

**“Fogo Island: Rock Haven”**

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FEATURE

## Fogo Island: Rock Haven

By [Lisa Moore](#)

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# Rock Haven

FOGO ISLAND Arts Corporation is building a future in Newfoundland

BY LISA MOORE

A priest dashes holy water on a bride and groom—two sharp flicks of his wrist, and then the camera moves in for a close-up on the bride. We see her in profile through a veil of tulle. Her eyes are downcast; the tips of her lashes almost touch the veil. How young she is, how full of emotion; there's an intensity that's inward-looking and old-fashioned, but also very present.

The wedding takes place in the late 1960s on Fogo Island, nine miles off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. Fogo Island is a barren landscape of marsh, fog-soaked, at the edge of the continent. Salt-heaps of caribou graze; icebergs and whales float that brings to mind all the 18th-century customs and the erasure of self in the presence of physics.

The bride puts her hand in the hand of the groom. The priest gestures with his finger toward the bride's hand. It is the smallest of gestures and the sincerity the couple brings to the ceremony has gathered for the occasion. All the community has gathered for the occasion. All the community has gathered for the occasion. All the community has gathered for the occasion.

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Opening spread for "Rock Haven" by Lisa Moore, *Canadian Art*, Fall 2011, pp 124–8 / photo courtesy Fogo Island Arts Corporation

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The wedding takes place in the late 1960s on Fogo Island, a remote location of about 100 square miles, nine miles off the northeast coast of Newfoundland. Fogo Island is a barren landscape of marsh, scrub and lichen-mottled boulders, expansive and fog-soaked, at the edge of the continent. Saltbox houses hang tight to the shore. In early summer, herds of caribou graze; icebergs and whales float past. It is the sort of weather-ravaged landscape that brings to mind all the 18th-century connotations of the word “sublime”—soul-quaking awe and the erasure of self in the presence of physical grandeur.

The bride puts her hand in the hand of the groom, and the priest’s white sleeve intrudes on the frame. The priest gestures with his finger toward the ring the groom is holding, and then toward the bride’s hand. It is the smallest of gestures, but it captures the groom’s gentle fumbling and the sincerity the couple brings to the ceremony, the authority of the priest. We see that the community has gathered for the occasion. All the women wear hats or scarves to cover their heads.

It’s possible to imagine that everything important about Fogo Island in the late 1960s has been captured in the intimate microcosm depicted in this moment of black-and-white footage.

The images of the wedding were part of an innovative and experimental film project, known as the Fogo Process, which began in 1967 and has since become an international model. There would have been few opportunities, before this documentary experiment, for people in isolated areas like Fogo Island to see their lives portrayed on film.

In the late 1960s, Memorial University of Newfoundland’s Extension Service (under the direction of Don Snowden) and the National Film Board (with the film director Colin Low) partnered to create what has been called “a seminal participatory communications initiative” in an effort to understand and eliminate the particular kind of poverty that develops in isolated communities. The Fogo Process documented hundreds of hours of interviews about work, as well as moments of ordinary life on the island—children at play, men and women making fish, kitchen parties—in order to create new modes of communication between the residents and with the government. The intent was to effect social change.

The process brought ten separate communities together; one of the issues that emerged was resistance to the program of resettlement. During the 1960s, there had been political pressure for the most remote outposts in Newfoundland to relocate, in order to centralize government services. As the Fogo films were produced, they were shown to participants on the island. The process provoked political organization. The people of Fogo Island articulated their anger about being forced to leave their communities; as a result, some of the planned relocation was averted.

The Fogo Process was then exported to other areas around the world including parts of California, India, Nepal, Southeast Asia and, later, Africa—the newly portable technologies of film and video allowed communication that could sidestep the boundaries of class, illiteracy and geographical isolation.

Fast-forward to the present. Zita Cobb, a philanthropist and the co-founder of the Shorefast Foundation, was a child in the wedding footage. She can be glimpsed among the crowd of well-wishers that mingles in the bright sunshine as the bride and groom leave the church.

“Roy and Christine Dwyer are still married,” she tells me, over a dinner of fresh crab from a local factory. “They live just down the road.”

Cobb left Fogo Island at the age of 17, when the Newfoundland cod fishery began to fail and her father decided to move the family to Toronto. After a business degree at Carleton University and

a successful stint in the IT industry, she decided to return to her childhood home, with a number of philanthropic initiatives aimed at kick-starting economic growth on the island. During the cod moratorium of the early 1990s, Fogo Island's population dwindled from the 6,000 who had lived there during the Fogo Process era to the current population: 2,700.

Cobb's foremost goal is to preserve the culture and way of life of Fogo Island. She embarked on developing a model of "social entrepreneurship" that intends to redirect all profits back into the local economy. The [Shorefast Foundation](#), which Cobb co-founded with her brother Tony, has set up micro-loans for small, local businesses through the Shorefast Business Assistance Fund, and has begun to construct a five-star inn with 29 rooms, which will serve the cultural/geo-tourism industry.

One of the most exciting initiatives that the foundation is currently supporting is a Fogo Island artists' residency program, run by the [Fogo Island Arts Corporation](#). Like the Fogo Process, the residency is designed as a social enterprise and a contemporary art experiment intended to facilitate communication—in this instance, communication between the local residents of Fogo Island and the international arts community.

"The idea is to revitalize the community by leading with the arts," says Elisabet Gunnarsdottir, the director of the Fogo Island Arts Corporation. Since 2008, she has shaped a program that commissions and supports work that engages the social, cultural and environmental ecology of Fogo Island. "We will encourage interaction between visiting artists and local residents, so that everyone can learn from each other on equal footing," she explains.

When I ask what sort of art the artists' residency program is hoping to support, Gunnarsdottir says the choices won't be made according to the type of medium or the discipline in which the artist works. Rather, the program is looking for "artists who will identify with our mission—artists who contribute to our critical objectives through experimenting and exploring new ground."

My husband and I arrive on the island on a warm evening in early May. As the sun starts to set, we disembark from the last ferry of the day. We follow the road from Stag Harbour along Shoal Bay, where we catch our first glimpse of the Tower Studio, a tall, narrow building with a dark exterior. Surrounded by scaffolding, it stands in the middle of the barrens, overlooking the bay.

Steve and I find the renovated traditional home the Fogo Island Arts Corporation has offered us for our stay—"The Coffin House"—in Joe Batt's Arm, not far from the Cobbs' childhood home. There are bowls of homemade soup, snacks and breakfast fixings in the fridge for us. Across the road, the ocean is still. Two old-fashioned stages set on stilts stand in the water, providing places for fishermen to tie up, unload their catches and work on the fish. The stages are mirrored in the sea's glassy surface. They are smart and well-made, and have been freshly stained. A dense fog rolls in behind them and the light is dramatic: the stages seem staged.

I discover we have forgotten to pack our toothbrushes, and Steve sets out to find a convenience store. It is dusk and he takes a few photographs of the stages before getting into the car. He is visited by the eerie feeling that everybody on the road has probably made note of his photograph taking, because every tourist probably takes this same shot.

At the convenience store, the man behind the counter says there were four caribou and a fox in the parking lot when he opened very early that morning. He'd watched them trot down the road together, through the town.

We spend the next two days with Gunnarsdottir, touring the Arts Corporation's artist studios, which were designed by the Norway-based Newfoundlander [Todd Saunders](#) and his team. The studios are ultramodern in design—sculptural and monolithic in the stark landscape, dramatically geometric in form, with references to traditional outport building practices: wooden clapboard and stilts.

Each studio has a spectacular view of the landscape. Gunnarsdottir introduces us to the local builders, who were busy installing solar panels and applying the finishing touches of paint. We visit the renovated traditional houses where the visiting artists will stay.

Gunnarsdottir is a curator and an architect, and as we walk through the houses, she oversees the work with an exacting attention to detail. The Arts Corporation is hosting the two-day international colloquium “re·mode control” in late June, and construction of the studios and artist residences must be completed by then. The colloquium will focus on the idea of “remote” and the creation of art as it occurs in non-urban contexts.

We tour an old church that will be converted into a recording studio and used for meetings, recitals and performances. “They deconsecrated the church when we bought it, and 150 people came to the ceremony,” Gunnarsdottir tells us. “Everyone was quite emotional. Many of those people had attended the funerals of loved ones here, or this is where they had been married.” The 400-seat space is large and open. At the time of my visit, it's being used to store the giant batteries that will hold the energy gathered by the studios' solar panels.

After a morning of touring, Gunnarsdottir brings us back to her home for lunch and to meet some of the Arts Corporation's staff. Her neighbour Lynda Penton, who has prepared the meal, tells a story about her aunt, a former Fogo Island midwife.

A baby had been born with mucous in its lungs, unable to breathe. The baby was turning blue, and the midwife instructed the father of the child to run down to the beach. As Penton tells the story, everyone around the table holds their spoons midway between their bowls and their lips, frozen.

“She thought right quick and told the father to bring back the biggest seagull feather he could find,” she says. For a moment, I think we might be hearing a fairy tale.

“There was no doctor or nurse in the community at the time, and the midwife took the fluffy part of the feather off the quill, put one end of the quill into the baby's mouth and sucked the mucous out of his lungs, and in that way she sove the baby.” The story reminds me of how remote Fogo Island must have been just three or four decades before, and of the ingenuity required to survive in the inhospitable environment. How important these stories must be to the people who continue to live on the island.

Later, Gunnarsdottir gives me a present from the Arts Corporation: a publication the foundation produced, a booklet of an artist project called 4 dimensional mapping that she curated in August 2009.

The project included artists from France, Scotland and Switzerland, and involved local residents. It documented an investigation of the material culture of Fogo Island, and contained locals' verbatim descriptions of geographical markers and the sea, recipes for traditional dishes like Jiggs' dinner, drawings of local architecture and other cultural points of interest, photographic portraits of residents, and copies of postcards sent to Glasgow detailing aspects of island life. In its careful documentation of the culture, the 4 dimensional mapping project was not so different from the careful documentation undertaken by the original Fogo Process.

In the afternoon, I meet with the artist Janice Kerbel, who will be one of Fogo's first artists-in-residence and is making a three-week pre-residency visit. Kerbel is a Canadian living in the United Kingdom. When we meet, she has just completed [a commission for the Chisenhale Gallery in London](#). The commission was a play, the sole performers of which were stage lights. The work existed in the gallery and was visible only in the movement of light on the gallery floor. Kerbel told me she is fascinated by the notion of representing the invisible—like light, which is visible only when it comes in contact with a surface.

Kerbel tucks her young son into a Snugli and we hike to the Long Studio, where she will be working for three months next spring and summer. I asked her what interested her about the Fogo Island residency.

“The particularity of this place will inform the work I do here, because the elements are so dominant,” she says. “And the culture is fascinating. I’m fascinated by the sea and by lobsters and the music here.”

We sit near the studio's giant window, which looks out onto the ocean. We are momentarily overwhelmed by the vast, beautiful view. I ask Kerbel if she knows how her interest in the invisible might manifest itself in this location. “I like the idea of working with water—what can't be seen beneath it,” she says. “But rather than committing to any idea, I think it's important to let the place inform the work. All the work I've been making recently begins with writing. I do think it would be a very beautiful place to write.”

On the walk back over the marsh, I considered how Fogo Island will be reinvented through the eyes of the visiting artists, what they will take away with them, how the existing culture will be documented, and how it will be changed through the documentation.

On our last night on Fogo Island, Gunnarsdottir arranges a Jiggs' dinner for us in a cabin owned by Phyllis and Frank Comben, across the water from the Tower in Shoal Bay. It's a cold evening and we slip along the skim of ice that's formed over the boulders. The cabin is cozy and packed with dinner guests. The Jiggs' dinner is a feast of boiled root vegetables, salt beef and doughboys, homemade pickles and preserves, and a delicious lemon dessert. Peter Decker, a retired fisherman, offers to show us the boats that have been built for the annual “Great Fogo Island Punt Race to There and Back,” another Shorefast initiative. Decker will walk us through the construction of a punt before our long journey home.

“How do I find you?” my husband asks. “I'm down the road from those stages you were photographing the other night,” Decker says.

[http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2011/12/08/fogo\\_island/](http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2011/12/08/fogo_island/)