

Mungo Thomson / Timeson / for “Background Extinction”

by Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer

*Give me Everest or give me death.*

*Give me altitude with an attitude.*

*But I am naked and nude.*

*I am constantly out of breath.*

—Frederick Seidel, “Climbing Everest”

The other day—or week or month—the Speaker of the House, invoking Thomas Paine from revolutionary days of yore, announced that, once again, the times have found us. And then some. These are days of crisis and outrage, frustration and unraveling, extinction and magnitudes—magnitudes too great to hold in mind all the time. Contemporary consciousness is conditioned on a state of bombardment, constant anxiety, and being overwhelmed. No one can take that stress all the time. We deal in our own way. Part of me is always gripping and flexing, squeezing and stressing. It takes several waves of conscious action to relax my permanently furrowed brow. But, more than and apart from that, time itself has found us.

When you think about day-to-day calendar time—the hour-by-hour day and night time of grocery shopping, dropping off the kids, picking up the kids, getting new tires, commuting, getting that filling, paying the credit card bill, answering emails, scrolling through headlines, going to the post office, cleaning the counter, sweeping up, watering the plants, doing laundry, getting lunch with that friend you never see, fitting in a couple hours of work, finding a birthday present, cooking dinner, putting your kids to bed, smoking an evening joint, reading a book, taking a shower, binging a show—at the same time as you try to think about geological time and the lifespan of mountains, this whole house of cards teeters on collapse and there is a high probability the dishes won’t get done and emails will go unanswered. If I get even just one small thing that matters to me accomplished, it is a victory.

That the human business of keeping busy is transparently small and absurd against the backdrop of other timeframes renders it no less pressing. A day is both jampacked and insubstantial, too short and all that there is—the forever-now that reigns over all time. Thinking of endurance and durations, what is a month to a mountain? To me? To my daughter? One may be forty million or more years old, one is thirty-five, and one is two. A month is a developmental leap, a growth spurt, a whole new way of communicating and conceiving. A month, a year, is nothing, three hundred and sixty-five of anything vanishes in a sneeze. There are so many measures and kinds of time—daily calendar time, geological time, cosmic time, travel time, seasonal time, news cycle time, election time, refresh time, daydream time, dinner time, epochal time, planetary time. The disparity between such spans governing human and environmental change does not compute, it is larger by far than we—or at least it has been until recently, now disparate durations are beginning to coincide in our accelerating Anthropocene. Long or short relative to what?

Before my visit to his studio, I knew the concerns would be large; objects and ideas soar quickly in Mungo Thomson's orbit. In his hands, things are launching points for existential riddles and cosmic reflection. Across works, Thomson deals in degrees of perspective and relative measures of distance and time. He deals in shades of recognition and plumbs strata of awareness, homing in on found moments of paradox or philosophical provocation hiding in plain sight among the cultural artifacts and consumer goods that inhabit his life. He has described the Heideggerian “distance of the near” as a guideline: “Heidegger’s idea was that there is a world before us that we forget to see, and the artists’ job is to disclose it again...Heidegger uses the example of not being able to see the glasses he’s wearing, but not being able to see without them. Charles Ray also said that obvious things are the most easily overlooked and the most enigmatic.” The mind’s ability to scale-shift and telescope in and out of frames of reference and metaphor gets a thorough working out. Deceptive simplicity is his jam. Or as he put it earlier this year in an interview: “I am more interested in a simple surface with a world beneath than a complex surface without much else going on.”

Which also helps to elucidate his newest body of works presented in “Background Extinction,” his *Wall Calendar* lightboxes that mine the basic optical effect native to printed matter in which backlighting causes recto and verso to merge. The bleed through effect of back showing through the front of a double-sided image, turns an inherent physical aspect of the material into metaphor-rich juxtaposition. Transparency is a layered, additive form of vision and insight. Two things separated by a turn of the page on different planes in different frames collide in a forensic, x-ray space of representation that simultaneously exposes surface and concealed depth as one. While other artists like Robert Heinecken used such show-through on magazine pages for different effect to locate an intersection of culture, commerce, and critique, Thomson trains his eye on wall calendars as another found artifact that is immediately conversant with scales of time and, being hung in our homes, is already, as he says, art-adjacent, or a surrogate for art.

Though the thinking for the series was triggered by seeing the inverted calendar grid showing through a galaxy in an outer space wall calendar gifted to the artist for the holidays, mountains are his chosen ground for these lightboxes. Mountains, but especially these epic, large-format snowy peaks—reminders of glaciers past, emblems of national pride and aspiration—serve as romantic shorthand for a Kantian sense of the sublime in the manner of Caspar David Friedrich that genuflects to the vastness, power, and towering enormity of the natural world, feeling our individual smallness in its afterglow. At the same time, these standard alpine shots with their anodyne mass appeal and familiar aerial anonymity stand in for screensaver banality and stock photography classified by type in one enormous database or another. This or that picturesque mountain conveying a subtext of throw-away photographic excess, overload, and cheapness—a mountain of interchangeable digital content. The hole punched at the top of each calendar page has a delayed double-take effect, passing at first as a perfectly centered full moon. The grandiose routinely gets cut with the mundane.

When we met, Mungo said in passing that we are closer in time today to T-Rex than T-Rex was to Stegosaurus. Something cracked inside. I couldn't get my head around what that meant and still feel woozy about it. How could I have had no idea those dinosaurs not only did not live even remotely at the same time but were separated by millions—many tens of millions—of years? The thought so jolted, I dared not look it up. Then I looked it up. Stegosaurus lived over 150 million years ago, while Tyrannosaurus lived about 70 to 65 million years ago. Estimates may vary by many millions of years here and there, but, however you cut it, the behemoths that regularly share representational space in children's books were separated by a totally abstract expanse of mega-time. The abstraction of millions of years, of geological time, let alone cosmic time, will always jolt, when one stands still long enough to be hit by it, because it is impossible to ideate with the gray matter available and the effort to try is psychically exhausting and completely unsustainable. The jolt still feels like a high. The high feels like a low, like a hole or internal crater, like the impact of comets that laid the dinosaurs low—which also describes the particular cover story of the May 6, 1985 issue of Time magazine that Thomson has enlarged and transposed here as one of his TIME mirrors included as a background counterpart to the *Wall Calendars* in “Background Extinction.” We are too much like dinosaurs just prior to extinction. The smallness and brevity of this crisis, this anger, this art, this culture sinks in when we let it. And the drastically divergent paces, speeds, and scales of awareness competing for our attention remind us again and again how narrow our window of perception really is, constrained all around by the physiological limits that condition our experience of time, space, color, and sense. But my own fundamental narrowness is not a diminished or negative condition; it is always a thrill to rediscover the subjective contingency and constructedness of what is understood as real. Nothing is more sublime than what lies beyond my perception and powers of detection. I will always be slayed by the view another way of being has on this world.