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Kathy Akey

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## INTERVIEW

 Interviews, News  By Whattaroll Magazine

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Today, New York-based artist **Kathy Akey** takes us on a remarkable adventure in Svalbard, Norway, a recent journey that allowed her to fulfill a childhood dream of polar expedition. Through an invitation to get onboard The Arctic Circle residency program, she and her companions – a team consisting of both artists and scientists – spent three weeks sailing together and exploring one of the harshest and remotest regions in the Arctic Ocean.

As with any film-loving wanderer out there, this was an opportunity to take memorable and breath-taking photos in analogue that Kathy couldn't miss. Having documented her trip using a variety of films and cameras – notably, The Intrepid Camera Co.'s large format camera – she graciously shared with us her amazing shots, and indulged us with a humbling and deeply insightful interview about her time exploring the beautifully untouched wilderness.

Read on to find out what it was like for her to finally take in the landscape she had only dreamed about as a child, how it gave her a new perspective for her work as an artist, the painstaking preparations she had to do, and how her collaboration with The Intrepid Camera Co. led to her working with large format photography for the first time!

**Hi Katherine, please tell us a little about yourself.  
Who are you and what does your daily life entail?**

I'm originally from rural Virginia and have been living in New York City for almost ten years now after moving there for college. Since finishing my MFA I've been working full-time as a photo producer for a start-up. That consumes my weekdays but it's also given me the cushioning I needed to make my trip to the Arctic possible. I try to find time for my art practice on the weekends or on days off. It's a hard balance to strike; in fact it's something I struggle with every day, but that's the reality of both being an artist and being a New Yorker! Work-artwork-life balance.

**We'd like to know about your first experience with large format photography. How did you come across it? What was it like shooting with it in the beginning? How would you describe the feeling of shooting with large format, say, compared to shooting 35mm or 120mm films?**

My first experience actively shooting large format myself was actually for this trip! It was a pretty big gamble, taking my first large format camera on a residency like this, but it certainly paid off. They may seem daunting but the simplicity of these cameras makes them incredibly easy to use, as long as you have both a good understanding of the basic principles of photography and a lot of patience. My biggest exposure to large format before shooting it myself came from my teachers at the International Center of Photography, including [Joshua Lutz](#), [Deana Lawson](#), and [Justine Kurland](#). I was totally starstruck with them and their work and that made me want to embrace the large format way of working, too.

The biggest benefit for me is being forced to slow down. Roll films, and 35mm in particular, gave photographers the ability to snap on the street and in war zones quickly, closely. That's

an incredible power, but I've always had a tendency to rush my work and it causes sloppiness, from my handwriting to my photography. In grad school I moved from shooting exclusively 35mm to mostly 120, and the bulkier and more time intensive cameras yielded me better and better images. Noticing that trend, I thought well, I better give large format a go!

**Shooting large format photography usually means a high chance of failure, errors in settings, etc. What draws you to it despite the “flaws” and challenges? What are the advantages of using large format for you, and for this trip specifically?**

Simply needing to load your own film is risky, and probably the riskiest part of the process for me. That being said, you have to accept a certain amount of “bad” shots to get the great ones! And you can always mess up, no matter the format. For instance, during this trip a bunch of my 120 images had a weird dark splotch in the bottom left hand corner, which I now realize is my mitten in frame! Because I was shooting with a rangefinder I simply didn't notice it while framing my shots. The large format gives you an insane amount of control because you have two planes you can angle and manipulate, changing the focal plane in a way you just can't with any other camera. It's incredibly liberating. I wanted that control, including the ability to take super long exposures in very tough lighting conditions without sacrificing the detail.

**We really love the Intrepid Camera here at Whattaroll. How did the collaboration between you and the Intrepid Camera Company happen?**

I had been a supporter of theirs for a while and decided to let them know I'd be heading to Svalbard and planned to take their camera with me. They were totally thrilled that one of their cameras would go somewhere so extreme and I was

super happy to show off the great images I got to take with their camera during my trip. Their camera was particularly attractive to me when preparing for this residency because it is insanely light and contains mostly wooden parts. Plastic becomes very brittle in the cold, and metal is painful to handle in those temperatures, making a wooden camera a great option!

**You spent a good period of time exploring and shooting in the Arctic. How did that affect you personally and as an artist? Would you say this experience has changed you?**

The trip was this incredible joy for the child in me; I'd read books about polar explorers since I was very young, and getting to see and smell and feel the landscape I'd read so much about. I got to hear the newly shorn ice crackle and pop in the seawater and to see violet and green appear in the snowdrifts. Who doesn't love an adventure? It was such a blast, I met incredible artists, forged strong friendships and learned so much about myself.

As an artist, it was an opportunity to take my thesis work and pull it in a totally new direction. I put an enormous amount of energy, time and emotion into that work in grad school, but as soon as I saw the Arctic with my own eyes and not just through those of past explorers that work changed for me enormously. It feels dated now, but sweet. You can't go back to unknowing something. So now that I've traveled to the Arctic, the way I was able to view the exploration of the area before, it's now extinct. That's a really powerful thing for me to have experienced, seeing that work change and rethinking how I move forward in that line of creative inquiry with this totally new, rich layer of experience, the firsthand experience.

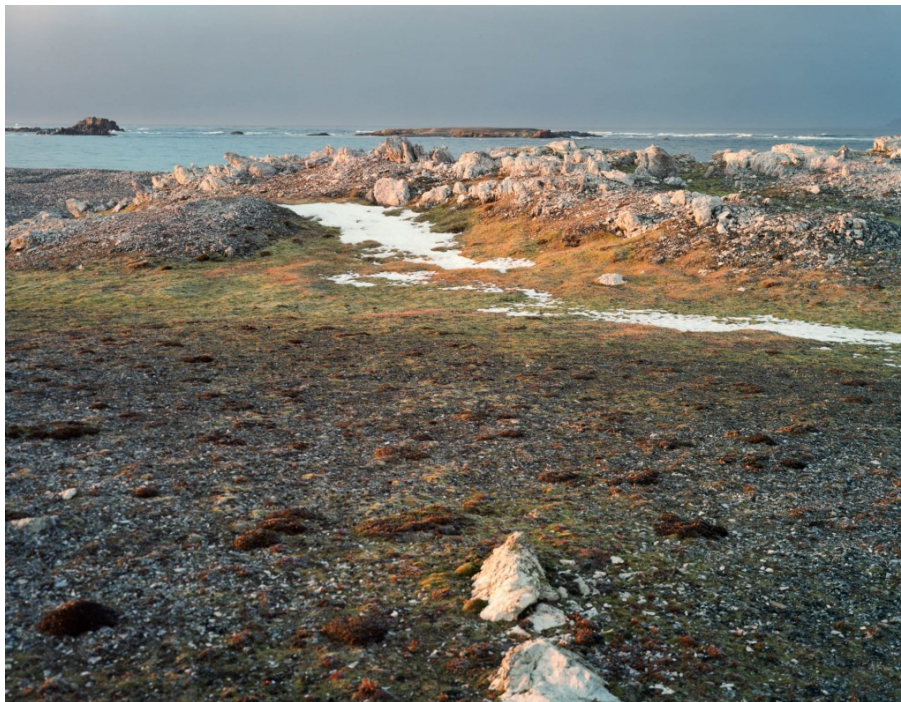
**Leading up to your trip, how did you prepare for such a long time away and in such testing conditions?**

I had to buy a lot of specialized clothing and that made up the bulk of my preparations, actually. I knew very little about outdoor brands or dressing for exposure going into this trip, and now I feel pretty comfortable walking into REI and being like “I know what I need.” Luckily, I had over a year to prepare and we happened to have a stunningly cold winter in NYC, so by the time I had bought most of my gear it was barely 20 °F outside! I stood in a nearby park for a while and got a feel for what was and wasn’t keeping me warm. I also did a ton of research, reading everything I could get my hands on about Arctic exploration, the early airship flights out of Ny Ålesund, and the history of the settlements in Svalbard. I also visited the [Byrd Polar Research Center](#) at Ohio State University, where I got a tour of their facilities including a rock library and their collection of ice cores. The scientists there produce such incredibly important and interesting work, I highly recommend you [check them out](#)!

**Can you share with us a memorable moment from your time there, and what made it special for you? Please share with us a picture which means a lot to you, taken from this trip and explain its significance.**

Our first night out to sea was a truly epic experience. We sailed from a sheltered, mirror-still fjord and headed north. Turns out what can be described as a “small swell” in the context of the ocean is, in the context of sea sickness prone individuals like myself, a massive upset. Three meter swells hit our little boat, and while many of my comrades headed below deck to their bunks, I joined a small group on deck. The boat was rocking so violently you simply had to hold on to something unless you felt comfortable sliding around uncontrollably! After a while, the waves got the better of me (and most of the others onboard, including the crew and wilderness guides and even the poor dog). I got sick overboard, and then felt worlds better.

As a reward to those of us toughing it out in the misty, cold outdoors, an outstanding aurora came out! Green with a red band at its bottom, the aurora wrapped around the ship from east through north to the northwest, and at one point a separate band flashed into the south (which is quite rare!) A group of towering, electric-like white shards shot out right above the ship, dancing above the mast. It was staggering in its beauty. Unfortunately, it also kept me out on deck long enough to become quite ill for a second, and then a third time. It was definitely worth it, though at a high cost. The next day we landed here, in Farmhamna, to see the only tundra and the only green of our entire journey. The peace was overwhelming.



**I think it's safe to say that this happens to all photographers before a trip; How did you decide which cameras to take with you and why?**

I changed my line-up right before my final pack, which was pretty intense. I had planned on a large format, a 35mm and a digital camera going into the trip so I'd have a nice spread of sizes. I recently inherited a Leica M2 and had been planning on taking that with me until it suddenly hit me that not only is the Leica M2 very heavy for its size and



completely metal, it actually isn't that easy of a camera for me to use! I'd only had it a few months, and without a light meter and with a pretty tricky film loading system, I realized I was bringing this really difficult tool with me as my go-to small format option. Thinking maybe that wasn't the best idea, I subbed in my Mamiya 7, which is a very light, plastic medium format camera. It also happens to be one of those cameras I could almost use blindfolded, and having the comfort of a very familiar camera with me was great.

**Are you hopeful for the future of film photography, more so with large format photography? Do you think it will grow or fade away?**

I'm cautiously optimistic, yes. I think it will become more expensive and more niche as manufacturers have to focus elsewhere to stay profitable. That being said, if companies like Intrepid Camera Co. keep popping up, providing the cameras and emulsions film photographers crave, perhaps we won't feel the crunch too much. I do think film photography will remain a huge part of the fine art photography world; oil paints didn't just vanish when cheaper, easier to use paints like acrylic showed up. The parts of using oils that can be frustrating, like the length it takes to dry, became its strengths, allowing painters to work over an area repeatedly before it dries. I think, and hope, that film will have a future a bit like oil paints'. The one thing I am really afraid will disappear are color darkrooms. The machines used for processing are huge, expensive and dangerous, and the mechanics who know how to repair and maintain them are few and far between. If any aspect of film photography will fade out, that seems the most likely to me.

**What do you want to say with your images? If there has to be a message, a statement, that your work speaks, what would that be?**

There's so many answers to this question, and being so early in my art practice I think it's subject to change a lot over the coming years. The core thread of my work would be a love of history, and I hope that people will come away from my work with their interest piqued, with a little bit more interest in the past and the people who lived it.

## **How do you approach a shoot, or a shot, in general? What is your "process?"**

The biggest lesson I learned about myself during my MFA was that I am not a strong photographer; I do not capture those decisive moments naturally or easily. Half of my work is done after the photos have all been taken when I get into a darkroom and start fiddling around. When I shoot, I think about gathering raw materials to use later rather than capturing strong, stand-alone images. Accepting that photography doesn't limit itself to the click of the shutter was so liberating; it allowed me to view the incredible breadth of photosensitive materials and techniques as opportunities rather than defined limits. A cyanotype can be an image on paper, but it can also be painted onto walls too! The silver in our papers can be transformed into magnificent, shimmering mirrors! The flash of sunlight across a paper can say so much about that day. Isn't that just incredible?

## **Are there any upcoming projects on the horizon? Is there anything that we can be looking forward to from you?**

I'm working on a couple projects using material I generated in Svalbard, including a little book about the wilderness guides from my trip and a project riffing on the arts and crafts of whaling villages in New England. I'm really hoping to get some of that shown over the summer! I'm also an avid (amateur) military historian and a goal of mine is to secure funding to travel the Western, Eastern, Italian, Middle Eastern, and African fronts from WWI to photograph them



and the people living along them now. That's a pretty long term goal though, so we'll see!

## Is there any advice you would give to photographers wanting to get into shooting large format?




Go for it! And when you do, be bold. Take advantage of the camera movements available to you when using such an incredible tool. And, as expensive as it can be, don't hold back. The more you shoot, the better you'll get, so accept the failed shots as they come and enjoy the process!

To learn more about Kathy's incredible adventures and work, please visit her website and blog:

**Website**

**Blog**

INTERVIEW BY KAM TOM YIP & JOY CELINE ASTO / PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATHY AKEY

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 About the author

### Whattaroll Magazine

Whattaroll was born out of the motto, "Having a crush on film photography." It's inspired by the fact that many young people have been rediscovering analogue photography in the past decade or so, and ultimately falling in love with it. With this in mind, our team decided to inspire our fellow young photographers to go "back to basics" and shoot with film. More and more talented young photographers around

the world feel overwhelmed by the almost religious cult of digital technology. Whattaroll, as a magazine which celebrates, promotes, and makes film photography more accessible to everyone, aims to address this by serving as a source of information and inspiration for anyone who wishes to explore this unique photographic medium.



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