

Collaboration and creativity under a looming sky

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VISUAL ART

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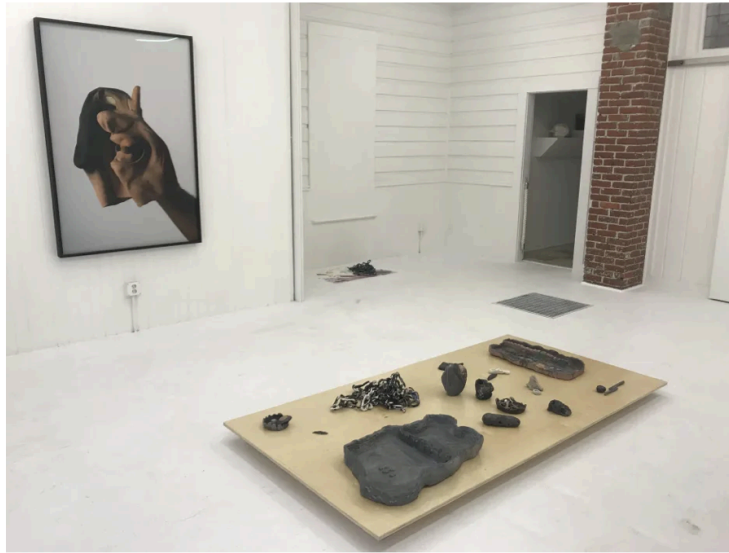
“The Big Dark is a cloud ... you appreciate it for reminding you that there is an above and a below. You could think of it like you think of a condition — something ominous or something pestering but also something you get used to, that you can’t do without.” In *The Big Dark* at [FourteenThirty Contemporary](#), Arnold Kemp and Kristan Kennedy form their own collaborative cloud of artistic expression.

The excerpt above comes from a text written by the artists and released as part of the exhibition that opened on Saturday, November 17 and continues through December 29th. The text is the story of Kennedy’s first experience of the phenomenon of “The Big Dark”: she first encountered it while driving on a day in which the sky was unnaturally gray and the air felt leaden. She describes it as an overwhelming cultural weight, a looming and protective blanket.

Kennedy’s first encounter with the expansive cloud wasn’t entirely metaphorical. In 2017, the National Weather Service identified an extreme weather pattern, a five-thousand mile cloud formation, a long river of rain. At five thousand miles, the meteorological phenomenon was bigger than the distance that physically separates Kennedy and Kemp’s home studios (Kennedy calls Portland home while Kemp lives in Chicago). The multimedia artists and educators have known one another since 2006 and have been in sporadic conversation ever since.

When Jeanine Jablonski, owner and director of Fourteen30, approached Kemp about showing new work, he suggested a collaboration with Kennedy. The Big Dark, the foundational concept, as conceived of by both artists exists in the past, present, and future. Like their friendship, it manifests in bursts but always shapes and defines immediate experience. Kemp explains that the exhibition afforded them “a chance to come together to draw again...to be in this very political moment and to present a model of collaboration across difference and to show how various interests could be combined to be a powerful force for good.” The works at Fourteen30 are all new though they were born of old ideas and conversations. The natural order of Kennedy and Kemp’s artistic practices coalesce here as if by no other choice, called on by this unrelenting condition of The Big Dark, this force that wills the creation of highly charged works. The artists grapple with finding clear skies and camaraderie on otherwise overcast days.

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“The Big Dark” (installation view), 2018; Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland, Oregon. Image courtesy of Lusi Lukova.

The exhibition coalesces around a raised wooden platform at the center of the gallery with a variety of 3-dimensional works made by both Kennedy and Kemp. Their artistic impulses can be seen in the indentations and tangible finger marks left in the paper clay and terracotta used to shape them. *Maquette for ashtray: white burial cloud* and *Drawing of the Outline of a Chain (Aretha)* both done in paper clay and ink, were made by Kennedy and Kemp together. Kemp contributed *ash face* and Kennedy fashioned *Drawing Tool*. The three large “ashtrays,” wells to catch ash but also light and emotion under *The Big Dark*, create the springboard for the rest of the pieces to intuitively come together. If one were to have no indication of a figure’s creator, the works easily appear as a cohesive installation. Kennedy describes this as a purposeful moving “into a space where we are even more vulnerable and collaborating directly, with the clay but also by trusting each other with shared authorship.” Many of these smaller works are inspired by their friendship; thoughts around chains, be they physical chains or chains of ideas.

Particularly in *Drawing of the Outline of a Chain (Aretha)*, Kemp and Kennedy couple their distinctive styles for this piece in which an unfired small, white ceramic bone made by Kemp sits on top of a linen rectangle painted by Kennedy. Atop the linen rectangle, painted in the same abstract manner as one of Kennedy’s larger paintings, is a chain crafted equally by both. Knowing that two persons had a hand in their making, with differing stylistic approaches, makes these pieces an even more powerful example of unity and wholeness. Even the title itself connotes various degrees of interception: a chain that is outlined and then drawn, and so unites cohesively in the final arrangement of the piece.

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Arnold J. Kemp / Kristan Kennedy. Drawing of the Outline of a Chain (Aretha), 2018; paper clay, linen, dye, ink. Image courtesy of Lusi Lukova.

All of these small works are impactful. Kennedy wants to move away from nominating these figures as purely “sculptures;” she sees the craft and skill employed here as more fluid and the function of the end products as more involved than that of a traditional sculpture. For example, Kennedy’s *Drawing Tools*, because it is covered in graphite could also be used as a surface to create a new drawing. The potential for multiplication is important and even when the works aren’t strictly collaborations, they are intrinsically interrelated. In wanting both makers to play a role in the cultivation of the objects, Kennedy and Kemp can make the work, in their words, about “negotiating their purpose and meaning together.”

On the left side of the gallery is Kemp’s *Untitled*, an archival pigment print of a contorted mask. The artist’s hand can be seen poking through the eyes and the mouth further twisting the image while offering his hand as the only obviously recognizable part of this work. As a result, the duality of expressing the self while simultaneously masking it speaks volumes in hushed reverence in this image. The mask by nature is meant to conceal and obfuscate, yet the very visible hand in the photo adds some potential for identification. In extending beyond the overt expression of our own experience as persons who are seen and, as a result, identified in some capacity, Kemp seems to question how this all occurs, and what efforts, be they internal or external, can muddy that experience. Kemp explained that he started on this line of inquiry in the late 90s with drawings of African masks, and the use of African culture and motifs in the Modernist and Postmodernist movements. More recent explorations of the same themes have embraced more personal references. This piece is one of a series of three prints created using a Flintstones cartoon mask to mimic the movement of satellite images of The Big Dark.

If we are to consider the gallery as meteorological narrative that tells of The Big Dark and its trajectory, Kemp sees Kennedy’s three canvases (*B.G.D.R.K.*, *C.A.P.D.S.P.N.T.M.T.* and *D.N.E.S.*) as seasons, summer, spring, and fall. Kemp’s print completes the cycle as winter. Kennedy’s paintings and Kemp’s print are identical in size to confirm this connection.

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Three large paintings by Kennedy occupy the gallery wall opposite Kemp's print. In *D.N.E.S.*, I immediately understand the Spring designation. The moody purples and ink splatters appear to me as the rain and dampness of April showers, that give way into the floral buds of orange tones on the canvas. Done in swift and large strokes, the motion of the work is reminiscent of the rapidity of Spring, how it comes to wash the earth and give way to Summer. To the right of *D.N.E.S.* hangs *B.G.D.R.K.*, the namesake painting of this exhibition. Perhaps the rendition of Summer, the canvas is overwhelmingly light, in direct opposition to its title. Yellows, light blues, greens, and pink tones form the calm background for a cloud-like shape done in grays and dark blues also pushing into the left-center of the linen canvas. Yet, as easily as one could see a cloud, it is a suggestion rather than a confirmed subject.



Kennedy, Kristan. B.G.D.R.K., 2018; ink, dye, bleach on linen. Image courtesy of Lusi Lukova.

For *C.A.P.D.S.P.N.T.M.T.*, the piece nominated as Fall, Kennedy combines ink, dye, bleach, aluminum and clay on linen and once again purposefully departs from figural representation. The canvas breaks the chronology of the seasons but serves as a balancing point on the wall — heavily awash with bright hues of reds and pinks, it truly is the counterpart to the two more gentler canvases on either side. In foregoing overt subject matter, vulnerable expression and exploration are at the forefront of these canvases. They appeal not to logic but rather sensational emotion. A small clay face embedded into the piece towards the bottom left is the only indication of a link between the tangible world and the more abstract one in which Kennedy creates. This small clay sculpture is also a direct link to Kemp's work and confirms the collaborative impulse that guides the show.

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Kennedy's titles muddy more than they clarify. The works, similarly, don't offer clear formal guidelines but instead allow for flexibility in interpretation. This is by design and a mirror of the formulation of the guiding concept, *The Big Dark*. There is light and clarity to be uncovered in the embrace of openness

Both artists seem to gravitate toward forms that have the potential to evolve. Raw, yet utilitarian, each piece in this show has the potential to serve multiple functions. Kennedy's canvases are multi-use — they can be framed, pinned up, draped, or laid on the ground; they have no one specific employment or way of viewing. Just like the vague shapes and outlines she paints, they are constantly shifting and in motion, changing before an audience's eyes. For *The Big Dark*, while three are framed, and only one is laid on the ground, we as gallery-goers can imagine them outside the familiar confines of the frame and existing unfettered, totally free. As for Kemp's prints and sculptures, his approach to questioning individual experience, to gauging one's personal stake at what is done to us and what we do to ourselves, similarly allows for a flexibility in execution and contemplation.

According to the text "The Big Dark," "You can't hurry a cloud." In contemplating clouds, I'm struck by the word becloud and its synonym blur. This exhibition blurs the lines between individual artists and practices. The works becloud and defy neat or easy interpretations. *The Big Dark* can waft over you dramatically and instantaneously, with no warning as to its coming. It may come quickly or "[w]e might be waiting forever for that!" Waiting forever in anticipation for clarity, for answers, for reprieve. Yet, as all-engulfing as it may seem, there is also comfort in the Big Dark, a kind of light found in reaching out and grasping a familiar hand to hold in the dark. For Kennedy and Kemp, that hand is one forged of friendship and a shared creative experience.

The Big Dark is on view at [Fourteen30 Contemporary](#) through December 29, 2018. Gallery hours are Fridays and Saturdays, 12-5, and by appointment.