

DIS/ENCHANTED: IDEAS OF NORTH—AN INTRODUCTION
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We have imposed a system of coordinates onto the earth—an invented grid that points North, South, East, and West. Throughout recorded history, but with inexorable intensity from the age of exploration through today’s penetrating globalization, constellations of impressions have gathered around each direction, impressions defined sometimes poetically, other times politically. In the 20th-century, for example, “East vs. West” defined geo-political machinations. And there persists, both globally and locally, stereotypical ideas of Southern character, whether referring to the hemisphere, or southern edges of a particular country, be it Germany, Italy, or the United States. These regional generalizations lead to a realization: a compass point can only be defined relatively, from where you stand. By definition it points over there, to an Other place, a not-us.

This project—the True North exhibition and book—is about imagining a place, an imaginary place, which is nonetheless vividly real but defined by its remoteness it becomes a screen for our hopes, dreams, and fears. Its focus is contemporary photography and video depicting landscapes loosely or precisely defined as northern, whether shot in the Arctic and adjoining regions, or places a bit further south in the winter months, such that vistas of mountains covered with snow and ice signal the forbidding extremes of northern climates. It broadly encompasses the ends of the earth: both Poles; mountain and glacial peaks; the limits of ice and snow. Lands that are chillingly vertiginous, or desolate, or both. Terrains that are a challenge to reach and to traverse.

While there is a notable contemporary resurgence of interest in the “idea of north,” northern landscapes held a special place in the imagination of Romantic writers and artists in the early 19th Century. The awe-inspiring grandeur of natural wonders—whether cathedrals of arctic ice or the immaterial atmosphere of Friedrich’s iconic seascapes, for example—inspired appreciation for the sublime, a kind of existential terror (or humility) that fulfilled a secular spiritual yearning. After the advent of photography, in the second half of the 19th Century, artist-explorers set out to capture the sublime first hand and bring back to an eager public proof of magnificent, pristine snow-covered Alpine passes, uncharted mountains of the American west, and Arctic glaciers. With the steady elimination of any and all barriers to long-distance travel, the implication of a heroic quest that underlay these images was superseded by the ubiquity (and banality) of the tourist snapshot.

The works in True North are the artistic descendents of northern Romantic painting, as filtered through the history of landscape photography. Like their Romantic forbearers, these contemporary artists try to capture the awe-inspiring magnitude of their subjects through the large scale of their photographs, installations, and projections. Some are interested in presenting an ineffable stillness before a horizon that seems infinite, a desolate void that is at once nihilistically threatening and somehow inspiring. The snowy winter landscape suggests both a place that menaces human survival while at the same time its unsullied purity seems sustaining in a world that is threatened with destruction at human hands. But of course we no longer live in the 19th Century, so the idealist notions underpinning Romantic painting and subsequent photography no longer obtain. Instead, the work of the contemporary artists in True North is often layered with irony and historical self-consciousness that acknowledges the incredible diffusion of representations of every remote locale in the world. Though in 1967, exploration of the North Pole was pursued in tandem with walking on the moon, today tourism, industry, and pollution reach all corners of the earth. Some of the work in the show seems to demonstrate the view, pensively expressed in Glenn Gould’s innovative radio