

Alone Again, Naturally

In a departure from his usual subjects, David Graham has created a series of color photographs that capture the quiet life of a pair of contemporary hermits through scenes of their now deserted house and island off the coast of Maine. Although thematically this series offers a sharp contrast to Graham's amusing and humorous photographs of modern Americana, they do have more in common than first meets the eye. Graham sees himself as a documentary photographer with an interest in representing the ways people express their individuality. Much of his past work is about

of the scene they present. For example, the focal point of one is a kitchen sink with a neat stack of sponges and a towel still bearing dark handprints. Out the window behind it there's a view of wild trees and shrubbery. Other images suggest the Kellams' do-it-yourself pioneer spirit, especially one that shows a funky pair of homemade swimming goggles made from discarded materials such as an inner tube, some string and a pair of lenses from welder's glasses. Another photograph shows a little wooden pen with one collapsed side in a clearing within a dense pine forest, perhaps a remnant of some *Bouvard et Pecuchet*-type experiment with gardening or animal husbandry.

ALONE TOGETHER: PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID GRAHAM

Through May 3,
The Print Center,
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Many of Graham's photos highlight the special relationship that Nan and Arthur Kellam enjoyed. One shows a pair of his-and-hers footprints in concrete. Several show the book collection of the inhabitants, including a wooden built-in shelf with books such as *An Island to Myself*, *The Teddy Bear Book* and *Civilization* by Kenneth Clark. I wondered where these books came from, what they express about their owners and what influence they had on them. A view of the surrounding room shows the floor, door and ceiling in the background are all made of patched-together wood scraps. A note thumbtacked to a knotty pine-board wall is the subject of another photograph. On a scrap of paper, dated 2/8/85, there is a list of temperatures in Celsius and Fahrenheit at four different times in the

evening, along with a cryptic love note that ends "B Bear."

Since ancient times there has been something special about people who choose to live their lives close to nature and in solitude. I think of the oracles of the Greeks, the hermit saints like Saint Francis and Mary of Egypt and Henry David Thoreau. Graham seems to be showing us in this remarkable series of photographs that, with the right combination of dedication and eccentricity, it's possible even in modern times to gain access to a more direct, simple and meaningful relationship with nature. Placentia Island has been uninhabited for 14 years and last summer, after Nan Kellam died, it was bequeathed to the Nature Conservancy, which will allow it to return to its natural state. One of Graham's photographs seems to foreshadow this process: In it a path runs through a grassy patch in the woods and is just beginning to fade into the earth.

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Image from David Graham's *Alone Together*, now on display at the Print Center.

playfully disclosing his subjects' eccentricities and this series, essentially a prolonged study of a very eccentric couple, is a continuation of that process.

Graham first heard about Nan and Arthur Kellam when he began spending time in the vicinity of Placentia Island in 1993. He knew that they had left California, purchased and moved to the 500-acre island in 1949, and lived there alone together for 35 years, without telephones or electricity. They had built a house from salvaged lumber, grew vegetables, talked, read and enjoyed their solitude. In 1989, Arthur Kellam died and Nan Kellam moved into a nursing home. Graham visited the island several times between 1995 and 1997 to take photographs. He told me that he was intrigued by the place and its mysteries, and attracted to the idea of the solitude it offered its inhabitants.

Some of the photographs — which all seem very casual and unposed, like tourist snapshots — are surprising by the ordinariness