THIN PLACES
KILIII YUYAN

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TURCHIN CENTER for the Visual Arts
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Appalachian STATE UNIVERSITY
I will always remember those nights with the burning, glowing embrace of the fireflies. In the space around my body, they floated like a thousand miniature green-yellow lanterns, blazing long enough to be seen, but gone quickly enough escape my cupped hands.

It’s embedded in me to see the fireflies as spirit beings here. I’ve never met a person who hasn’t felt their otherworldly nature. Indeed, my Indigenous ancestors referred to wild creatures as “men in other shirts.” For animistic peoples, our world is inhabited by spirits which only reveal themselves in particular circumstances or places. And yet, somehow, I think we all feel this regardless of where we come from.

And that spot by the pond out in the summer darkness with the fireflies? That’s my quintessential thin place.

I suppose that’s why, even as I walk through a world largely shaped by religion or science, I pause when I come across a thin place. I can’t help but feel it, to be confused by it, to be transformed – ever so subtly – by it. It’s sometimes full of grandeur and other times mundane. Encountering a thin place can be unpredictable, as when I’m walking across the tundra and the aurora borealis flares overhead. Many northern communities speak of communing with their ancestors in the northern lights.

The thin places are waypoints in my personal songline. I seek them out because they guide my way home—help me understand where I come from. I may be separated from my ancestral communities by history and hostile borders, but sometimes my ancestors are right there in front of me, blazing in the night.

Kilii Yuyan
Photographer Kiliii Yuyan illuminates stories of the Arctic and human communities connected to the land and sea. Informed by ancestry that is both Nanai/Hèzhé (East Asian Indigenous) and Chinese American, he explores the human relationship to the natural world from different cultural perspectives and extreme environments, on land and underwater. Kiliii is an award-winning contributor to National Geographic, TIME and other major publications.

Survival skills, cold-water diving, and a penchant for listening have been critical for Kiliii’s projects in extreme environments and cultures outside his own. On assignment, he has fled collapsing sea ice, weathered botulism from fermented whale blood, and found kinship at the edges of the world. In addition, Kiliii builds traditional kayaks and contributes to the revitalization of Northern Indigenous/East Asian culture.
Kiliii Yuyan is a National Geographic Explorer (2021), one of PDN’s 30 Photographers (2019), a Grist 50 Fixer (2022), a member of Indigenous Photograph and Diversify Photo. His work has been exhibited worldwide and received some of photography’s top honors. His public talks inspire others about photography, Indigenous perspectives, and relationship to land. Yuyan is based out of traditional Duwamish lands (Seattle) but can be found across the circumpolar Arctic much of the year.
“I had a powerful moment where I understood the need to branch out beyond my regular work and dive further into animism, the spiritual framework behind my Nanai and Chinese ancestries. And since animism is about relationship to land, it’s a perfect candidate for landscape work.

But the big question was: how to turn something so abstract and beyond normal perception into photography?...

As soon as I asked the question, the answer appeared in front of me, as the forest I was hiking through transformed into a river of floating orange spirit lights, dancing above my head and on the trunks of the fir trees. I had never seen anything like it before, but I knew that the moment and the particular place had given me insight into how I would approach the idea of animism, now my ongoing project titled, Thin Places.”

Have you ever had a moment where you felt very connected to the world around and beyond you? Have you ever experienced a “thin place”? If so, imagine yourself there. If not, imagine yourself inside one of Kiliii’s photographs.

What does it feel like?
Is this place cold or warm?
Soft or prickly?
Does it remind you of something else?

How might you depict these feelings through your own imagery?

Use any materials you like to visualize the feeling of being in a “thin place”.

INVITATION TO CREATE
BEHIND THE SCENES

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It's embedded in me to see the fireflies as spirit beings here. I've never met a person who hasn't felt their otherwise lively nature. Indeed, my Indigenous ancestors referred to wild creatures as "men in other skins." For animistic peoples, our world is inhabited by spirits which only reveal themselves in particular circumstances or places. And yet, somehow, I think we all feel this regardless of where we come from.

And that spot by the pond out in the summer darkness with the fireflies? That's my quintessential thin place.

Thin Places:

I sometimes feel why, every once in a while, I am drawn by silent or presence to a place. I come across this place and help but feel it to be connected by it. It's sometimes hard to say exactly why it is. Sometimes full of wonder and other times mystery. Entering a thin place can be unforgettable, as when I'm walking across the street and the northern lights overhead. Many thin places are spaces of communicating with whatever is in the northern light.

Kilili Yuyan

Thin places are ways our personal songlines. They are a way because they guide us to where we came from. They may be separated by cultural communities by history and politics. Sometimes my ancestors are right there in front of the northern lights.
GALLERY TOURS
SELECTED IMAGES

The Claw, 2018
Archival Inkjet Print

Moonlife, 2022
Archival Inkjet Print

Kodamas, 2020
Archival Inkjet Print

Icehenge, 2021
Archival Inkjet Print
SELECTED IMAGES

Eye of the River Spirit, 2022
Archival Inkjet Print

Understories, 2021
Archival Inkjet Print

Portrait of the Artist

Rare Waters, 2019
Archival Inkjet Print
ARTICLES:

Strange Fire Collective Interview

Humble Arts Feature - Finding Homeland Through Ice and Snow

LensCulture - Unbroken Lineage: The Keeper of Knowledge

Communication Arts Feature

World Photography Organization Interview

Frequently Asked Questions - Becoming a Nat Geo Photographer
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

VIDEOS AND PODCASTS:

- Storytelling Fellow Video by NIA TERO
- National Geographic Podcast - Camping on sea ice with whale hunters
- Creative Live Podcast - Connect to the Land
- Outside Podcast - Life and Death Among Polar Bears
THANK YOU

FROM THE TURCHIN CENTER FOR THE VISUAL ARTS

The Turchin Center for the Visual Arts at Appalachian State University engages visitors from the university, community, nation and beyond in creating unique experiences through dynamic and accessible exhibition, education, outreach and collection programs. These programs inspire and support a lifelong engagement with the visual arts and create opportunities for participants to learn more about themselves and the world around them.

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