

Curating *Underwater*

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Everywhere I've looked, there have been compelling artworks about the underwater. And so this show by ten contemporary artists has come together from scores of possibilities. It's an international selection of the artworks I've been most drawn to, spanning the past decade.

I've also seen a surprising number of artworks about the act of getting into, or out of, water: however, 'Underwater' is, specifically, a show about the state of total submersion. And 'Underwater' is also concerned with vast natural waters – oceans, rivers, lakes – rather than confined man-made pools or tanks.ⁱ This is because the exhibition has a personal dimension. I've been attracted to artworks that are full of metaphors for the big life dramas as they occur to me now: birth, love, friendship, death. As a way of touching on some of those connections, I've included in italics some personal anecdotes and a fantasy within this brief discussion of the artists' works.

I've also been conscious of a marked increase in coverage of the undersea in the media: it seems to be a motif of our times. There have been numerous articles about newly discovered undersea territories and species, underwater archaeology, stranded whales, and the spoiling of the oceans by human filth, noise, overfishing and global warming. There have been countless underwater advertisements – for insurance, for razors, and even for the new terminal at Heathrow Airport! *The Blue Planet*, a hugely successful BBC nature documentary series, was first broadcast in 2001. I've been inspired, too, by writings literary and philosophical, and by some recent popular science books. But first, a strange recollection.

I was out in the lambing shed, doing the final check. All of a sudden, I saw something there at my feet in the straw – a translucent mound of pink liquid, held within a membrane. The creature inside it – born, amazingly, without rupturing its

birth sac – had to be dead: a bad end to the day. I parted the sac and the fluid ebbed away. I took hold of the lamb. It shuddered and came to life in my hands.

In the salt waters of the womb, the young of any kind of mammal remain essentially elsewhere. No matter how many ultrasound scans are taken at the hospital, it's only when a baby is born – or more precisely when it takes its first breaths – that it truly comes into being. At an early stage in the womb, however, all mammals are fish-like, having gills and a tail. As scientists tell us, more than 375 million years ago our distant ancestors propped themselves up on their fins and crawled out of the sea. In every cell of our bodies there are clues of this ancient aquatic past. Sequences of DNA that run the length of our bodies are apparently very similar, though much more complex, to those of jellyfish.ⁱⁱ Yet now that we've left the watery depths, this place of origin has become more or less alien. For one thing, it's almost immediately life threatening; having once inhabited the seas, we now can't get our oxygen anywhere but from the air. The underwater is a mysterious, utterly distant place where we can go only with difficulty – and also a place of fantasy, of free imaginings.

In **Bill Viola's** video *Becoming Light* (2005), a naked man and woman slowly intertwine just beneath the surface of a deep dark pool. At intervals, the lovers interrupt their rapture and rise to the surface to gasp for air. Eventually, they dive down together into the apparent infinity of the waters, to form, in the far distance, a single point of light, and life. For their drowning is also a spawning. The last breath that they exhale rises towards the surface, where it forms a perfect circle of bubbles, in the centre of which is the tiny speck of life the lovers have formed.

Consider a few snippets of information. Over 1.4 billion cubic kilometres of water exists on earth, 97 percent of which is in the oceans. Water covers more than 70 percent of the earth's surface, the deepest point in the ocean is 11 kilometres below sea level, and until very recently, only two percent of the oceans had been explored.ⁱⁱⁱ And it's the source of all life on earth (the only life

currently known in the universe). Viola's artwork *Becoming Light* is an allegory of human desire – the underwater is perceived here as limitless; it takes us beyond comprehension; it's something we lose ourselves in. This underwater drama is also a metaphor for the mystery of our existence – that small moment of life before dying.

Shirley Kaneda's paintings are the most abstract works in the 'Underwater' exhibition. She is concerned with the state of liquidity, and her free and yet precise squiggles are a play of refraction and reflection and distortion (the surface is animated; it appears to move). While her colours sometimes hint at a location (the green algae of a lake? the turquoise waters of an Arctic sea?) her paintings are conceptual rather than specific to place. There's a dimensionlessness, too. For we can't tell whether this is a single droplet we are contemplating, or a whole ocean.

Kaneda's paintings belong to conceptions of contemporary reality in which there is no subjectivity, nor even such a thing as a discrete object, but rather a 'series of flows, energies, movements' in which 'only intensities pass and circulate'.^{iv} Looking at these artworks we experience a freeing – giddying – loss of self: the illusion of liquid movement seems to enter the space around us, and even to enter us (remember that we ourselves are 60 or 70 percent water).

Seunghyun Woo has created sculptures of imaginary underwater flora and fauna. She's used a flicked plaster technique, in which rivulets of plaster are arrested in mid-flow. And there are multi-coloured drizzlings of paint that cover every surface of this plaster, mixing and flowing over it. It's as if we are looking into water at watery optical distortions playing upon these aquatic forms. As with Kaneda's paintings, there's a curious sense in which these sculptures de-solidify as we look at them, an attribute that connects, again, with the radical idea of declining to have 'a final goal, a resting point, a point of stability or identity'.^v

The underwater would seem to be a *feminine* place. It is 'other', in the sense of being alien and beyond. It is also amniotic, a birthing place, the great womb of all life. And there's a connection, too, to women's sexuality.

A friend from Cape Cod recently told me how, in the sixties, a new boyfriend took her on a first date down to the sea-bed – illicitly – in the newly-launched Alvin, the first ever passenger-carrying deep-sea scientific research vessel.

Janaina Tschäpe's video *Moss* is a nine-minute loop in which the head of the artist is seen turning from side to side, hypnotically, just below the surface of a dark pool of water. Eyes closed, it's as if she's in a trance, a dream-state – or it could be a never-ending moment of sexual rapture. This turning of the artist's head in the water is steady and slowed, so as not to break the surface of the water. In *Moss* we see a woman's slow movement in slow motion: here is the slower pace of sexual arousal for women, and also its longer sustain. There is a rhythm, too, of appearance and disappearance, of presence and absence: the woman, turning away, sinks into the murkiness of the water, to become visible once more when her face turns towards us. She is, by turns, completely self-absorbed and utterly desiring.

Dorothy Cross's *Jellyfish Lake* is a six-minute continuous video in which the artist is suspended in sunlit water that teems with jellyfish. They are all about her, carried by the currents and pulsing through the water. She shares their element, her long hair wafting about her in imitation of their movements: she and they are mesmerising to watch. But won't these jellyfish sting? Aren't they dangerous? And the artist's face is turned upwards and away from the camera, so that it's above the water: in order to breathe, in order not to drown. This figure of the woman is both in and out of her element, belonging and yet alien. Or perhaps, somewhere in the slow, mesmerising repetition of it all she is transformed: she *becomes* jellyfish.^{vi}

I walk down to the sea's edge and stop. I don't know how to look at the expanse of the sea. I throw in a few stones and look for boats. And then I walk, and keep

walking, until I take a deep breath of salt water and enter the darkness. I am a sleepwalker, an adventurer, an oceanaut in inner space.

Under water, completely other rules of existence apply. It's somewhere humans have, in relative terms, hardly ventured as yet. In terms of the imaginary, it perhaps represents 'those as yet unterritorialized spaces'^{vii} where different possibilities could well exist. An estimated ninety percent of the world's biodiversity is in the oceans and **Ellen Gallagher's** series of artworks, called *Watery Ecstatic*, conjectures new species that have evolved in the distant, watery depths. Her work on paper in this exhibition is part natural history specimen study^{viii} and part science fiction monster. What we see is a flattened, eyeless and spongiform creature. Beneath its outer skin there are mysterious organs and workings; intimations of a heart, a vascular system; seeping and putrescent greens and yellows; a shadowy and menacing inner bulk. It's grotesque, a product of the deepest recesses of the mind, surely – but finally no more alien or repellant than many of the new life forms that are daily discovered deep in the oceans.

Ed Pien's drawings for his series *Image Bank* suggest a nightmarish underwater realm. He set himself the strange discipline of working on his drawings for just three minutes at a time. Some of them are finished in one go; more often they involve several layers of work, each taking the three minutes. The drawings that result depict monstrous forms in liquid suspension: in Pien's words: 'hybridised figures, loosely land-based and water-based creatures that fight, intermingle, and then can't fight anymore'.

There's something here of Beowulf's battles with monsters of the sea: 'The deep boiled up/ and its wallowing sent the sea-brutes wild./... Time and again, foul things attacked me,/ lurking and stalking, but I lashed out,/ gave as good as I got with my sword.'^{ix} It's a venturing into a murky beyond: the artist disgorges onto paper – and struggles with – the menacing and chaotic imagery of the unconscious. And remember that Pien enters the dark space of his

drawings for just three minutes at a time: the time spent underwater by a practised free-diver.

Since the earliest known stories (including *Beowulf*) humans have ventured deep under the water in their imaginations. And there have long been attempts to actually go there. Some drawings made in 1532 depict a diver with a breathing funnel made of sewn leather; there were also attempts in ancient times to go underwater in wooden barrels.^x In Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, the submarine takes the ultimate fantasy form and allows humans to live permanently underwater. In the book, the captain explains that it was due to his abominable treatment by mankind that he went to such extraordinary lengths to create his submarine.

Cut and Scrape's sculpture *Submarine* envisages one moment from Verne's novel, in which giant sea creatures attack the submarine. The sculpture is motorised and tilts up and down in the clutches of a writhing mechanised squid, and there are sound and lighting effects, too. It has made-in-a-shed, makeshift appeal. It's *Boy's Own Annual*, James Bond and *Thunderbirds* rolled into one, a masculine enactment of a classic moment of jeopardy, but on a domestic scale. And it seems bound to fail; it is endearingly absurd. There's a sense of pathos here that's related also to the sheer scale of endeavour that will face all artists who toil in tiny isolation to make art about the oceans.

In the hospital ward, my father was one of a row of old men with shattered lungs. Each had an oxygen mask. Each one of them would die, without question, very soon. In many ways, they were already dead – lost, beyond – their breathing apparatus allowing them to visit one last time.

At any real depth, the underwater is violently inhospitable to us: it's intensely cold, with pressures that we can't survive; even a relatively shallow dive needs careful management to avoid the bends, a potentially lethal condition.

Daniel Gustav Cramer takes photographs of the sea-bed while diving, using

housing for his camera that was first developed in 1953 (and used by Jacques Cousteau, one of the earliest pioneers of scuba diving, a technology invented as recently as 1942). Cramer feels unease about being underwater: 'it is not natural, you are not supposed to be there, forty metres down it is strenuous: some divers vanish completely'. His series of underwater images depict a deathly and ominous place: amorphous, towering rocks, rising silts, barrenness and decay. There's little visibility in these half-lit murky places; it all closes in on us. And there are no fish or other creatures. Even the colour has almost drained away. Cramer talks about the fear while swimming of what might be underneath in the water, connected to the German nightmare myth of *Wasserleiche*, meaning a drowned and decaying body.

The dread within these photographs pervades the majority of the exhibits in this show at some level. Lovely Ophelia, doomed to suicide by drowning, is at least partially present in the drifting females with flowing hair that are depicted here.^{xi} But more than this, the compulsion that's shared of plunging, conceptually and sometimes actually, into the watery depths, can begin to feel diluvian, apocalyptic. In some respects at least, art functions as society's 'worry beads', and the suggestion is, I think, that the ten artists in the 'Underwater' exhibition manifest something of the anxiety there is about this watery, life-filled planet and the threats it faces from humans.

Finally, there is **Klaus Osterwald's** sound sculpture *Donatus Subaqua*, which comprises six large and tapering cast aluminium speakers. Holding your ear to the speakers, you hear curious noises: chirrups, rhythmic clickings and pops. It transpires that the artist collects these sounds by lowering home-made hydrophones (underwater microphones) up to twelve metres below the surface of a forest lake near Cologne. The sounds are of gas bubbling up from the bottom, plants producing oxygen, the strange trilling of fish, even the calls of waterboatmen: other sounds have yet to be identified, even by scientists.

What we hear in the space of the gallery is presented as a gift from the underwater (as the 'donatus' of the artwork's title suggests). Here the underwater world reflects us back on ourselves, challenging our species' unthinking assumption of the underwater as silent, and as an absence to be filled. It's quite the opposite: the underwater goes on offering up the scientifically, biologically unexpected, as well as infinite possibilities for the imagination.

ⁱ Consider, by contrast, *unter wasser über wasser: Vom Aquarium-zum Videobild* ('under water above water: From the aquarium to the video image'), Kunsthalle Wilhelmshaven, Germany, 2009; and *Liquid Sea*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney, 2003, which looked at the oceans above and below the water line.

ⁱⁱ Neil Shubin (2008), *Your Inner Fish*, London, Allen Lane/ Penguin Books, chapters 1 and 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ See, for example, Peter Frances and Angeles Gavira Guerrero, eds, (2006), *Ocean: the last wilderness revealed*, London, Dorling Kindersley.

^{iv} Both quotations here are from a discussion of the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari in Elizabeth Grosz (1994), *Volatile Bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*, Indiana University Press, chapter 7.

^v Grosz, *ibid*, p 178.

^{vi} See Grosz, *ibid*, p 173: 'Becomings are always specific movements, specific forms of motion and rest, speed and slowness, points and flows of intensity; they are always a multiplicity, the movement or transformation from one "thing" to another that in no way resembles it. Captain Ahab becomes-whale, Willard becomes-rat, Hans becomes-horse.'

^{vii} Luce Irigaray (1985), *This Sex Which Is Not One*, New York, Cornell University Press, p 141.

^{viii} See J. Malcolm Shick's essay for a discussion about how, in the nineteenth century, biological specimens were depicted in isolation from their surroundings.

^{ix} *Beowulf*, dating from between the seventh and the tenth centuries, trans. Seamus Heaney (2000), London, Faber and Faber, p 19.

^x There is a fascinating display of model divers and submersibles in the Science Museum, London.

^{xi} Compare *Ophelia* (1851–2), a painting by John Everett Millais, Tate collection, of a scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Other key sources

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*, 1836

Italo Calvino, 'Blood, Sea' in *t zero*, 1967

Philip Hoare, *Leviathan, or, The Whale*, 2008

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, 1851

Jules Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, 1869

Derek Walcott, *Omeros*, 1990

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