

## INTERVIEW: LYNN DAVIS

**James Barron:** In August 2016, you and I spoke for two hours straight while I was in a car en route to JFK. You told me that the following week you were going on an expedition to Greenland to see the icebergs with two documentarians and Tony Leiserowitz, the Director of the Yale Project on Climate Change. When I sat in my seat on the plane, told a friend I had been on the phone with Lynn Davis. The guy sitting next to me said, "Did you say Lynn Davis?" When I replied, "Yes," he said he was Tony Leiserowitz.

**Lynn Davis:** That was the craziest thing in the world.

**JB:** What are the chances? One in a billion? One in ten million? What does this mean to you?

**LD:** To me it means there is something indicated.

**JB:** You have in a way inadvertently documented the melting of our icebergs. Obviously, you didn't set out to do that. What was the impetus for the first trip to photograph the icebergs?

**LD:** Rudy, my husband, was on a trip with Robert Frank, up the coast of Newfoundland. They saw an iceberg and that iceberg stayed in Rudy's mind. It was the late 80s, and there was AIDS in New York, and I decided not to do any more portraits or nudes ever again. I didn't know what I was going to do — this was 1986. People were dying. One day we were talking, and he said, "You know, I was on this boat trip and I saw this iceberg. It looked a lot like one of your nudes." And that was it; I started researching icebergs. Where they were, calved. There was almost no information at the time. There wasn't the internet and there weren't any pictures. I remember some number in Greenland that I called up; it was an Inuit and he was speaking in a different language. So I couldn't find out if there were actually icebergs there. But I did find out that in the town of Ilulissat, the largest iceberg in the world was calved.

There wasn't a direct flight. I had to go from city to city, then across to Nuuk, the capital of Greenland, and then I took a freighter up the coast. I got so sea sick I had to lie down the whole trip. My stomach would settle down, and I would get up and run to the captain and say, "Where are the icebergs? There's no icebergs." He said, "Just wait. Wait." I was sort of in a panic. I had put everything on the line [for this trip]. Five hours out of Ilulissat, I saw the first iceberg.

**JB:** That must have been a remarkable experience.

**LD:** It was amazing! And then as we came into the harbor, there were more and more past the fjord. It was dazzling.

**JB:** When you see them melting now, since you know these icebergs well, is it almost like seeing a beautiful old friend aging or dying?

**LD:** The whole nature of the ice has changed. It's not that you see them melt. It's like there aren't as many. The ones that you see [in my photographs] are all beautifully formed and very crisp and beautiful. Now you look out into the bay and see very soft ice. It isn't formed or articulated. You can still find the icebergs, but the majority of them are softer and unformed. When we went back in 2016, there were still some amazing, beautiful icebergs, but the nature of them has changed.

**JB:** When I watched the Al Gore film *An Inconvenient Sequel*, there was aerial footage from a helicopter of an entire section of an iceberg collapsing into the water. I lost my breath and sobbed. These icebergs have an incredible resonance. We see them as objects of tremendous beauty, they are also living embodiments of our planet's well being.

**LD:** I understand that feeling entirely.

**JB:** You swore you would not take another nude, which is a strong statement. Now, at a different moment in your career, would you consider going back to take nudes that could be visual parallels with the icebergs?

**LD:** No. First of all: I've done it. I did it, I did it, I did it. The icebergs are done, the nudes are done, the portraits are done. I'm in a different place now from all of it. There's no going back. The body became this transient thing. Part of what I found in the ice, and these other places I went, was something that was relatively more permanent. Of course, now we see the ruins in the thirty years since I've been doing it. Many of the things are gone the cities, the buildings, the ice.

**JB:** The other photograph we have in our featured exhibition is *Old Faithful*. There is an obvious connection between the two photographs; one is really in a sense about ice melting. It's in a form of stasis in the photograph, but in actuality, it is melting. The other is something about this rupture within the earth.

**LD:** Around this time, my friends died of AIDS, and my father also died. I wanted to go somewhere with some resonance in my mind. I decided to go to Yellowstone for the geyser, because of the energy. It's cataclysmic and shocking and shakes up the earth under our feet, so

it felt very appropriate. I went on that trip in the very last days you could go. It was already November, and everything was about to close down for the winter. A lot of the things I did at that time had to do with the death of the people around me. The geyser had a lot of meaning for me.

**JB:** You waited to see an iceberg, and then you waited to see a geyser erupt.

**LD:** Right. It is a challenge to do those pictures. If you're not very calm and centered and precise, you miss the whole thing, or you're not in the right place to shoot it. The ice is like that, too. It is challenging physically and mentally, so it's the whole thing all together. It's the emotion, the mental state, the intellectual state, and the challenge of, "What can you do with this?"

**JB:** Do you see yourself as a continuation of the tradition of the explorer photographer?

**LD:** No, not really. That became an accident, because I trained myself in the studio to look specifically, and I took that studio discipline [into all my work that involved travel]. I was much more trained in art history than I ever was in photography.

**JB:** Can you give us a clue of what you are up to now?

**LD:** There is a project I've always been interested in, which is the geometry of architecture. I am going to do a huge book on the circle, the square, and the triangle, and my architectural journey around the world. It's all laid out on my table. There are hundreds of images that I'm now organizing historically to get the layout of the first book, which is how we do our prototypes. I had natural images in there, but then it didn't work because I couldn't date them. I want the book to be a dating of these subjects historically from the ancient to the modern.

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