



Lynn Davis

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Lynn Davis: Natural Wonders and Sacred Sites

Lynn Davis has become a new kind of expeditionary photographer. She is operating in a shrunken millennial world where the grand natural sites and exotic monuments of antiquity so remote a century ago are now too often cultural theme parks and packaged tourist destinations. Though Davis has spent the last eight years photographing far-flung wonders of nature and great man-made sacred architecture, the purpose of her travels differs from that of the 19th century painters and photographers who are her direct artistic ancestors.

Unlike T. H. O'Sullivan, William Henry Jackson and Carleton Watkins, those visual surveyors employed by the federal government to document the American West as a prelude to its settlement, Davis' images of natural phenomena retain no faith in the virtues of exploiting the wilderness. But they do share with those artistic forebears a belief in the spiritual value of contemplating nature's spectacular formations. Her photographs seek to reinvest power in whatever bits of circumscribed wilderness remain to us by embodying the awe such astonishments of nature as geysers, pinnacles and icebergs can still evoke. To this end, and in order to kindle an awareness of that awe in the viewer, Davis borrows many of the compositional devices – among them mammoth scale, isolation of the image and a consistent light – used by those earlier photographers and painters. And she has revisited many of the places that first drew them.

Her large-scale images of the Egyptian pyramids and the Colossi of Memnon acknowledge an affinity with the works of Gustave Le Gray, Maxime Du Camp and Francis Frith, those romantic Victorian predecessors who made their reputations photographing ruins, ancient monuments and holy sites. But her pictures do not subscribe to the attitudes of colonial exoticism possessed by those travelers in Napoleon's wake, who were, knowingly or not, advance men for encroaching western civilization. Davis is not a cultural traveler but a spiritual pilgrim. Her expeditions have taken her to Greenland, to Yellowstone, to Giza and Thebes, to Australia, Burma and Thailand. Never random, these trips were specific quests for sacred geometries in an artistic era more defined by a prevailing cynicism and self-reflexive mining of secondary, "mediated" sources than by soul-searching confrontations with the wider, non-Western world.

Davis' series of photographs of icebergs and Egyptian sites are the earliest chapters in what has become over nearly a decade an ongoing and large body of work. In 1986, she left her New York City studio behind and with her Rolleiflex boarded a passenger freighter bound for Greenland. But before she saw the frozen "inscrutable monoliths" of Greenland's Disko Bay, Davis had already built a career as a photographer in Manhattan.

Lynn Davis arrived in New York City in 1974. As an undergraduate, she studied art history at the University of Minnesota where one of her professors was the charismatic American poet, John Berryman. She began to concentrate on photography in her senior year and from 1967 to 1969 went to study with Imogen Cunningham at the San Francisco Art Institute. While she was in San Francisco she also met Lisette Model, whose impact on Davis' early formation as an artist was profound. Model



Colossi of Memnon IV, 1989, 28" x 28", selenium-toned photograph, collection of the artist

introduced her to Berenice Abbott, for whom the young photographer worked as a studio assistant in Maine during the summer of 1974. The high seriousness of Lynn Davis' work is surely partially a legacy from both of these celebrated and dedicated photographers who were her mentors.

Another legacy was her independence. During the 1970s, Davis, who had arrived in New York already a stringer for Time, never took a staff job. She free-lanced as a photojournalist for more than 30 magazines, among them *Ms.*, *Esquire* and *Mademoiselle*, initially borrowing and renting studios in which to do her work. During those years, she also created the austere black-and-white portraits and sensual, formally stylized nude studies that began to earn her critical notice in the contemporary art and photography world.

As a close friend and colleague of Robert Mapplethorpe, Davis shared the flamboyant photographer's attraction to highly polished formal imagery and velvety black-and-white surface contrasts. In 1979, she and Mapplethorpe jointly showed their nude figure studies in an exhibition at the International Center for Photography on Fifth Avenue.

Davis' portraits of the period have more in common with the work of the late Peter Hujar, another colleague and friend known for his uncompromising photographic studies of people. By the late 1980s, both Mapplethorpe and Hujar had died of AIDS. After that, Davis found herself unable to bear the idea of taking what she calls "superficial portraits." The only ones she has made since were the series of 100 portraits of the Tibetan lamas, monks, dancers and musicians who met in New York at the 1991 Kalachakra for World Peace. The egoless transparency of these pictures is an extension of the seamless clarity of Davis' landscape photographs.

Turning away from the prevailing art-world zeitgeist of the late '80s, Davis literally stepped out into a bigger and deeper world when she began her travels with a voyage to the icebergs. And she expanded the possibilities of her work by allying it with a different system of values. Seeking illumination, Davis rejected anomie. While artists such as Sherrie Levine appropriated the works of Walker Evans to discredit and dismantle the idea of the value of individual artistic originality, Davis appropriated a continuity with past artistic traditions. She applied them as a primary tool in her effort to embody visually her sense of the metaphysical geometries found in nature and at certain great sites. Her landscape work reanimates 19th-century photographic traditions and expresses her respect for the value of her predecessors' work. "History is my foundation," she has said.

Davis is also interested in rediscovering the sublime. The two trips she took to photograph icebergs recall the three-week voyage America's greatest luminist painter, Frederic Edwin Church, made to the coast of Newfoundland in 1859 to sketch the icebergs. Two years later, he produced the grand 6-foot by 10-foot oil painting, *The Icebergs*, which critics found disturbingly "weird and beautiful" when it was shown in London in the early 1860s. Like almost all of Davis' Greenland photographs, Church's painting contains no trace of humanity in it. (In only one of Davis' pictures is a tiny fishing trawler silhouetted on the horizon. In the others there is only



Iceberg #15, Disko Bay, Greenland, 1988, 28" x 28", collection Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles

ice, air and water.) Her studies of icebergs, made in both black-and-white and in color, capture transcendental qualities still evident in special places in the world.

By editing out most signs of civilization, of man and of pollution, and by concentrating on the compelling architectural structure of these natural forms, her photographs, taken in the rarefied air and long light of arctic summer, convey the iconic purity of this landscape. Certain ecologically concerned post-modern American photographers such as Mark Klett and Richard Misrasch dramatize the issues underlying their work by emphasizing man's degrading intrusions on what was once portrayed as paradise. Davis avoids this tactic. Instead, her photographs distill the frozen landscape's magical and constantly changing character, texture, atmosphere and color. Her uses of black and white are subtle, too.

In 1820, the explorer William Scoresby, in his *Account of the Arctic Regions*, observed the exceptional two-dimensional vistas of the Arctic's high-contrast black-and-white coasts. Davis' black-and-white pictures create many variants on those

characteristic contrasts. Her iceberg pictures also capture the lyrical purity of the arctic light about which Barry Lopez wrote in his 1986 book, *Arctic Dreams*:

"I marveled as much at the behavior of light around the icebergs as I did at their austere, implacable progress through the water. They took their color from the sun, and from the clouds and the water. But they took their dimensions from the light: the stronger and more direct it was, the greater the contrast upon the surface of the ice, of the ice itself with the sea ... The bluer the sky, the brighter their outline against it.

"I wrote words down for the tints – the grays of doves and pearls, of smoke ... At the waterline the ice gleamed aquamarine against its own gray-white walls above. Where meltwater had filled the cracks or made ponds, the pools and veins were milk-blue, or shaded to brighter marine blues, depending on the thickness of the ice ... In twilight the ice took on the colors of the sun: rose, reddish yellows, watered purples, soft pinks. The ice both refracted the light and trapped it within its crystalline corners and edges. In brilliant sunshine

the icebergs now gleam[ed] as crisp and blinding white in the black water as storm-lit sails."¹

There is a corollary between clarity of form, purity of light and spirituality. Barry Lopez also points out the comparison that has often been made between icebergs and cathedrals.² That metaphor is relevant to Davis' *Icebergs*, for it reveals the mystical properties these creatures of pale light possess. And it dramatizes their embodiment of something profound and pure beyond the self, beyond man and close to God. This mystical equivalency has captivated the artist's attention and it informs her austere images. Delineated in velvety textures of gray, black and white, the pictures are also private elegies to her lost friends.

She found similar spiritual resonances also exist at the great Egyptian ruins. In spite of the encroachments of modern cities, roads and traffic, the antique landscapes at Giza and Karnak, which Davis photographed in 1989, are still imbued with an awesome presence. The sheer grandeur of the ruined architecture that remains induces a meditative calm that has inspired Western writers, artists and photographers since the ruins were rediscovered in the 18th century. When the legendary American traveler John Lloyd Stephens (who would later uncover the Mayan ruins in the Yucatan) first saw the pyramids at Giza in the early 1830s, he wrote:

"Approaching, the three great pyramids and one small one are in view towering higher and higher across the plain. I thought ... I could almost touch them; yet I was more than a mile distant. The nearer I approached, the more their gigantic dimensions grew upon me, until when I actually reached them, rode up to the first layer of stones ... looked up their sloping sides to the lofty summits, they seemed to have grown to the size of mountains. ... No man can stand on the top of the great pyramid Cheops ... without considering at that moment an epoch not to be forgotten. Thousands of years roll through his mind, and thought recalls the men who built them, their mysterious uses, the poets, historians, philosophers, and warriors who have gazed upon them with wonder like his own."³

The first European photographer to take pictures of the pyramids, massive monuments, statues and hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt was the elegant Frenchman, Maxime Du Camp, whom his nubian guides called "the father of thinness." Du Camp traveled to the Nile in 1849 with

Gustave Flaubert. In 1852, Du Camp published his book, *Le Nil, Egypte et Nubie*, the first photographic record of many of the still half-buried temples, tombs and monuments, for which he won the cross of the Legion of Honor. In his journals of their trip, Flaubert described the Pyramid of Chephren at Giza as being “like a thing of nature, a mountain – as though it had been created just as it is, and with something terrible about it, as if it were going to crush you.” About the monument-littered desert, the author of *Madame Bovary* exclaimed, “Quelle silence! One sees how awesome it might be here.”

Maxime Du Camp said about the Colossi of Memnon, which Davis photographed 140 years after he did, “It is a place where one could stay for a very long time and in a perpetual state of astonishment ... Stones that so many people have thought about, so many men have come to see, are a joy to look at.”⁴

Lynn Davis’ Egyptian photographs minimize but never exclude the changes history has continued to impose on these historic places. Her photographs of the Colossi contain the road that runs right by the statues and the electrical wires above the road. But her obsession is really with the primal shapes of these grand monuments and how those archtypal forms reoccur in the sacred architecture of so many ancient civilizations.

Her pictures isolate and emphasize the severe formal purity of the pyramids at Giza, Meidum and Saqqara. Located on a plateau near modern Cairo, along with the Sphinx, the three great Giza pyramids dominate the vista of the Nile Valley. Scholars consider these 4,500-year-old structures to be at the apogee of the age of pyramid building, when the pyramid was the recognized tomb for Old Kingdom royalty. Because it was obscured by scaffolding, Davis did not photograph the Sphinx. At other sites she made haunting images of the step pyramid at Meidum and the pyramid at Saqqara, the first great stone structure built by man.

All of these images and her photographs of the Colossi of Memnon, the famous pair of statues of Amenophis III at Karnak, are intentionally mammoth in scale to emphasize geometric and historical monumentality. The prints are also enriched by bronze, gold, silver and copper tones that recall 19th-century photographic processes and that Davis has continued to use in her subsequent work.

To achieve these subtle printing effects, she collaborates with Minneapolis-based



Chephren, Giza, Dynasty IV, 1989, 28" x 28", selenium-toned photograph, collection of the artist

master printer, Steve Rifkin, who also has printed for Model, Mapplethorpe and James Van Der Zee. Rifkin extensively researches old formulas. After Davis decides on the tones appropriate to a group of photographs, they experiment together to get the tones she wants. Images are developed, bleached and redeveloped with selenium, creating a far richer surface than any black-and-white printing can provide. These toning processes consciously modify and expand on classic vintage printing processes like the experiments Edward Curtis made with gold-toning.

Recently, Davis made mammoth views of Niagara Falls that continue to re-examine the American sublime. And her 1993 photographs of the temples of Pagan, of the ruins at Angkor Wat and of Thailand’s great religious sculpture have further extended her anthology of sacred architecture. But do not mistake her pictures for nostalgic recreations of a vanished past. “My desire is to advance on what has already been done, not to imitate it,” Davis has said. Her pictures may distill the past. Yet their conscious elegiac qualities and essential formal concerns identify them as post-industrial, late 20th-century images.

Geometric forms that reoccur in so much non-Western religious architecture – the triangle, the cube, the circle, the spiral – appear repeatedly in stupas, temples, pyramids. But Davis never isolates these forms from their spiritual functions. In fact, her images reunify form and spirit. The photographs she has made since 1986 are nothing less than redemptive landscapes that seek to raise the consciousness and assuage the malaise of a massively secularized age.

– Alexandra Anderson-Spivy
New York editor, *Argonaut*

1 Barry Lopez, *Ice and Light*, page 207-208, *Arctic Dreams*, Charles Scribner’s & Sons, New York, 1986.

2 *Ibid.*, page 251.

3 John Lloyd Stephens, page 32, *Incidents of Travel in Egypt, Arabia, Petraea, and the Holy Land*, Chronicle Books, San Francisco, 1991.

4 Francis Steegmuller, editor and translator, page 170, *Flaubert in Egypt*, Academy Chicago Publishers, Chicago, 1987 (second printing)

Cover: *Iceberg #6, Disko Bay, Greenland*, 1988, 28" x 28", collection Lannan Foundation, Los Angeles.

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