

## Interview with Denis Defibaugh, Author of “North by Nuuk” and Will Ross, Editor, Rockwell Kent Forum

**Will Ross:** So, my first question is pretty simple, tell me a little bit about yourself and how you got interested in photography.

Denis Defibaugh: My photography started when I was young and was given an Argus point and shot medium format camera. I took a lot of family photos, pictures of pets and landscapes. I didn't become serious about photography until I bought a Pentax Spotmatic 35mm camera and enrolled in RIT's photography program. That began my career in photography.

I am a photographer and Rochester Institute of Technology professor emeritus, School of Photographic Arts and Sciences. My photographs, books and articles have been widely published and I have presented more than 30 solo museum, gallery, and cultural center exhibitions. One of my favorite series is an expressive photographic project, *Afterlives of Natural History* which focuses on extinct species, was exhibited in Arles, France during Fotofest and featured in Smithsonian.com. I earned a Fulbright-Hays Grant to Mexico which preceded my first photography book *The Day of the Dead* published by TCU Press in 2007. The book release included exhibitions and lectures in numerous museums and cultural centers of the USA. In Spring of 2016, I began work on the NSF Awarded *Rockwell Kent Comparative Study*...that took place in four communities in Greenland. I returned from Greenland in summer 2017 to prepare a monograph and worldwide exhibitions of the Greenland documentary photographs. *North by Nuuk: Greenland after Rockwell Kent* is featured in Japan's *Coyote Magazine*, the Lenscratch blogs, and podcasts with Photo Banter and WXXI's radio interview.

I have produced advertising and editorial images for such clients as UNICEF, National Park Service, Coca-Cola, Polaroid, Delta Airlines, Eastman Kodak, and American Express.

Beyond teaching at RIT, and lecturing internationally, I have presented workshops for Yellowstone National Park, Zion National Park, Florida A&M University, SPEOS: Paris, RIT's T&E Photography Workshops, and personally coordinated workshops in Greenland, Cuba, Brazil, Mexico, Indonesia; and Korea.

That may be more than you asked for, but hope it helps you with my career.

**WR:** Second, how did you get interested in doing a photographic study in Greenland?

DD: I am always looking for intriguing project ideas. I was interested in Kent after seeing the Moby Dick book, especially the three volume Lakeside Press edition. Eventually, I made my way to SUNY Plattsburgh to view their Kent collection. I meet Cecelia

Esposito, at the time she was the Kent archive director, and she showed me a small wooden rectangular box. I opened the box and saw about 60 small open drawers that each contained a lantern slide. I carefully pulled one out and placed on a light box. It was a Kent photograph on glass and hand colored, beautiful. At that moment I decided to investigate the Greenland Project through the support of NSF. I didn't know until that moment that Kent was a photographer.

**WR: Third, how did you become acquainted with Rockwell Kent? How important was your knowledge of Kent in deciding where to focus your travels?**

DD: I was minimally acquainted with Kent and his Moby Dick book and woodcut prints and knew of some of his paintings mostly made in the USA. I also had some friends that collected Kent books, but really didn't know much about him as an artist. Once I started to gain a better understanding of him, I became intrigued with his art and writings. And his work in Greenland was of most interest to me. The Greenland project travels were totally based on Kent's travels in Greenland.

**WR: Fourth, I was impressed by your utilization of the glass slides at SUNY-Plattsburgh. When and how did you first learn of their existence?**

DD: As mentioned earlier, I had never seen his photographs until I visited SUNY-Plattsburgh to research Rockwell Kent in Greenland. That experience was in 2012. I became infatuated with his lantern slides and his photography. Although the hand-coloring was not of the greatest quality, the compositions and content was informative and intimate. His photographs and lithographs were helpful in identifying Inuit individuals for my project.

**WR: Fifth, speaking of the slides, I know that Kent did not hand color them. That job was done by others. How true to real-life do you believe the colored slides to be? Specifically, the slides that show Greenland women in costume?**

DD: It is hard to say how accurate the hand-coloring of the lantern slides are. First, we have to decide how good Kent's memory is. I say his memory was very good. And how concerned he is with accuracy of the moment. My feeling is that he was somewhat concerned with an accurate rendition of color. I presume most of his slides are accurate. Looking at the color dyes used for his photographs I could see a realistic color in the clothing. There are several images that are a bit over saturated by the color intent. The portrait of four woman standing side by side seems exaggerated. In addition, the detail of the coloring technique is rough as compared to the highest quality hand colored lantern slides.

**WR: Sixth. How well known is Kent in Greenland today? Did that knowledge vary by location? (This is my wife Joanne's question.)**

DD: Let Joanne know this is a good question. Kent is not well known in Greenland by the general population. Museum curators know who Kent is. Some people are familiar

with Kent and own books of his. Overall knowledge of Kent is rare. Knowledge in Illorsuit was good because it is a small settlement of 70 people and he built a house and dance hall and lived there for extended periods in 1931 and 1935. On the other hand, when we introduced communities to Kent's photos and paintings of Greenland people were very interested and were excited to see if they recognized anyone in the photographs.

It is sad that in all of Greenland I only saw two Kent works. A small watercolor he painted for the Sisimiut town manager in 1932 and a lithographic print in the Greenland National Museum in Nuuk.

**WR: Seventh, I know Greenland has changed since Kent was there. In what way do you think it has changed the most, either for the good or ill, or both?**

DD: It has been close to 90 years since he was in Greenland. And like the USA, technology has changed with cell phones, internet, facebook, and TV that is similar to the USA. The hunting culture is still prevalent, although it is not an economic choice. Is more traditional as in the USA. Fishing is the industry now that provides economic opportunity. It was similar in the 1930's but not as important as it is now.

Greenland is now self-ruled though still supported economically and educationally by Denmark, although the University of Greenland has grown to become an important choice for Greenlander's.

Travel by motorboat and airplane/helicopter or snowmobile didn't exist when Kent was in Greenland. Mostly sailboat and dog sledge were the mode of transportation.

Population numbers are not much different for the country but many of the smaller settlements that existed when Kent lived there have been abandoned.

**WR: Eighth, one thing I like to ask authors is what surprised them. Did anything particularly surprise you, either in your research or in your actual experience in Greenland, or both?**

DD: The one thing that was even more impressive than I expected was the landscape. It is hard to realize how large and remote Greenland is. The country's landscape is even more beautiful, magnificent, and imposing than I imagined.

**WR: Ninth, as you look back on your experiences in Greenland, what are you particularly glad you did? Did something make you particularly proud?**

DD: I am glad that I did not give up on the NSF proposal application (applied three times) because I would never have been able to do the project without the NSF award. I was proud that by the time I left Greenland for my return to the USA I knew and became friends with many Greenlanders and was welcomed into their homes and gained their

respect for my efforts to tell their story. They were thankful that we give back to the communities in Greenland. Obviously, I was proud of my photography of the people and place. Teaching the photography workshops to Inuit students and exhibiting the photographs that they created was a proud experience. I could go on, but finally I am proud of the book that was created about the project.

**WR: Finally, what do you have planned for the future?**

DD: I would like to return to Greenland to photograph the abandoned Illorsuit settlement and the displaced Illorsuit residence that were evacuated from their homes due to the 2017 tsunami that hit the fjord. They have not been permitted to return to Illorsuit.

I am planning to restart the *Afterlives* project of photographing extinct species in the Smithsonian Museum's archive.

*We asked Professor Defibaugh which were his favorite photos from the book, both his and Kent's. His picks are below. The captions are taken from the book, [North by Nuuk](#), [Greenland After Rockwell Kent](#). The book is available from RIT press - [North by Nuuk](#) | [RIT Press](#) | [RIT](#)*

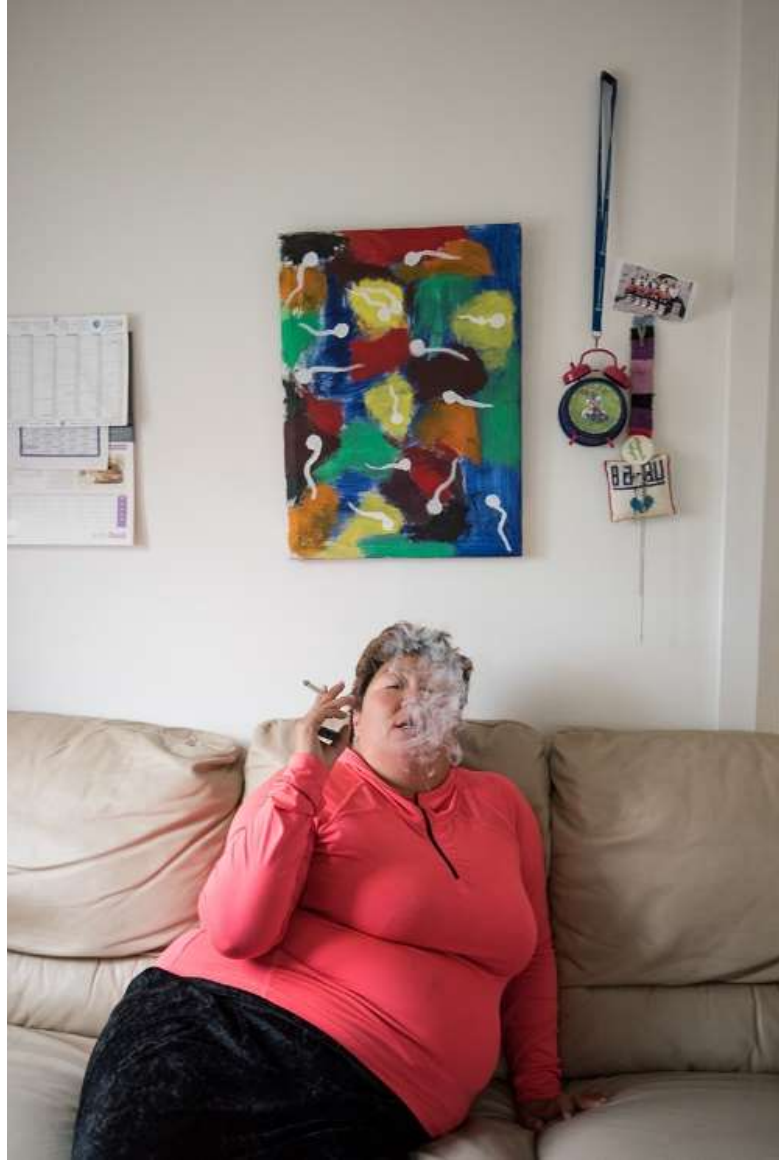


Ummannuq Fjord 2017 Hunters Pujunnguaq Hammond and Karl Nielsen dog sledging to their fishing holes. Temperature is about -10 degrees F



Sisimuit 2017 The historic Sisimiut church built in 1926 celebrates the sacrament of Confirmation. Such ceremonies can be long





Uummannaq 2016 Nuka-Sofie Fleisher Lovstrom reclining in front of her son's painting

These pictures ©Denis Defibaugh



Illorsuit Sound, ca 1931. Salamina with Knut Nielsen, Hendrik Qvist and an unidentified passenger sailing with the United States flag in the background; maybe to honor Kent? RK-631 Plattsburgh State Art Museum

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