

# Tara Nicholson's Northern Light

by Portia Priegert



1. Tara Nicholson's photographs aren't large or glamorous. There's little action, or even dramatic possibility. Any glimpse of something that might pass for conventional beauty is usually subverted by some other element in the frame. These are quiet images that offer space. The light can be remarkable; the subjects less so. Nicholson is interested in remnants or traces, the overlooked detritus that hints of the everyday, typically (though not always) outdoors.

While her work often features vast, sparsely populated places where human endeavour seems to cling to the metaphor of a toehold, it's rare to see anything approaching scenic features or a grand vista. "It was never the idea of photographing this pristine wilderness," Nicholson says.

Her images are more humble. The land is witnessed more from within than without, and she is guided by several key themes, including the human search for sanctuary and escape. For instance, while visiting the stunning visual setting that is Haida Gwaii seven years ago, she was drawn to photograph a domed hut built by a German student, her interest twiggled by its location near some old longhouses.

Nicholson expresses neither the grand myth-making ethos of the photographers who first documented this continent, nor the glossy populism of *National Geographic* or others of that ilk, although her recent subject matter of climate change research in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic makes such comparisons unavoidable. Her interest in wilderness also makes it hard to exclude thoughts of







the virtual army of Instagrammers who lug their cameras up mountain passes and across isolated shores.

In the face of this plethora, where's a serious artist to turn? In Nicholson's case, it's often to the ordinary. She offers studies of the mundane: stretches of squat northern bush, the kind of scenery you can drive by for days without stirring to pull out a camera. Or dim snowscapes populated by a few wistful buildings, shot during a 2016 visit to Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk, where she watched scientists measure permafrost levels and survey the region's ice road.

Nicholson has always been pulled by her visual curiosity. "What does it look like when you get to the border?" she asks. "The next province? The Arctic Circle? Or the edge of the tree line? I was always terribly fascinated by that, the idea of how the landscape changes." Based in Victoria, B.C., she often treks 'up island' to places like Port Alberni, a rough-edged logging community. "There's something about it that seems much more real to me," she says. "I guess in some ways, it's not as documented, or it's not as pretty, or it's not as perfect."

Nicholson was born in Prince George in Northern B.C., and spent her earliest weekends camping with her family in the region's vast forests. The trees, once so plentiful, are now in retreat. Not from logging, though there has been plenty of that, but from a massive infestation of mountain pine beetles after a spate of mild winters failed to keep the beetle population in check. Such deforestation is just one of the alarming manifestations of climate change, along with melting glaciers, receding ice caps and devastating floods, as we know all too well. It was Nicholson's curiosity about research into climate change and the scientists who document it that prompted her visit to the University of Copenhagen's Arctic Station on Greenland's Disko Island in the summer of 2015.

2. Science, like art, occupies a rarefied position in the public imagination. In popular culture, both are portrayed as sites of heroic male endeavour and rugged individualism. Both art and science, or so the story goes, share brilliant leaps of cognitive wizardry à la double helix or even the Newtonian apple—not so very different, say, than Pollock's incessant dripping or Picasso's dissonant fracturing of his demoiselles.

Any mention of climate change research is likely to evoke mental images of derring-do scientists rappelling down icy fissures or delivering dire warnings to the United Nations. But these moments are the one per cent, as we now like to say. The reality of most science—and art—is the 99 per cent: slogging labour for meagre rewards, whether money, fame or the thrill of discovering something new. Nicholson's images show scientists almost as modern-day gleaners, backs bent over sample jars and gridded quadrats, counting and measuring, collecting data that might prove elucidating, if not now, perhaps some day.

Nicholson recalls meeting a group of scientists in Greenland. "They were sleeping in a tent and collecting soil samples for three weeks, and coming back and basically testing soil samples for about three months," she says. "There was nothing very glamorous. And I couldn't believe some of the work they were doing. They would do tests for, sometimes, years without even knowing if it was going to work, or if their research was even going anywhere. It was a big eye-opener for me."

3. When hiking, you can stare at the same things hour upon hour. Trees. Bushes. Rocks. Seeing something different becomes an event. An old lean-to or a chunk of mouldering machinery might pass unnoticed if encountered elsewhere. But in the wilderness, such hiccups in dominant visual patterns merit a pause, a conversation, a photograph. Perhaps such juxtapositions stir an old way of knowing, when time moved at its own rhythms and we lived closer to the land, our sensitivities alert, free of urban and digital clutter.

In conversation, whether she's describing a rustic cabin or a boatload of eco-tourists descending on an isolated island, Nicholson often uses the word "bizarre." The ability to spot interesting juxtapositions is a strength of her eye. In *Red Peppers*, *Arctic Station Library*, 2015, for

instance, the plants grow on a window ledge next to a large map of Greenland, its interior a cavernous white maw. Or, in *Skateboard Park*, *Disko Bay*, 2015, icebergs are seen through the unlikely urban architecture of a half pipe.

Another image, *Arctic Station Research Tent Site*, *Disko Island*, 2015, shows a hummocky, barren land shrouded by mist. Five yellow-and-grey tents are scattered to the left. At right are two drab olive-green tents, one shaped like an umbrella, the other larger and pointed, not quite a tipi, more of a jaunty cap. A lone sea-foam green picnic table is the single counterpoint. The interesting juxtapositions here relate to the distant flat-topped hills and their formal echoes in the shape of the tents, as well as the tactile differences between the rough ground and the taut fabric, the natural and the manufactured. The image's tonal qualities are striking, as is its sense of peace and timelessness.

4. A lovely quality of Nicholson's work is its sensitivity to light, photography's vital elixir. The northern light is of course remarkable in and of itself, but she pushes its possibilities. In *Soil Tests*, *Research Laboratory*, *Arctic Station*, 2015, for instance, the laboratory is cast in deep blue shadows. Four small windows run like a freight train along the back wall, casting a stunning glow onto a table holding beakers, a graduated cylinder and a toaster-sized device powered by an electrical cord that dangles vertically through the centre of the picture, presumably to reach a power outlet. It's the contrast with the natural beauty outside—a strip of golden beach ebbs into an ethereal ocean where chunks of ice float like glacial erratics—that moves this image into remarkable terrain. The black cord dangling from the ceiling, so distracting, so easy to unplug? It pulls the work back from beauty's tipping point. The decision to leave it untouched speaks volumes.

Nicholson's newest project, "Cultivate," the one she has been working on between Arctic trips (she was trying to set up a visit to a Russian research station when we spoke) is to document legal marijuana grow-ops in British Columbia. It's a different direction, but one that seems in line with her core interests. There's a frontier of sorts, endowed with the folksy mystique of cannabis culture, yet also a large-scale industrial entablature that stands in opposition to it, a rich terrain for bizarre juxtapositions.

In pondering Nicholson's arc, I find one thing hard to shake: her images feel like home. I don't mean my home in particular, or any generalized sense of hominess. I think it's more of a psychic space related to the remarkable honesty of her work. There's a matter-of-fact sensibility, an interest in showing things as they are, rather than some wished-for or manufactured reality. It makes the work, understated as it is, powerful. I've found myself musing whether it reflects some strand in the northern character, a sort of hinterland take-it-as-it-is aesthetic. I've never visited Greenland or even the Canadian Arctic, but as someone raised in the scraped-out clearings of the Northern Alberta bush, I think it's the frankness of these images that makes them feel not only familiar, but also true.

*Portia Priegert writes about the arts from Victoria. She is the editor of Galleries West Digital, a biweekly online magazine that covers the visual arts across Western Canada, and has taught at the University of Victoria.*

#### Images:

**Page 18:** *Tent Tent Site*, *Arctic Station*, *Greenland*, 2015, 76 x 102 cm, c-type print. **Page 19:** *Skateboard Park*, *Disko Island*, *Greenland*, 2015, 102 x 114 cm, pigment print. **Page 21 clockwise left to right:** *Map*, *Arctic Station Lab*, *Greenland*, 2015, 102 x 127 cm, c-type print; *Arctic Ocean*, *Tuktoyaktuk*, 2017, 102 x 102 cm, c-type print; *Lab*, *Arctic Station*, *Greenland*, 2015, 114 x 114 cm, pigment print; *Hidden Room*, 2017, pigment print; *Village Site*, *Tuktoyaktuk*, 2017, 102 x 102 cm, c-type print; *Dark Snow*, *Lyngmark Glacier Study*, *Greenland*, 2015, 102 x 147 cm, pigment print; *Greenhouse Bubbles*, 2017, 107 x 107 cm, pigment print; *Soil Tests*, *Arctic Station*, *Greenland*, 2015, 102 x 127 cm, pigment print.





# Tara Nicholson Opens a Door on Marijuana

by Portia Priegert

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Tara Nicholson, "Hidden Room," 2017, limited edition archival pigment print, 42" x 42"

Tara Nicholson is curious about the world and she lets that curiosity steer her photography practice. Her latest exhibition, *Cultivate*, on view at the Vernon Public Art Gallery until Dec. 20, is a case in point. In it, she explores British Columbia's marijuana grow operations, documenting spaces she describes as bizarre or otherworldly with their dense foliage, bright

lights, dangling wires and high humidity. "It's a very constructed, man-made, artificial environment," she says.

Nicholson, who is based in Victoria, came of age in the 1990s, when pot cultivation was shrouded in secrecy and people whispered about neighbours suspected of having plants in their basements. Some of her friends have worked harvesting pot, or even started their own grows. But when she started this project three years ago, she had never seen a grow op firsthand. Nicholson started asking around, chatting with friends of friends and trying to learn more about the province's thriving pot industry while making the connections that would get her access.

The availability of medical marijuana, along with the federal government's decision to legalize recreational pot as soon as next summer, means the sector's notorious secrecy is starting to abate. That made it possible for Nicholson to photograph grow operations around the province, including Vancouver Island and the Okanagan. The series is straightforward and documentary, largely devoid of recognizable people. "It looks at the reality of what these spaces are like," says Nicholson.

In one image, a man in a white spray suit and mask checks the plants. Another photo shows a pair of trimmers at work, their backs turned to the camera. Incubation domes filled with clones and dripping with condensation are stacked on metal shelves. Buds the size of brussels sprouts dry on improvised door-sized shelves stacked atop plastic pots. There are several outdoors scenes showing not only plants but greenhouses amid the larger landscape.





Tara Nicholson, "Spray Suit," 2017, limited edition archival pigment print, 42" x 52"

It's the first time Nicholson has exhibited these images, which speak to her larger interest in demystifying hidden worlds. Her best-known body of work, *Arctic Claims*, explores the realities of researchers she met in Greenland and the Canadian Arctic as she followed her curiosity about the science behind dire headlines about climate change. *Arctic Claims* was exhibited at the Burnaby Art Gallery earlier this year, and three works from the series are included in a group show, *Water*, at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria until Jan. 7.

Nicholson sees parallels between her Arctic images and those of the B.C. grow ops. "These rooms seemed somehow similar to scientific spaces," she says in an interview in the exhibition catalogue. "Often hidden, highly specialized and specific environments, these spaces are unlike any space I had photographed before. The lighting, temperature, airflow and humidity within these sterile spaces are all designed to cultivate the highest yields in the shortest period of time from a wide variety of different cannabis strains. Many of the lights are either homemade (with crazy reflectors and materials) or highly specialized, which are incredibly expensive."





Tara Nicholson, "Clone Room," 2017, limited edition archival pigment print, 42" x 42"

With government regulatory changes afoot, marijuana production is shifting to a larger scale. In some neighbourhoods, distribution outlets are starting to outnumber liquor stores. Nicholson, who uses medium-format film for her images, has plans to continue the series. She hopes her images encourage people to discuss a variety of health and safety issues.

As Lubos Culen, curator of the Vernon Art Gallery notes in his exhibition essay, labour conditions are among the issues raised by Nicholson's work. "Considering all of the conditions of clandestine operations, the questions of how the workers are employed and how they are found also come to the forefront of Nicholson's inquiry," he writes.

"The workers must be skilled in a particular type of work, reliable because of the secrecy surrounding the grow ops, but also hard working. The hired workers are often young people attracted to the good pay and often they move from one grow op to another, just like the fruit pickers in the Okanagan Valley moving from orchard to orchard."





Tara Nicholson, "Summer Plants," 2017, limited edition archival pigment print, 42" x 42"

Nicholson, who teaches part-time at the University of Victoria, says producers, uncertain how long they will be around as the regulatory environment shifts, are pushing production schedules, trying to maximize profits or at least offset start-up costs. While most of the spaces she visited were legal, she said none had been inspected. She noticed some operations use heavy doses of fertilizers and pesticides, while others are trying to grow organically.

"I have seen all different age groups of people use cannabis for both pain relief and relaxation, and think there is a need for the legalization of its use," says Nicholson. "I definitely think people should be aware of what environment, pesticides, fertilizers and other products are being used ... especially if they are using it on a regular basis or for medical purposes."





# TARA NICHOLSON: "Somewhere Beyond Nowhere," September 7 to October 6, 2012, Deluge Contemporary Art, Victoria

by John Luna

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FEATURE PREVIEWS FALL 2012

"Trailer, Port Renfrew", Tara Nicholson, "Trailer, Port Renfrew," 30"x30" c-type print, 2012.

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FEATURE PREVIEWS FALL 2012

"Tyvek House, Salmon Beach", Tara Nicholson, "Tyvek House, Salmon Beach," 30"x 30" c-type print, 2012.





FEATURE PREVIEWS FALL 2012

"Swimmer, Near Chute Lake", Tara Nicholson, "Swimmer, Near Chute Lake," 30"x30" c-type print, 2012.



TARA NICHOLSON

*Somewhere Beyond Nowhere*

September 7 to October 6, 2012

Deluge Contemporary Art, Victoria

By John Luna



Since completing her MFA thesis work two years ago, *Wilderness and Other Utopias* photographed in Haida Gwaii, British Columbia, Tara Nicholson has integrated the peripatetic tendency prevalent in so much of contemporary art practice further into her work. She's used travel and temporary relationship as keys for developing a body of work based on locations in British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, and Holland. She insinuates herself into new communities to determine local byways, campsites and landmarks, temporary shelters and ephemeral spectacles: a swimming hole in an abandoned quarry, a ski-doo graveyard, a decaying papier-mache mascot killer whale, dumped like a corpse at the edge of summer woods.

A phrase in Nicholson's exhibition statement joins "local and remote." This in itself is a comment, on the disjunctive way that modern development thrusts fragments of suburbia into what was previously wilderness, at the same time leaving behind pockets of dilapidation in the form of desolate retreats of past-tense recreational seclusion or forsaken networks of resource extraction infrastructure. Lapsed, lost or unlikely habitation abounds in Nicholson's work, from a tepee on Salt Spring Island, to a flagging Conservative campaign sign tacked to an aging industrial compressor, to a rustic tower clad in pristine Tyvek; the vacated hideaway, the forgotten boomtown, or subcultural otherworld gone to seed. In one of the images from Holland, Kuierpadtien, the torqued sheath of a worn blue water slide leads to the colours of an improbably idyllic tableau of children paddling on an artificial lake. Nicholson seeks out visions that in her words, "hover between reality and fantasy," a fluxing of nature and artifice too precious or precarious to last forever.

Nicholson relies on firsthand experience and anecdote, noting, "often I try and find a place from memory or look for things I specifically remember, textures, light or structures." Nicholson employs this well-tuned sense of place to "challenge identity", and its attendant territoriality. She cites John O'Brian and Peter White's book, *Beyond Wilderness: The Group of Seven, Canadian Identity and Contemporary Art*, which, in unravelling the nationalist mythology of Canadian landscape, examines the way notions of 'northernness' and 'wilderness' became part of the country's cultural identity in the early twentieth century. Nicholson is interested in the persistence of such myths, even as her own approach echoes the restless explorations of early Canadian painting (the title of her show is almost an answer to a recent survey of Emily Carr at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, *On the Edge of Nowhere*.)

Outside of the viewfinder's capture, some moment of human interaction is often part of the picture. Nonetheless, Nicholson chooses in many (but not all) cases to exclude figures from her work. This creates an ambiguous but charged scene. Figures that remain are often strikingly isolated, as in one particularly vertiginous composition of a naked woman floating in a lake overlooked by a fire-scorched horizon of dessicated pines (this turns out to be a self-portrait), or a trio of riders on an overcast beach that blurs hooves and hair with roving patches of grey on the horses and sand into something inaudible, emblematic and weightless with nostalgia.

Tara Nicholson grew up in Northern British Columbia, spending time in the Okanagan and on Vancouver Island. She has attended artist residencies in Newfoundland and Banff, and exhibited work across Canada, at The Parisian Laundry Gallery, Montreal, The Jeffery Boone



Gallery, Vancouver and a recent exhibition in the 2012 Calgary Banff Canmore Exposure Photography Festival. Nicholson teaches at the Vancouver Island School of Art, and the University of Victoria.

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by John Luna

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