

Kahn and Selesnick Career Review in PDN (Photo District News), February 3, 2007



## Flights of Fancy

**Welcome to the whimsical world of Kahn and Selesnick. They bring their mock histories to life with the help of some thrift-store props, a little photoshop and lots of ingenuity.**

**By Sarah Coleman  
January 03, 2007**

A white-suited astronaut steps from a spaceship onto the dry, crumbly surface of the moon. It's virgin territory, one giant step for mankind, he thinks. But wait—over on a rocky escarpment, something looks strange. Cresting the hill, the astronaut sees in front of him an odd vista of cone-shaped structures with bent, pointy tops. Tall men in long fur coats scurry around, their heads obscured by glass helmets with conical beaks. Houston, we have a problem. It looks like a group of men from Edwardian England got to the moon first, and they seem to have the place colonized.

Welcome to *The Apollo Prophecies*, the latest oddball creation from the fertile, slightly warped minds of photographers Nicholas Kahn and Richard Selesnick. Recently published by Aperture, *The Apollo Prophecies* is a book that unfolds accordion-style and is printed on both sides so that it's essentially two enormous, skinny panoramas. It tells the mythical story of the encounter of modern-day astronauts with a group of Edwardian space adventurers. It includes a companion volume of mystical prophecies by the Edwardian space adventurers, who muse, among other things, that "the moon was latent, even crystalline, until perturbed by the agony of Gagarin."

"It's just such a pleasure to see their visual inventiveness," says Nancy Grubb, the duo's editor at Aperture. "Other people have done their own interpretations of the space program, but Nicholas and Richard have put their own very particular spin on it."

Kahn and Selesnick's previous projects have been just as odd and whimsical. For the last two decades, they have specialized in creating photographic stories that artfully blur the line between history and fantasy. Their first major project, "The Circular River," followed the fictional 1940s expedition of Bindon MacRupert and Ian Brockman, emissaries from the very British Royal Excavation Corps, to investigate the crash of a German spy pilot in Siberia. *Scotlandfuturebog* told the story of a postapocalyptic tribe of bog people in Scotland, and the dazzling *City of Salt* consisted of tableaux inspired by Sufi fables, which took place in and around an imaginary city of glittering white stupas and minarets.

Call it fictional photography, or perhaps photo-fantasy: Kahn and Selesnick are part of a small but growing genre. Like photographers Jerry Uelsmann, Robert and Shana ParkeHarrison and Anthony Goicolea, they devise improbable scenarios and photograph them with immense visual flair. The images might employ Photoshop to a greater or lesser degree, but more important are the photographers' boundless imaginations—their abilities to conjure up worlds that are at once bizarre and strangely familiar.

Generating ideas isn't a problem for the pair. In Kahn's house, a converted church that overlooks the Hudson River in upstate New York, the mundane and fantastical coexist. Above the dining table, an antique chandelier is festooned with 12 artificial crows and many wooden puppets. On a shelf, some crinkled, cream-colored objects rest underneath glass bell jars. "These are life forms that the Edwardian astronauts found on the moon," says Kahn. He squints at the jars. "They're actually some kind of coral. At least, that's what they are on this plane."

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Right now, Kahn is busy designing imaginary bank notes for another upcoming project, "Eisbergfreistad." According to this tale, an iceberg broke away from Greenland in 1923 and floated to the northern German shore, where a city was carved from the ice. Eisbergfreistad had its own currency, and an elaborate masked ball took place there before the entire ice city crashed into the sea. "We've never been to that part of Germany, which makes it easier to imagine," says Kahn with a laugh.

Having started off as visual pranksters, creating plausibly "historical" photographs, the two artists are now expanding their range. "It's more interesting to walk the line between history and fantasy, rather than always doing mock-history," says Selesnick.

Shooting these surreal, elaborate stories takes time and ingenuity. Kahn and Selesnick's signature panoramas, which are usually 8 inches high and 6 feet wide, are stitched together from images shot on cameras ranging from a 1920s Gundlach 8 x 10 bellows camera to a Canon Rebel. Before Photoshop, they would literally cut and paste images, then copy them on a color Xerox machine, adding scratches and folds to make the images look old. Now, says Kahn, "We're big Photoshop and Mac users." In one of the images for Scotlandfuturebog, Selesnick created a crowd scene by compositing different poses of three models. "It's wonderful that we can change landscapes and replicate people," he says.

A tall, red-haired Brit with a deadpan manner, Selesnick is the one who tends to spend hours manipulating images in Photoshop. Kahn, who's dark-haired and slighter, has the mischievous glee of one of Santa's elves. He's a self-confessed thrift store and eBay junkie who delights in finding odd props. "I grew up in New Jersey, so I'm really good at shopping," he says.

The two met in the mid-1980s, when they were both students at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. They rented an apartment together and at first worked separately on similar projects—"We'd be tripping over each others' sets on the way to the bathroom," recalls Selesnick. The friendship persisted despite the introduction of Rupert, a rabbit Kahn found on the street and brought in as a pet. "He'd constantly escape and rampage through the sets we'd built in the apartment," remembers Selesnick. "If we could get him back into his cage, he'd spread-eagle himself against the chicken wire and spray shit and pee into the room."

But Rupert's mischief set the tone for future projects. "We like to combine humor and transcendence, and we have these constant shifts between them," says Selesnick. Once, while shooting a scene for Scotland- futurebog, he crouched naked on a Scottish moor with a rubber skullcap covering his hair, thick mists rolling in around him. "It was a sort of mystical, transcendent experience—until a hiker appeared from nowhere, let out a horrified scream and fled back into the mists," he laughs.

It has been suggested more than once that Kahn and Selesnick could parlay their skills into big-budget movies, and they admit to a fondness for Kubrick, Bergman and Greenaway. But they prefer to work simply. "We like to use what's on hand, and usually, what's on hand is me and Nick," says Selesnick. One exception took place when the two were resident artists at Phillips Exeter Academy in Andover, Massachusetts. Word spread that the Kahn/Selesnick studio was the best party on campus, and soon, dozens of high school students were showing up to be transformed into bog beasts. "There were girls wearing sheep's pelts, with rubber Ace bandages around their breasts," Selesnick remembers. "It was like something out of Caligula. I remember Nick getting overwhelmed and spending some time in the fetal position."

For their gallery shows, Kahn and Selesnick create artifacts to go with the photographs, from clothing to expedition diaries. When "The Apollo Prophecies" was shown in a gallery in D.C., fake moon footage shot in Kahn's 15 x 15-foot attic, complete with breathy commentary by the two, was convincing enough to fool a group of visiting NASA scientists. Someone at NASA got the joke, and admired the pair's chutzpah: As a result, Kahn and Selesnick have a grant from the organization to imagine a future Mars expedition.

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Along with critical acclaim, the pair has attracted some lukewarm reviews: "Make them stop," wrote the New York Times's Roberta Smith. Still, they are doing well, with regular shows at the Yancey Richardson Gallery in New York and the Pepper Gallery in Boston. The Apollo Prophecies is their third collaboration with Aperture, and they generate a good income from print sales.

Highly talented as individuals, these two artists have found a way to combine their strengths and push each other to greater feats of daring. Since their partnership is a kind of marriage, its intensity can lead to occasional conflicts at home (Selesnick is married with two children; Kahn is engaged), but, says Kahn, "our partners are artists too, so they understand." Importantly, both men say, the collaboration leads them to push themselves harder. "We both know that we can bring in what we want to bring in," says Selesnick. "When we criticize each other, it's usually to say, you haven't gone far enough with this idea."

Their next creation is bound to look like nothing else you've seen before. But do they ever feel like just, you know, photographing reality?

"Not really," says Selesnick. "I like photographs of reality; I have no interest in doing them myself." Kahn grins broadly. "I thought that's what we were doing," he deadpans. "I guess other people just don't see it that way."

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