

# More than Meets the Eye

by Robert Bean





Recent Work  
by Scott  
Corro

Previous spread  
 Scott Conarroe  
 "Bixby Creek Bridge, Big Sur,  
 California" from *By Sea*  
 2011

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
 BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)

**THE SERIES OF PHOTOGRAPHS** by Scott Conarroe entitled *By Sea* presents a disquieting and provocative continuation to his previous project *By Rail*. If *By Rail* was an exploration of where we have been, a cultural and metaphorical journey through a history of modern industry, *By Sea* anticipates where we may be destined to arrive.

Since 2009, Conarroe has been systematically photographing the coastline of the North American continent. Despite the formal beauty of the land and seascapes and the impeccable attention to the fluctuating luminosity of electric and daylight, the profound sense of tranquillity and solitude are intentionally misleading. We are invited to take pleasure in the ostensible beauty of the seaside—what Conarroe refers to as a “North American idyll”—yet these images are sensitive to the possibility of a future overdetermined by the contemporary anxiety over climatic and environmental devastation and loss. Iterating the phatic qualities of discussions about the weather, at the same time, these images signal a critical discourse that has transformed the weather from the favoured topic of small talk—“Cold enough for you?”—to a subject of grave concern. *By Sea* paradoxically establishes the commonplace as the location of impending adversity.

Many of us are drawn to the sea. Because most of us will never “go to sea,” except, perhaps, passively, as tourists on an all-inclusive cruise, the principal vantage point for those of us who long for the sea is the shoreline, and it is this littoral zone that Conarroe has chosen to photograph for his *By Sea* series. Historically, the shore is both a boundary and a place for speculation and reflection; here, where the built environment looks out onto an infinite horizon, past and future imaginatively overlap. The poetic and liminal metaphor

of the shore is thoroughly established as a zone of danger, ecstasy and tragedy, the border between life and death. Every year, visitors to Peggy’s Cove in Nova Scotia are swept off the rocks by rogue waves that rise up unexpectedly and engulf those who seek this profound experience of sea and shore. Despite signage warning of the danger, there continues to be a perpetual willingness to tempt fate. The promise of transcendence is a powerful lure.

Narratives of the sea are full of strife and the struggle to survive. The discourse of navigation, commerce, harbours, colonization, war, emigration and seafaring reminds us that, unlike the meadow, the ocean conceals a sombre, even menacing past. Recent events such as the tsunami in Japan, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, flooding in Mississippi, and persistent predictions of the ruinous effects of climate change on the world’s coastal populations are strangely embedded in the shipwreck of human interaction with the sea and the shore.

The pictorial conventions that Conarroe adopts—the exquisite colours that result from photographing at dusk and dawn, the elevated vantage point, the documentary veracity associated with the optical aesthetics of the view camera (which, by means of its large-format negative, provides very fine detail)—are important to understanding the significance of these photographs. The photograph titled “Battered Dome House, Surfside, Texas” (2011)—an image of a failed utopia that will eventually collapse and perish in the sea—is emblematic of Conarroe’s approach. Already “battered,” the small octagonal cottage perches obliquely on four iron pilings above the water. Two wires that extend from the building provide an electronic lifeline to terra firma. Like



"Loop Canyon, Chicago, Illinois" (2007)  
 from *By Rail* by Scott Conarroe  
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
 BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)

the perfect stillness of Narcissus ensnared by his own reflection, the building is perfectly reflected in the alluring blue surface of the sea.

The cottage features a hybrid geodesic dome, an architectural structure introduced by the futurist architect and theorist, R. Buckminster Fuller. Conceived as a sustainable building form, the dome was promoted in the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, first published by Stewart Brand, an early proponent of personal computing, in 1968. Embracing back-to-the-land economies against a background of cybernetic technological promise, the catalogue was central to the do-it-yourself political ideals of a pluralistic counterculture in the 1960s, ideals currently experiencing a resurgence in contemporary grass-roots movements. The catalogue functioned as a hub that linked converging ideas, tools and theories related to sustainability, electronic technology and communalism.

Surfside Beach, where the octagonal dome resides, describes itself as "a coastal community that cares."<sup>1</sup> Familiar with littoral disaster, it has been hammered by five hurricanes between 1875 and 2008. It is perhaps fitting that the little octagon now functions as an Internet source for local

weather data and water reports. Equipped with a Webcam that streams images of the beach and sea for the local surfing community, the weather-beaten dome house retains its legendary form of sustainability against mounting odds.

In "Loop, Biloxi, Mississippi" (2009), an elevated highway and a boardwalk, mirroring one another, emerge from the bottom right of the frame and, curving out above the still water, disappear in the upper right of the frame. It is dawn and the beach is deserted. The soft colour of the early morning light emphasizes that these passageways—pedestrian and automobile—serve as conduits for a scenic experience at the edge of the sea. This exquisite, though seemingly inexplicable, loop is, however, situated in catastrophe. At the junction of the Interstate 110 and Highway 90, the loop protrudes over the Gulf of Mexico where Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. Biloxi suffered extensive damage and numerous casualties as a consequence of the hurricane's devastating force. Four years later, Conarroe recorded the present-day serenity of the I-110 loop from the parking lot of the Beau Rivage Resort and Casino. In the centre of the beach, the last surviving palm tree remains vigilant, a compatriot, perhaps, of Paul Klee's "Angel of History."

A small graveyard sits adjacent to a government wharf in "Cemetery, Cap-Chat, Québec" (2009). Conarroe found an elevated vantage point that overlooks a green, manicured lawn speckled with memorial stones and votive floral arrangements, which he framed with a magenta sunrise over the Gulf of St. Lawrence. On the right is the last house on the road, an immaculate white mobile home with two minivans and two scooters. The panoramic vista that surrounds this mobile home is breathtaking. The iconicity of this location

<sup>1</sup> See [www.surfsidetx.org/default.aspx?name=city.homepage](http://www.surfsidetx.org/default.aspx?name=city.homepage). Accessed on March 16, 2012.

Scott Conarroe  
"Battered Dome House, Surfside, Texas"  
from *By Sea*  
2010  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)

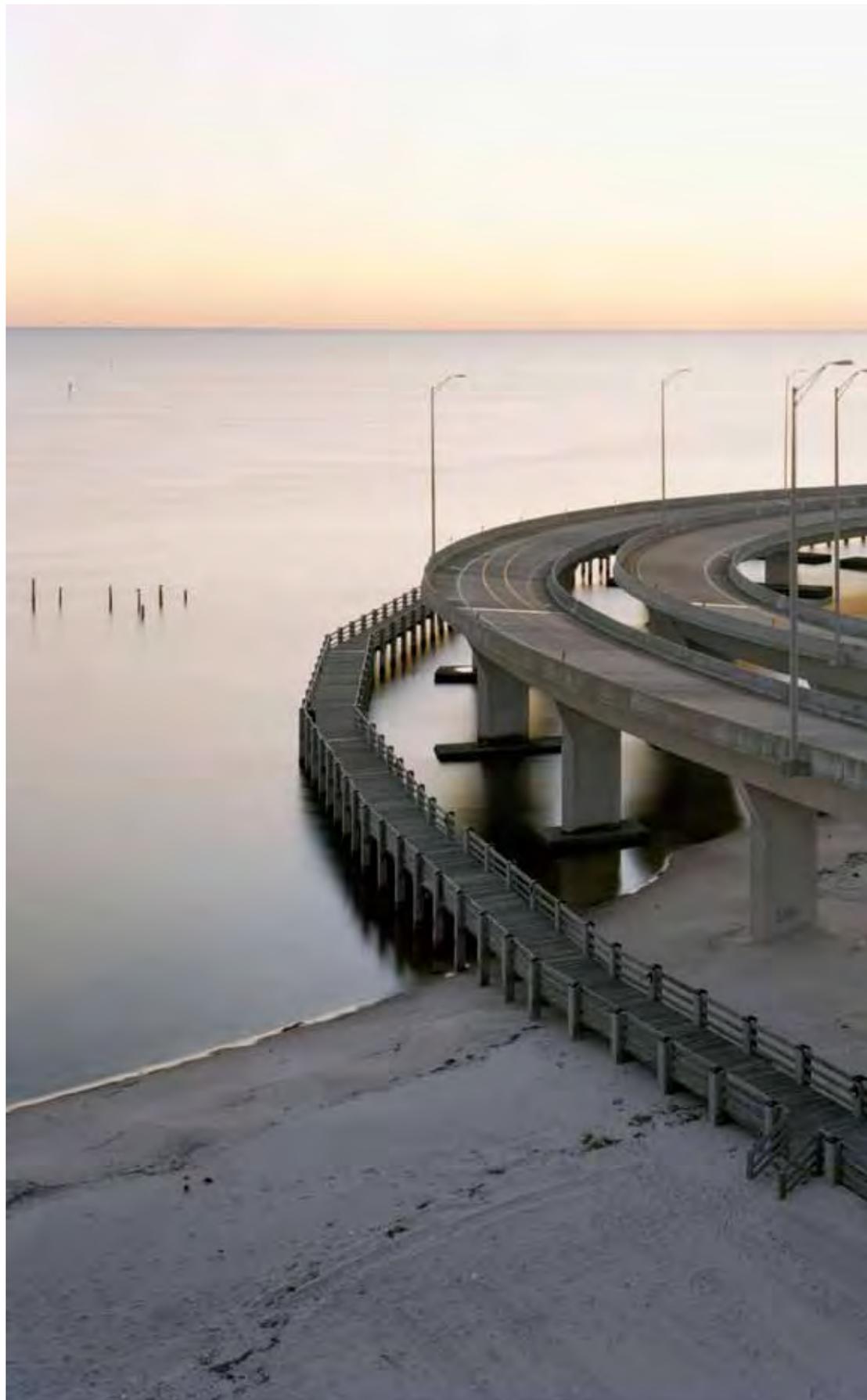


Scott Conarroe  
"Boat Barn, Belfast, Maine"  
from *By Sea*  
2009  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)



Scott Conarroe  
"Loop, Biloxi, Mississippi"  
from *By Sea*  
2009

COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)





Scott Conarroe  
"Cemetery, Cap-Chat, Québec"  
from *By Sea*  
2009  
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
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echoes that in many of the photographs that Conarroe made for *By Rail*. Like the “last spike” of the Canadian Pacific Railway in Craigellachie, British Columbia, which sutured the sovereignty of Canada, the St. Lawrence River facilitated and accelerated the European colonization of North America. However, in order to fully grasp the deeper significance of *By Sea*, one must look to Conarroe’s carefully selected locations. For these locations, which Conarroe blandly inscribes in his titles, signify much more than the picturesque. Cap-Chat, Québec, for example, which hosts the tallest vertical-axis wind turbine in the world, is a primary location for wind-energy exploration. Like the image from Biloxi, Mississippi, the title functions as a strategic inscription, a clue to a larger narrative. As Walter Benjamin observed in his “Little History of Photography”:

Isn’t it the task of the photographer—descendant of the augurs and haruspices—to reveal guilt and to point out the guilty in his pictures? “The illiteracy of the future,” someone has said, “will be ignorance not of reading or writing, but of photography.” But shouldn’t a photographer who cannot read his own pictures be no less accounted an illiterate? Won’t inscription become the most important part of the photograph?<sup>2</sup>

Conarroe’s most recent contributions to *By Sea* are from Northern Canada. The landscape and geography of the North continue to be paradigmatic for Canadian cultural identity and sovereignty. In 1967, Glenn Gould was commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to produce a radio documentary on a subject of his choice. The result was

*The Idea of North*, an audio work that addressed Gould’s interest in and fascination with solitude and the Canadian North as an idiom for the particularity of Canadian identity. This seminal work has served as the foundation for a number of contemporary art projects targeting the North in recent years.

“Summerside and RIB Landing, Sunshine Fiord, Nunavut” (2011) sheds some light on the subject of Canadian sovereignty and identity. Looking across the Sunshine Fiord near Cape Dyer, the photograph depicts two sea vessels flooded by a sun that never sets during the summer months. In this harsh landscape, Conarroe is denied the resplendent options of dusk, dawn and electrical grid that are characteristic of his more southern land- and seascapes. The boat in the foreground is a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) typically associated with shore patrol, shuttle functions and whale-watching excursions for tourists. In the background is a military vessel that is tethered to contemporary political questions concerning Canada’s defence and sovereignty in the North and, perhaps considerably more decisive than defence, the seabed resources that will eventually become accessible due to the acute decrease in Arctic ice. The HMCS Summerside (MM711), the last Kingston-class coastal defence vessel, was deployed in order to reinforce “Canada’s presence in the Arctic and enable the Canadian military to practice [*sic*] emergency response skills.”<sup>3</sup> Sailing under the code name of “Operation Nanook,”<sup>4</sup> the HMCS Summerside is only subtly visible in the photograph, but its presence is overwhelming with implications. Again, the implicit ambiguities could easily be overshadowed by the pictorial virtuosity, but it is important to resist this passive stance and to look again.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2, 1927-1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press, 1999): 527.

<sup>3</sup> “Canada, U.S. on board for Arctic mission,” *The Canadian Press* (August 3, 2011). Posted at CBC News Nova Scotia. See [www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/story/2011/08/03/nl-cp-arctic-mission-803.html](http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/story/2011/08/03/nl-cp-arctic-mission-803.html). Accessed on March 24, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> “Nanook” is the Inuit word for “polar bear,” as well as the title of the historically renowned documentary film *Nanook of the North* (1922) by Robert Flaherty.

Scott Conarroe  
"Fog, Port aux Basques, Newfoundland"  
from *By Sea*  
2009  
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BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)







"Summerside and RIF, Cape Dyer" (2011)  
 from *By Sea* by Scott Conarroe  
 COURTESY THE ARTIST AND STEPHEN  
 BULGER GALLERY (TORONTO)

Sunshine Fiord is an inlet on the eastern tip of Baffin Island near Cape Dyer. In 1952, continental defence initiatives discussed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) resulted in the development of a chain of Arctic radar stations that, stretching from Alaska to Greenland, were intended to monitor Soviet bomber activity in the polar region. Completed in 1957, the DEW Line (Distant Early Warning system) was implemented through a bilateral agreement between Canada and the United States, and it provided the technological foundation of NORAD and the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) computer systems required to network the sixty-three radar stations. The largest, heaviest and most expensive computer system ever built, SAGE acquired mythical Cold War status through films such as Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). Site 41 on the DEW Line, Cape Dyer was one of the most important northern development sites in Canada during the Cold War. Fifty-five years later, the presence of HMCS Summerside in Sunshine Fiord recapitulates the strategic position of Cape Dyer vis-à-vis questions of Canadian sovereignty, particularly in

terms of Canada's position as minion to the United States. A ship on the fiord may, at first sight, appear insignificant. But the caption, which reveals the location and name of the ship, gives us the coordinates, thus providing an inscription that links the past and the future. Not immediately concerned with nuclear annihilation, contemporary issues of Canadian sovereignty in the North lie in economic development, climate change and the anticipation of a complex and potentially devastating environmental crisis.

Marshall McLuhan, drawing on the metaphors of the Cold War, defined art as the distant early warning system of culture. Referencing the Distant Early Warning (DEW) radar technologies deployed in Northern Canada, McLuhan referred to artists as a cultural form of "early warning system."

The power of the arts to anticipate future social and technological developments, by a generation and more, has long been recognized.... Art as radar acts as "an early alarm system," as it were, enabling us to discover social and psychic targets in lots of time to prepare to cope with them. The concept of the arts as prophetic contrasts with the popular idea of them as self-expression. If art is an "early warning system," to use the phrase from World War II, when radar was new, art has the utmost relevance not only to media study but to the development of media controls.<sup>5</sup>

This artistic foresight is related to our ability to remember our past and to creatively envision our future. For it seems clear that crises—environmental, economic, social and political—are

<sup>5</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon (Corte Madera: Ginkgo Press, 2003): 16.

escalating and intensifying. As American writer Rebecca Solnit points out, disaster produces unintended as well as obvious effects.

Disasters are, most basically, terrible, tragic, grievous, and no matter what positive side effects and possibilities they produce, they are not to be desired. But by the same measure, those side effects should not be ignored because they arise amid devastation. The desires and possibilities awakened are so powerful they shine even from wreckage, carnage, and ashes. What happens here is relevant elsewhere. And the point is not to welcome disasters. They do not create these gifts, but they are one avenue through which the gifts arrive. Disasters provide an extraordinary window into social desire and possibility, and what manifests there matters elsewhere, in ordinary times and in other extraordinary times.<sup>6</sup>

She goes on to note that it is not the institutional elites and hierarchies that are quick to respond to such crises. Rather, it is civil society that “succeeds, not only in an emotional demonstration of altruism and mutual aid but also in a practical mustering of creativity and resources to meet the challenges.”<sup>7</sup> This creativity has begun with the work of artists and activists concerned with our future. Scott Conarroe is one such artist.

The organic democracy that disaster can generate within communities continues to be undermined by autocratic, anti-democratic responses of governments and ruling elites. The official response to terrorist attacks and to disasters in general has stripped many individuals of their

civil liberties. But even in such undemocratic times, civil disobedience is re-emerging, and the role that art and artists serve in broadening our understanding of the politics of the present moment is already visible.

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« Au-delà des apparences : les travaux récents de Scott Conarroe »

L'artiste et professeur Robert Bean examine ici comment l'artiste photographe Scott Conarroe, dans sa série intitulée *By Sea* (2010), illustre avec subtilité et minutie la menace que représentent les crises environnementales, économiques, sociales et politiques, celles du passé aussi bien que celles à venir. Tout comme la mer, les paysages terrestres et marins de Conarroe, d'une luminosité exquise et d'un calme trompeur, contiennent un danger immanent. Renvoyant à la notion de McLuhan qui voyait dans l'art un « système d'alerte précoce », Bean détecte dans ces images un lien avec les mouvements progressistes populaires, qu'ils soient historiques ou contemporains, et avec l'élan de coopération communautaire que le désastre semble générer.

Scott Conarroe gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Light Work and the Canadian Armed Forces Civilian Artist Program.

<sup>6</sup> Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities that Arise in Disaster* (New York: Viking, 2009): 6.

<sup>7</sup> Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell*: 305.