

Aquatica Exotica

The universe created by artist Janaina Tschäpe beckons one into a parallel world of ambiguous scale—indeterminate in both time and space. Reminiscent of Voltaire's *Micromegas*, the fantastical scenes she conjures collapse boundaries and fluidly mingles in a continuum of evolution and transformation. Recurring gestures become characters in a grand opera that touches on evolution, gender, and the construction of myth and history. In the end, Tschäpe's work begs the big picture questions that tease us all. As Gauguin put it, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?*

Blood, Sea

The spring-fed grotto at the South Florida theme park provides the scenographic impetus for this grand production, but is in no way the origin of game. The sea maiden mythologies that inform *Blood, Sea* link endless stories from across time and space. Millennia of previously unknown deep-sea creatures caught in fishermen's nets spawned the mythic narratives that gave rise to these goddess/creature tales. From the Mami Wata cults of West Africa (which, ironically, anthropologist Henry Drewal suggests can be traced to a late 19th century German chromolithograph of a female Indian snake-charmer) to the water sprites of Irish lore, the trope of the sea maiden is overdetermined, to say the least. Tschäpe's primary connection is, of course, to her namesake, the Orixá Iemanjá of Candomblé, the Brazilian version of the many syncretic articulations born of the Yoruban diaspora. But Iemanjá is merely one character in the global pantheon of the water goddess.

The split-tail mermaid imagery that adorns the exterior walls of centuries old homes in the landlocked Swiss Alps are testament to the enduring imagery of the fish-woman. The split-tail represents the hybrid presence of both home and away, the perpetual dual identity of the émigré, and a curious cipher of Tschäpe's experience living between the culturally antipodean points of Germany and Brazil. This existence places her between logic and magic, between Protestant rationalism and the mystical worldview of Candomblé, between the grey angst of northern Romanticism and the sensual elegance of the southern hemisphere.

This intrinsic cultural paradox allows Tschäpe to fluidly operate as both subject and object, both voyeur and agent, and to embody the participant-observer position of the ethnographic model. This is evidenced clearly in *Blood, Sea*, where the point of view witnessed in the photographs and the video perpetually shifts—at times the viewer is on board the ship, cast in the role of scientist discovering a previously unknown life form. At other times, we are privileged to swirl amidst the creatures, as one of them.

One can readily locate the work in a range of critical gestures designed to trump the gender inequities that continue to haunt human relations and stymie the possibility of a truly enlightened society. It would be easy enough to connect the dots of the sea maiden

myth across culture and time, and to posture a critical feminist ethnography examining the trope of the ideal woman.

But I'll leave that to someone else.

Though the work may have narrative origins in these mythical tales, it transcends the trope of the sea maiden and enters the cosmic and microcosmic realm of a far more grand story—evolution. The Eames' *The Power of 10*, Smithson's spiral, Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, Voltaire's *Micromegas* and Tschäpe's experiments in alternate evolutionary paths and the imagined worlds they might produce all share a line of inquiry. Each of these gestures seeks to locate the big in the small, the infinite in the infinitesimal.

Tschäpe's choice of Italo Calvino's passage from *t zero* confirms that there is more at play in her work than simply sirens and fish tales/tails. In the realm of evolution—change over time—elemental issues of art meld with elemental issues of evolutionary biology—namely, form and scale. *Blood, Sea*, and Tschäpe's drawings, articulate a magnificent and fantastical taxonomy of creatures and environments that toy with scale—one never knows if the imagined scene is interstitial or interstellar.

The experience of watching *Blood, Sea* is, by design, mesmerizing. The creatures float languidly by the camera, the silence punctuated by the eerie and organic minimal soundtrack evoking Homeric sirens and cetaceous echo-location. Overhead, trees morph into beds of kelp, a body transforms into a rusty inkblot released by a giant squid, organisms appear to collapse time by evolving before our eyes. This organically orchestrated ballet undulates like an organ pumping liquid. The viewer is unmoored, lost tumbling in space and entirely unable to determine the scale of the beings. Is this entire lagoon merely a microscopic view of the tiniest interior of a valve of that organ? Or is this scene played out on a cosmic scale, where each shifting body is celestial and universal? The creatures are evolutionary experiments in bodily forms. Tschäpe plays creator, then deploys her spawn in a field to see how they may live, like a child's science experiment writ large. Functions of the body like gestation that were internal are now external, the boundary between body and environment disappears. Ichthyological reproductive practice finds creatures depositing eggs, and appropriating the entire ocean as the amniotic fluid until another creature comes along to fertilize them. One imagines the pure delight the artist must take in this Petri dish approach to art-making, as the behavior of her subjects—off-spring in any fashion—begins to reveal itself. As her creatures move through the world, the horrific and fabulously amusing account of Kafka's Gregor Samsa negotiating his new form comes to mind as the creatures float idly, or drag their bodies across the beach, unaccustomed to their newly evolved forms. Imagine thirty-foot extensions of your limbs, which radically extend the body, allowing you to annex space, as Tschäpe's costumes allow her character-creatures. And imagine the awkwardness, the simultaneous joy and discomfort of extending the body in this fashion. This is what Tschäpe conjures for the viewer, a fantasy of bodily transformation.

“Historical events, like astronomical bodies, *occur* before they *appear*...”

George Kubler *The Shape of Time* 5

Artists like Tschäpe — the big picture artists — are attuned to the echo, somewhere between the occurrence and the appearance. Ears to the tracks, or perhaps, fingertips on the superstrings, sensing the pulses, giving them form and translating the signals for the rest of us. This is, of course, what all artists do—construct fantastical parallel worlds, and then seek the lessons and the logic that dictates the shape and actions of that world. Tschäpe's mutations hint at another universe, speculating an alternate path or branch on the phylogenetic tree. She visually articulates our collective quest to understand. By excavating our vestigial qualities and desires, she implies both past and future—our collective biological urge to carry on, and our collective cultural urge to connect to the past. When asked to share thoughts about Calvino's *Blood, Sea* passage, an evolutionary biologist responded simply "things change." 6 Cetaceans left the sea and roamed the earth. And then they went back.

Perhaps we will, too.

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Tucson, Arizona, 2005

1. Paul Gauguin, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* 1897 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
2. Drewal, Henry John. 1988. Mermaids, Mirrors and Snake Charmers: Igbo Mami Wata Shrines. *African Arts* 21 (2):38-45, 96.
3. Many thanks to Dr. Annatina Meischer for images and thoughts about art in the towns of Sent and Ftan.
4. Kafka, Franz *The Metamorphosis* (Schocken Books: New York, 1983) p.92-95.
5. Kubler, George *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 1962), p. 19.
6. Drs. Derek Wildman and Monica Uddin, collaborating with Dr. Morris Goodman have recently found more evidence to support Goodman's 1962 assertions regarding our relations to other primates. The authors state: "The most parsimonious phylogenetic tree that can be constructed from our results demonstrates that humans and chimpanzees are closest relatives, not chimpanzees and gorillas. Also, simply in terms of degree of divergence, there are fewer character-state differences between humans and chimpanzees than between chimpanzees and gorillas." March 2 Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (vol. 101, no. 9)
7. Calvino toys with these ideas throughout his hilarious and poignant *Cosmicomics* essays, in particular his *Aquatic Uncle*, in which our poor narrator finds his fish uncle seducing his fiancé into giving up terrestrial life and joining him in the ocean. (Harcourt, Brace & Co.: San Diego, New York, London, 1968)

Many thanks to Wil Peterson for his thoughts on animal architecture, cetacean evolution, Italian metaphysicians, mermaid erotica, American touristic practices, fish sex and all the rest.