

salonfocus

In a fog of wonder

For more than 70 years, world-renowned cloud physicist Bob Cunningham visited Kent Island off Grand Manan to collect fog and conduct meteorological research. For artist Jaune Evans, Cunningham's decades'-worth of pencilled data on graph paper add up to more than just a statistical analysis, they paint a poetic picture of obsession and wonder. Story by Shannon Webb-Campbell

It is low-lying, and creeps in off the ocean. It mystically looms across the water, enveloping a once familiar scene. Fog disorients, granting a sense of the surreal. Fog creates mystery, a sense of overwhelming. Fog masquerades.

For cloud physicist and meteorologist Bob Cunningham, Grand Manan was a place of wonder, an island for dreamers – the place where it's so foggy seaweed hangs, damp and limp in the trees. Cunningham spent 60 years of his life collecting glass jars of fog, and, in turn, dedicated his lifetime to wonder.

Or that's what San Francisco-based writer and artist Jaune Evans calls it.

In the summer of 2008, Evans had a dream that spurred her to write an email to her ex-husband, photographer Peter Cunningham. In her dream, residents of Grand Manan, Kent Island, good friends and extended adopted family members were there, all together – everyone save for Cunningham's father, Bob.

"Bob, who studied the magic of fog, the one who followed his dreams and found the heart of his life on two unknown islands in the middle of a mighty bay," she wrote.

In the email, she asked, why am I writing all of this to you now?

Cunningham responded within the hour. His father had died in his arms 40 hours earlier. Evans's reaching out was instinctual, perhaps telling. Cunningham extended an invitation to her to the burial on Kent Island, 200 acres of land nine kilometres south of Grand Manan.

Known as The Fog Seeker, Cunningham was an American world-renowned atmospheric scientist and cloud physicist. He dedicated his lifetime to studying fog, which included a detailed documentation of the buildup and decline of acidity from pollution in the fog banks, and later, levels of mercury. A photo he took of a tornadic anvil storm was published as a two-page spread in the Aug. 17, 1962, issue of Life Magazine, which had Marilyn Monroe on the cover.

Beginning in 1937, he spent his summers travelling to New Brunswick, spending time on Kent Island and Grand Manan, capturing fog as children do fireflies. With Ernest Joy, he acted as the first caretaker of Bowdoin Scientific Station, a still active branch of Maine's Bowdoin College, renowned for its research on seabirds.

Cunningham travelled between Cambridge, Mass., and Grand Manan, while travelling the world working in the MIT meteorology department, which used an Air Force B-17 to take the measurement of clouds. In the process, Cunningham and his team developed instruments that became legendary to researchers in the field, including a device to measure vapor pressure changes, which gave insight into the structure of clouds.

The loss of Bob Cunningham renewed a deep-rooted friendship between his son and Evans. They could now meet one another as souls, artists and writers, and remember. In turn, they could return to wonder together.

Evans believes wonder is the essence of living. Her exhibition *Collecting Fog*, which premiered at Thoreau Centre in the Presidio, in San Francisco, last fall, is at Grand Manan Island Art Gallery until Aug. 29.

Collecting Fog is not only an insightful look into the life and work of Bob Cunningham, it's a testament to wonder. Poetry, photography and a fascination with fog are explored, creating an homage to Grand Manan, the Bay of Fundy, Bob Cunningham and obsession.

In her introductory essay to the exhibition, Evans aptly describes Bob Cunningham:

"When taking his readings – checking the anemometer, the barometer and the hydrograph, or measuring fog water in the sampling jars – he often stopped to gaze up at the sky for long stretches of time. If the atmosphere was foggy, he might stand, squinting with hands on hips, transfixed and motionless, for 15 minutes."

Evans can easily imagine Cunningham circling the sky in a C-130 airplane, his face contorted into perpetual state of wonder, notebook in hand, looking out the window measuring sunlight, "cataloguing clouds by shape, type, height and density – screening them for whatever mystery might be revealed in their elemental personalities."

She imagines him twisting off the lid of a bottle, sticking his arm

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One of the image pairs from Peter Cunningham's new book, 'Dead Reckoning.'



San Francisco-based artist and director of California's Institute for Arts and Healing at Commonweal, Jaune Evans in Russell Ingalls' shed in Seal Cove, Grand Manan. PHOTO: PETER CUNNINGHAM

out the window and collecting clouds in jam jars. The Fog Seeker.

"I was inspired by Peter's father, Bob, when I was married to Peter in the 1970s, and I saw the collection of bottles of fog in the basement of their home on Grand Manan," Evans says. "I had never seen such a thing. I couldn't believe it – he collected fog. I really decided then and there that I wanted to do something about it. It took me a few years to get to it."

Since the age of 10, Bob Cunningham habitually checked the weather twice a day, and kept a record of the events in a notebook. He knew the report just from looking up to the sky. Ever since his first word – ice – he had his head up in the clouds. His passion for Grand Manan was as thick as the fog that coats the coastal area.

Calling from a Californian highway, Evans's cell phone cuts in and out like a loose cable wire. She recalls a myriad of mason jars filled with clear water under the stars.

"They were scattered about in rows, not necessarily in very neat rows," she says. "He was always deep into his research, trying to analyze the acidity of fog. It was not his purpose, but he ended up collecting fog for 60 years. He ended up with a really important body of work about acid rain."

Evans cuts out, there is a cacophony of static, then silence. She's gone, lost to the fog of modern day technology. Moments later, she calls back, and apologizes. She's on her way home from a weekend spent collecting herself on retreat in the mountains of California's Cardinal Valley.

With a career spanning 25 years working nationally and internationally in public health, fine art, literature, environmental protection, human rights, gender equity and indigenous cultures, Evans is also the director of California's Institute for Arts and Healing at Commonweal, and serves as a philanthropic consultant to a global indigenous program protecting human rights, culture and sacred lands.

After moving from Washington to San Francisco in 2009, she found herself surrounded by a thick grey soup.

"I finally opened the folder I had been carrying around with me for 30 years that had a little tab: Fog Man," she says. "When I started I thought I would write about Peter's father, but it became more of an exploration, for me, into what I think about the practice of wonder."

Evans wanted to investigate what happens if you follow wonder. She describes what she found as stepping into a great mystery.

"That mystery can be about relationships, it can be about the way in which the world, and in this case, the water cycle balances itself," she says. "It can be around culture – in terms of Grand Manan, as a very unique culture that is influenced by its weather, and the people have bonded through their life of living in some of the greatest fog banks in North America."

"Fog also obscures things and reveals things. So, for me, it became a real investigation of the many aspects of fog, both scientific and metaphorically, and poetically."

Collecting Fog is as scientific as it is poetic. Framed by a quotation by ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu, Evans invites viewers to look beyond what is seen, to go beyond what is heard, and in turn, unheard. Tzu insists, "From wonder into wonder, existence opens."

In her essay *Remembering Grand Manan*, Evans describes this relationship defined by two words: love and story. The in-between is pure mystery. Writing, art and photography are acts of healing, of remembering, recalling and retelling. She describes the creative process as becoming a keeper of an image. The act of preservation is paramount.

"Bob Cunningham was such a person," she writes. "He was a keeper of fog – a man collecting something most people think is

uncollectable – just because he loved the wonder of it. His son, Peter, is also such a person, preserving the image of Grand Manan, holding it and presenting its everyday sacredness in the world."

While married to Peter Cunningham, Evans travelled to Grand Manan often. They were wed on the island, and held it sacred even after they parted ways and went on to find new partners, and re-marry.

"We were married 40 years ago. We've stayed friends and in the past few years we've gotten closer again," Cunningham says. "We're as intimate as non-romantic partners can be. She chose to do a project about my father. The real subject is wonder; how people are driven by wonder."

Cunningham, an established New York photographer, who joins Evans' exhibition at Grand Manan Island Art Gallery with his own reflections of life on the island, understands that everything stems from wonder. His father always had his head up in the clouds, reminding his son by his actions to look beyond.

"Whenever you grow up with someone who is obsessed with their work as a father, you get something and you miss something," he says. "He wasn't a particularly articulate or social guy. I didn't get basic things. I wound up getting them from substitute parents and family in Grand Manan. I learned how to be a person in the world from many men, fishermen."

While his father was obsessively filling jam jars with fog, his son learned something else, something beyond what men in boats could offer.

"My father was in some ways absent, off flying around the world, he taught me something that was so important to me as a photographer," says Cunningham. "To be absorbed. To be fascinated by your work. Jaune calls it wonder."

Cunningham describes Grand Manan as the home of his heart. He was conceived on the island, and recalls spending his summers as a teenager drifting in his father's mythology. As an adult, the place holds all meaning: his history, family and place in the universe.

Dead Reckoning, Stories From Grand Manan and *The Sardine Museum and Herring Hall of Fame*, two new photography books by Cunningham, now on display at the Grand Manan Island Art Gallery alongside *Collecting Fog*, are tributes to his father's legacy and his own relationship to Grand Manan.

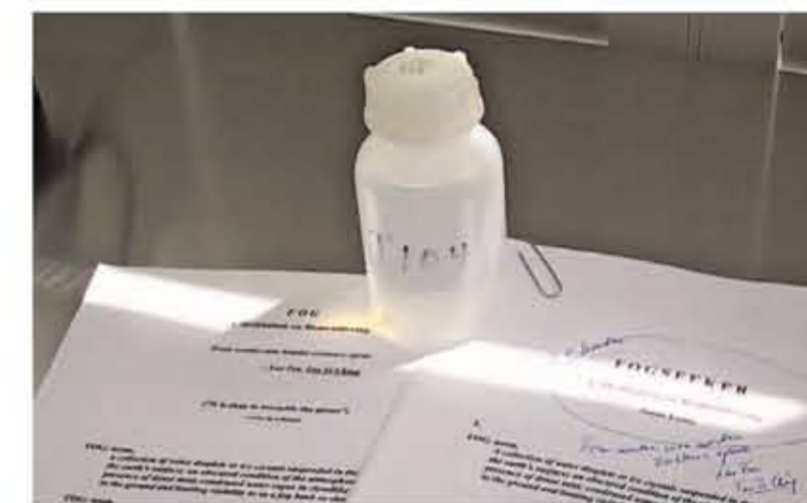
"I considered moving there in my 20s. One of the things I realized if I chose to live on Grand Manan I wouldn't have the option of going out and about in the world. I wouldn't have the kind of income to leave, so I chose to live in the city, in Greenwich Village, for over 40 years."

With almost cinematic photography, and distilled poetics, *Dead Reckoning* embodies the spirit of the place and its people. When he wasn't photographing Bruce Springsteen and Madonna in New York City, he was belly down in the grass, wandering the fog, bemused by the wonder of another island on the coast of the Atlantic.

"This is the most important thing to me, it's the most personal," he says. "When I'm on Grand Manan it's so meaningful to me that the many things I see become symbols. I see things in a mythical perspective."

Much like his father, Cunningham finds wonder everywhere. "I did Madonna's first pictures when she did her first record. We spent the day together in a studio and on the streets in Greenwich," he says. "It was like being in a sandbox, she loved being photographed. I love taking pictures. Photographing on Grand Manan with people that you love, it's playful. It's not work, it's play."

Cunningham believes all art is an act of love. "When it's honest, it's an act of love," he says. "When it's not honest,



Four images from Jaune Evans's exhibition 'Collecting Fog.' Clockwise: 'C-130 with Lester's Shed,' 'Bay of Fundy Fog,' 'Fog Sample #5' and 'His First Word Was Ice.'

Grand Manan Island Art Gallery opens Jaune Evans's 'Collecting Fog' and 'Dead Reckoning' by Peter Cunningham, along with 'Weirs of North Head' by Robin Cormier, today at 7 p.m. The shows will be on display until Aug. 29. The gallery is open daily, Monday to Saturday from 12-7 p.m., and Sunday from 1-5 p.m., at 21 Cedar St., in Castalia, Grand Manan. General admission is \$2, children under 12 are free. For more information call 662-3662.

it's what they call taking a picture."

Cunningham hopes people recognize their own world in *Dead Reckoning*. It's unusual for him to take on the role of writer, as it is peculiar for Evans to hold up a camera, but the two work with a seamlessness in both arts, finding words in the images, and images in the words.

Both Cunningham and Evans are completing circles, returning to a place where they once said their vows, to pay homage to relationships, friendships and the fog man they both loved.

Wandering through the woods, Cunningham grows quiet for a moment, looking up at the sky. It's easy to imagine that his hands are on his hips, his eyes squinting, before he delivers a weather report the old fashioned way.

"Sunny with broken clouds, it's starting to rain on me. I'm under a blue sky. I can't believe this will get me wet." S

Shannon Webb-Campbell is an award-winning writer, photographer and journalist. She hangs her hat in Halifax and can be reached at twitter.com/shannonwc.



World-renowned cloud physicist and man of wonder, Bob Cunningham, died in 2008. Here he is inspecting a rooftop instrument, top-left, and with his fog-collecting screens. PHOTOS: PETER CUNNINGHAM



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