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TRANSCRIPT from the specially made film about the exhibition *Ultima Thule.*

An interview with photographer Stephen Vaughan and director Anne McNeill.

Anne McNeill (AMN): Tell me what inspired you to begin this project?

Stephen Vaughan (SV): The photographs were inspired originally by the journey of Pytheas, the Greek explorer from the 4th Century BC. He travelled in around 325 BC from Marseille in the Mediterranean, possibly around the south coast of Spain, or alternatively across France by land into the Bay of Biscay [and] into the Atlantic Ocean. He also circumnavigated Britain and eventually reached a place, Ultima Thule in the far north, which is thought to be Iceland. That was the source of my initial inspiration for the project.

AMN: What does Ultima Thule mean?

SV: Ultima Thule is a phrase that was coined about 2,000 years ago for a place in the mythical north, a place beyond the known world. It is a place beyond civilisation. There is no real place that is Ultima Thule. Many people believe it to be Iceland, but there are other possible locations too. So it's more about a place that is beyond the horizon, a place that is over the edge of the known world, beyond civilisation.

AMN: Can you tell me about this first image and where it was taken?

SV: This photograph (image 1) was the beginning of the project and it's the first picture in the series. I didn't want to make an exact replica of Pytheas journey. I didn't replicate every point he stopped at. But, I think, this is probably the furthest point north that Pytheas may have reached. Here, I'm standing inside the Arctic Circle, in a place called

Grimsey, off the northern coast of Iceland. I'm looking towards the North Pole. So this was the starting point of my project, the end of his [Pytheas] journey, the furthest point north.

AMN: Now can you tell me why this second image fits into the series and where it was taken?

SV: This picture (image 2) is paired with the first one in the series. Again, it is taken from edge of the Arctic Circle, looking south this time towards Iceland. This is where I imagine Pytheas return from the far north before he began travelling southwards. These two pictures begin the series and from here, the photographs go into the centre of the Icelandic landscape.

AMN: You choose to use a Gandolfi large format camera to take pictures with, can you explain why in more detail?

SV: The camera that I use is a 10"x 8" [eight by ten inches] Gandolfi Field camera. The negative is very large so the amount of detail the camera records is immense. It's a very similar way of working to 19th Century practices, my photographs happen to be in colour but I'm still working with the same techniques. Photographing these places, especially the glacier, links in some ways to the 18th and 19th Century ideas about ice and fear of a new ice age. Ideas of the sublime, the danger of nature and wilderness all become elements in the work. Obviously in the 21st Century we have a very different perception of what that wildness is and what the sublime means because none of these places are truly wild anymore. So true wilderness is not really what I was seeking. It's that wilderness from a contemporary viewpoint.

AMN: Can you tell me why the photographs are presented at the size they are?

SV: The photographs are deliberately presented at large scale; they are about 60"x 50" [sixty by fifty inches] which is very big. What the 10"x 8" negatives does is allow an

enormous amount of detail in the photograph so the viewer can almost enter into it and study those geological processes, and surfaces with a kind of forensic scrutiny, an exactness that's only available through that kind of large scale.

AMN: You have stated that *Ultima Thule* touches on, amongst others, geology and history, please tell me more about the geological aspect of this work.

SV: Like many people, I'm really interested in volcanos and in glaciers and geological phenomena. Iceland is a place where all those things are very evident. You can see the earth creating itself right in front of you. It's an incredible place to make pictures, almost overwhelming.

SV: In Iceland you can observe the earth forming itself. There is wealth of geological and tectonic activity. The landscape has been created because it spreads across the mid-Atlantic ridge, where the European and American tectonic plates are separating. Because the plates are separating, volcanic fissures emerge and in some of the photographs that were made in Krafla in Iceland, you can see clearly this point of separation. These geological processes of volcanism, of tectonics and glaciation fascinated me. These are some of the youngest and rawest places on Earth.

AMN: And the historical.

SV: In some senses, I'm imagining an ancient pre-history, but I'm also stood in a 21st Century landscape, that is the nearest equivalent to Mars on Earth. Some of these sites were used by astronauts to train for the moon landings in the 1960s. So there's a bridge between ancient history and contemporary inter-planetary exploration. This links again with the journey of Pytheas in the 4th Century BC. So there is a world of things mixed together in the photographs.

AMN: Tell me more about the ice pictures and in particular the one with the volcanic ash and fragments of ice.

SV: This is an image I made in mid winter, during my second trip to Iceland, when things were much more bleak, cold and difficult. I made a series of pictures about ice and I was looking at processes of glaciation. In our contemporary environment, we are worried about the melting of ice and so on. There is a whole series of pictures in the exhibition that begin with the glacial expanse and move through to points of fragmentation, to blocks of ice that have fallen off the end of the glacier and are swept out into the ocean gradually melting. These pieces are 2,000 to 2,500 years old and are layered with rich layers of volcanic ash. They have incredible colours and textures and are amazing surface to photograph. These fragments break up into small pieces of ice, which eventually melt and disappear, this is where they end their life.