sent them an image that I had made," says Lee. "They projected it onto the window and drew it on the window. So it's kind of fun. It is a drawing, but I just didn't draw it myself. It's of all the places in the United States that are named Plymouth. It opened during the British Art Show. It's once every five years so it was held during that. It was funny. It was also during the America's Cup."

"Plymouth, Also" drives home the serious point that the English colonists didn't exactly integrate with the Native American inhabitants — in terms of language, culture, and, of course, place names.

"One of the arguments made about immigration is that the people coming over now, they bring their own culture and they're not trying to integrate with us," says Lee. "They say 'When our ancestors came over, they integrated with the culture.' And it's like, yeah, that's why we speak Cherokee now, isn't it? I'm like, this language that we speak, it's called English!"

In addition to his work reflecting on historical immigration patterns, Lee has also focused his attention on the city of

Indianapolis. In a 2008 photographic mapping series, "IPS-Township School District Borders," he questions the gerrymandering of school districts and the educational disparities that result.

SPACECAMP MICROGALLERY

Another activity that Lee pursues close to home is his curatorial work centered in his former studio at Suite 212 in the Murphy Art Center. It's more of a glorified walk-in closet than a gallery; but, per the curatorial copy, "SpaceCamp is dedicated to bringing small (size wise) but large (idea wise) national and international art to Indianapolis."

Lee shares curatorial duties with co-gallerists Paul Miller (who currently has a show of his own going on at the Wheeler; see infobox) and Kurt Nettleton. On Dec. 2, a Lee-curated exhibition will open in the space: "Mapable," featuring the work of twelve artists drawn from around the world (see infobox).

"My work is about maps so I wanted to have a show that was speaking about maps as an art form," Lee says. "We've got artists from Israel. There's a Scottish artist [Stuart McAdam] who rode his bike to Denmark and back. The piece is just a trace of him riding his bicycle for that time."

While SpaceCamp shows local artists frequently, there's a particular emphasis on bringing in outside voices. "I think part of the issue with galleries that show only local artists is that there's no one to go out and extol our praises. So that's why I try

to bring artists in and I encourage artists here to try to get their work out. We want to bring in fresh ideas and get our ideas out. Not out ideas but our name. So that people can see that we have a really good thing going. We live in such a global society. ... And ideas don't really cost anything. So that's something we can really think about is how to bring in more ideas."

Curating, for Lee, is part of his artistic practice, and it flows into his teaching as well. He could probably draw a feedback loop on a blackboard (or an iPad) explaining how every aspect of his existence on this planet influences his art. His art, likewise, feeds back into his life. Or as he states on his website, "The intersections between public and private, art and life, history and the present among others, have always informed his work. He uses mapping and indexing to recreate/reconstruct various pockets of space time."

Lee's big ambition is to engage in a photography/videography project in Antarctica, where the West Antarctic Ice sheet seems to be headed toward meltdown, according to numerous scientific observers. This is a project for which he would need substantial outside funding. Michael Hoefle, his companion on the Alaska trip, would bet Lee could overcome any roadblock that gets in his way to finding funding and completing a successful trip. "He's just really, really focused on these big projects that he wants to get done, and he doesn't allow anything to stop him," Hoefle says.

Perhaps Lee's toughest border to cross is at home. "My family's supportive but they don't understand it all," says Lee. "They understand the stuff I've been doing a lot more than the stuff that I was doing in grad school or even undergrad. It's still concep-

tual, but they know that it's talking about history or talking about environmental issues. It's funny. I haven't even talked to my dad about the Alaska stuff because he doesn't even believe in global warming. So that's one of the reasons that I'm doing this project is that people don't understand. It's not something you believe in or don't believe in. It's happening."

For more on Flounder Lee go to photo-flounder.com. See nuvo.net for an extended interview with Lee, regarding his childhood desire to be an astronaut.

MAPABLE

"Mapable," curated by Flounder Lee, will explore the intersection of art and mapmaking in the work of twelve artists from all over the world. "We've had maps for a long time now," states Lee in the SpaceCamp release. "We have even had art about maps for quite some time, but personal mapping and the pervasiveness of mapping technologies is reaching a crescendo recently. With GPS becoming part of every device, we are seeing maps in completely new ways. Paper maps becoming relegated to theme parks and other tourist attractions." For more info: spacecampgallery.com ■

MAPABLE

SpaceCamp MicroGallery

Murphy Arts Building

1043 Virginia Ave. Suite 212

Opening reception: Friday, Dec. 2, 7-10 p.m.

Open select Saturdays throughout December and January, check spacecampgallery.com for details. Open by appointment.

I don't claim to be a native artist; I just claim to be interested.

— Flounder Lee

Flounder Lee's (almost) astronaut life

by Dan Grossman



Flounder Lee never went to Space Camp, but got to create SpaceCamp instead. Here, he's flying in Alaska. *Michael Hoefle*

For years, Herron professor and founder of [SpaceCamp MicroGallery](#) Flounder Lee wanted to be an astronaut; he talked with NUVO correspondent Dan Grossman about those aspirations.

NUVO: Talk about your childhood ambition to be an astronaut.

Lee: It's just something I wanted to do for as long as I could remember. I grew up near Huntsville which was a NASA center... I always wanted to go to Space Camp but never got the chance. That was a big part of the naming of my gallery. The other part in the naming was my favorite music venue when I lived in LA, Spaceland.

NUVO: Tell me about your experience at the University of Alabama.

Lee: I was an Aerospace Engineering major — an undergrad for one year. I had wanted to be that for a long time though and had actually received a lot of scholarships to go. I did well in the computer drafting part of the program and I actually taught an experiment in my physics lab because I could figure the brand new computers out quicker than the professor. He kept asking me for help and finally just had me teach the experiment. Those are two things that carried over into my art and teaching career.

NUVO: How did your experience as an Aerospace Engineering student affect your [art-making and curating](#)?

Lee: I take a somewhat analytical approach to my work. I usually set up systems with very small variables and set parameters that I try and follow. Unlike an engineer or scientist, though, when the real world interferes with my parameters, I bend or break them to still end up with the artwork. For instance if there is cliff that my GPS says I should go off or a lake I should go through, I just go around and shoot as close to the original line as possible.

In my curating, it is mostly that I am just interested in science and space. I have curated one show that was [Aerospacial](#) [at Herron School of Art & Design in March, 2011] all about different work relating to aerospace as well as co-curated [RetroFuturism](#) which was about ideas related to the future but in a backwards sort of way.

NUVO: Tell me about the concept behind the *Aerospacial* show.

Lee: I knew I wanted to do a show on this theme for a while and I had a couple of artists in mind, Sam Davis and Darren Hostetter. I searched for a couple of years for other artists at art fairs that would fit with them. I briefly considered picking more artists in an open call but finally found a third artist, McLean Fahnstock, that worked so I made it a three person show. I knew all three artists, but I think it had more to do with LA culture that they fit my idea for this. In LA, you always have helicopters, planes and blimps overhead, not to mention all the military and space industries nearby.

NUVO: You make a point of keeping up with the technologies that you could conceivably apply to your work. What are some of the technologies you're excited about now?

Lee: I'm excited by the pervasiveness of GPS technology for the art-world as a whole. For my work, I am enjoying learning to use the remote control helicopter that I got with the RSFG [Research Support Funds Grant] grant. I'd like to pair it with a 3D camera at some point as well as a pocket projector. I am also interested in 3D printing/output. These are always rolling around in my head just waiting for the right project to use them on.

NUVO: Can you picture how you would employ your photographic mapping on the moon (if you could get a grant to go up there)?

Lee: Never really thought about it but I guess something to do with the Outer Space Treaty, which basically states that all celestial bodies are owned by all of humanity and countries can't exploit them without some agreement. What I'd really like to do is do a giant video show that could be seen from Earth!

For more about Lee, check out "[Flounder Lee's big adventure](#)."

Tags: **Visual Arts, Flounder Lee, Herron School of Art and Design, SpaceCamp MicroGallery, Feature**

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