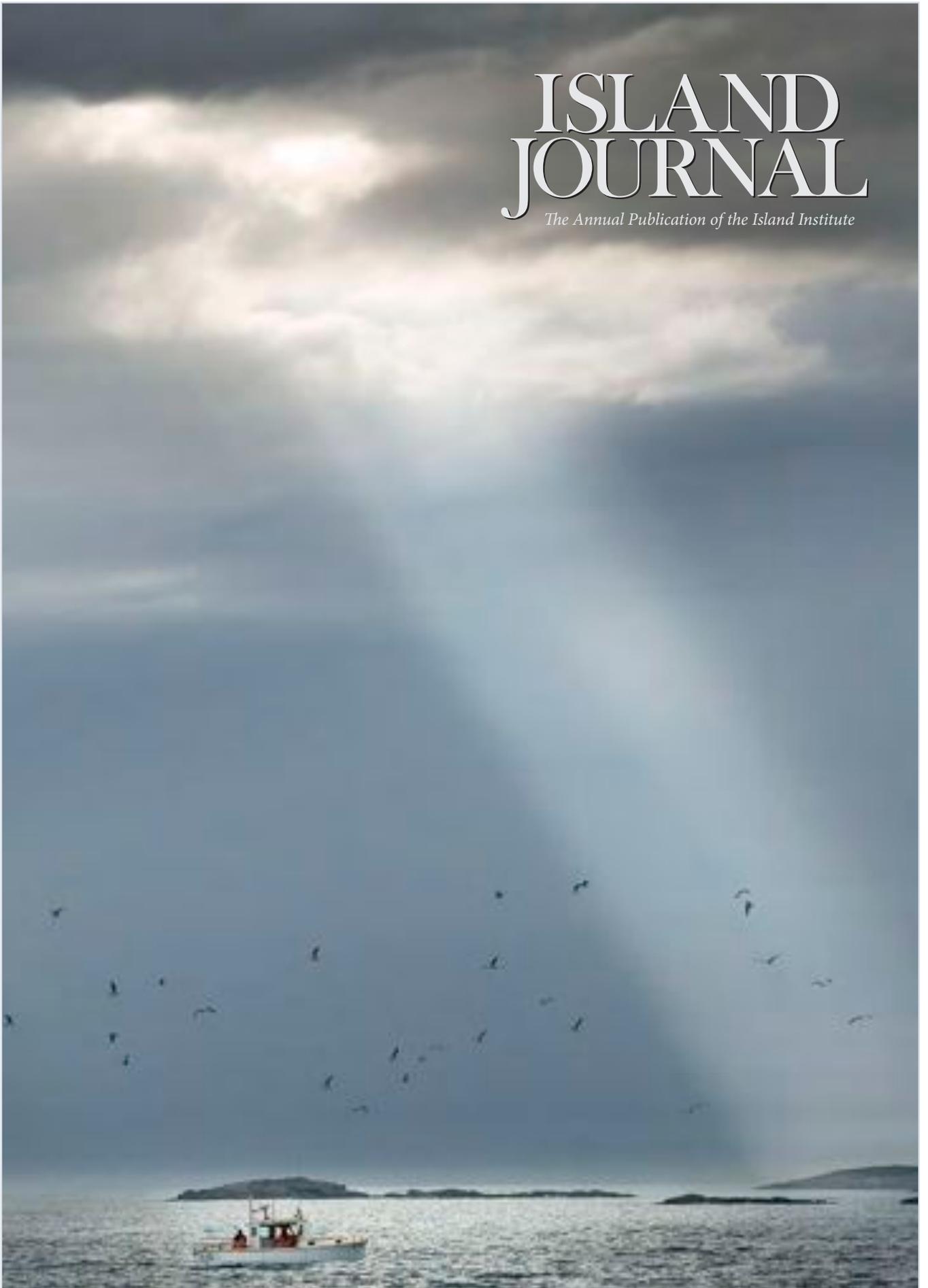


ISLAND JOURNAL

The Annual Publication of the Island Institute





Photographing the Naiads

TINA COHEN

There is an invitation, of sorts; word out on the street among a certain demographic. Within days, they coalesce. There might be a gentle haze in the sunlight of some of those early midsummer mornings as they gather. They look like they've arrived on gossamer wings, the way they have alighted on the rocks surrounding a quarry pool in the middle of the woods. In combination, there's an otherworldly, primal feeling to this verdant place. The laughter, goofiness, and feigned British accents suggest they are there to make merry, delaying for the moment any claim their jobs and other commitments may have on them. Like naiads, these women rule the quarry—temporarily, at least. Female spirits in Greek mythology, naiads preside over bodies of freshwater. Known for their singing and dancing, they are worshipped by humans because they make the water they inhabit come to life, even imparting healing properties. These naiads at this quarry will cavort in the water, animating that aqueous place as they collaboratively create scenarios with their photographer, Michael Seif.

“Once we're all there on the big rock, Mike describes his plan for the photo shoot, which usually works with the idea of re-creating a school of fish using a school of humans. We'll undress, making a big show of all of us in unison jumping off the cliff and splashing into the water. Mike positions himself to shoot from a cliff, aiming the camera down at our little school of fish. We have to time it just right in order for all of us to be underwater at the same time, so there is always a countdown and then a mass submersion. Underwater, we swim, crisscrossing each other, trying for the school-of-fish effect. When we can't hold our collective breath any longer, we pop to the surface and erupt in giggles, recounting what our faces looked like underwater and which leg kicked whose stomach in the effort to be fishlike. Sometimes we laugh so hard, with our affected British accents, it can take several minutes to get back to the task at hand.”

“We come up with all sorts of harebrained ideas, but also some good ones that end up creating great images. Mike puts up with our silliness and realizes that some of the best shots



come out of that kind of energy and enthusiasm. We, very simply, have fun. Many of us were quite comfortable with each other already. It's fun to swim, fun to play as adults, fun to hang out with your friends."

"Watching Mike's work evolve over the past few years and knowing that we've all been a part of it is humbling and exciting. He's a true artist. In some of his photographs, you don't know what the heck is going on in them, and in others, there may just be a hint—a hand or a foot in exquisite focus that is completely mesmerizing. Those are my favorites: where you're not sure if the form is human, but then, bam—there's undeniable proof that, somehow, what you're looking at is a person."

"What I find so interesting about his photos is that the nude becomes a part of nature, which it really ultimately is. It's as though he is able to capture the human form as nature rather than the human form in nature."

"Some of my favorite summer memories are in Mike's photographs. It's a true pleasure to work with him and with all the other models. As much as we may grumble about having to wake up early to go jump in the water, it's always, always worth it."

An academic background in zoology led Michael Seif to begin his work in photography by looking at fish. On the advice of one of his photography teachers, Lisette Model, he changed his focus: "You should be doing flesh," she said.

He discovered that human models moving in water created interesting effects: ripples, bubbles, distortions, fractured light, transformed features, and mysterious textures. But these quarry photographs are about more than just flesh; there's also an implicit sense of these women's expressive personalities, their embodiment of both innocence and sensuality. Seif has an attitude toward his models that seems almost worshipful at times, and that seems wholly deserving. After all, these naiads are quasi-deities of the quarry.

Seif's photographs have been exhibited across the United States in solo and group shows. In 2011, he won a Juror's Choice Award from noted photographer Joel Meyerowitz at the Copley Society of Art in Boston show, "Then and Now: The Enduring Allure of Light in Photography." His first book, *The Fluid Figure*, was published in 2011.

Michael Seif is represented by New Era Gallery on Vinalhaven. A selection of his photographs will be on exhibit in the Archipelago Fine Arts Gallery at the Island Institute, June 7–July 26, 2013.

For more information, see www.thearchipelago.net, www.neweragallery.com, and www.michaelseifphotos.com.

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Migration West



Coming Up



Exhalation



The Descent



We Two



Nebula



Ambivalence



Parrot Tulip



Coming Apart



Collision



June 1

\$19.95



I AM FISHING FOR GOD

using my heart as bait.
It is just before dawn,
The slightest hint of

pink bleeds into the
night sky. I use my
pen knife to cut the

hole in my chest,
reaching behind the
pocket of my shirt.

What a tough muscle
to pull through.
The heart is astonished

to be in this other world
and trembles and shivers like
a moth discovered in daylight.

I try to calm it by stroking it
by telling it that it will be
ok, but what do I know.

The breeze picks up and chills the cavern
in my chest. It feels good to
be empty at last. I cast my heart

across the water. I cast it again
and again. Sometimes it floats on
the surface, other times it sinks

below. Something will strike at it
that I can't see. I pray
I am using the right bait.

The tough outer layers
soften in the water. The heart grows
smaller, more pliant.

It has become a beautiful
blue jewel. I begin
not to recognize it.

Was this me?
It was. I wait.
The boat rocks

slightly in the breeze
lifted and lowered
by the tide.

STUART KESTENBAUM

From *House of Thanksgiving* (Deerbrook Editions)
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