

BIRTHE PIONTEK ARTIST STATEMENT

The Idea of North

Individuation is a recurring theme in my photographic work: the ways people struggle to belong yet be different at the same time. Sometimes, people's quests for identity lead them to leave the beaten path, and take the road less travelled. And for them, the quest for self-discovery becomes a journey in every sense of the word.

The fast-paced, anonymous life of the urban environment sometimes offers neither the time nor space for individualization, nor the comforting place needed for belonging. So, for some, the sense of freedom and interdependence intrinsic to a remote, Northern community makes it an idealized symbol of the Promised Land.

The idealization of the North has been nourished by stories by Jack London and Robert Service; by numerous movies about the area's wild and pristine tapestry; and even by images of the Northern lights, which to this day, although certainly explicable by science, have lost none of their spiritual fascination or magical appeal.

In 2008, I spent three months in a small community in Canada's Yukon, where I experienced first hand the mystery and fascination of life above the 60th parallel, and met people who came here as part of their quest for the idea of North.

I'm not the first observer to be simultaneously intrigued, yet remain a visitor. Glenn Gould, whose work inspired the title, wrote after visiting the North briefly, "I've read about it, written about it, and even pulled up my parka once and gone there. Yet like all but a few Canadians I've had no real experience of the North. I've remained, of necessity, an outsider. And the North remained for me, a convenient place to dream about, spin tales about," and in the end, return South.