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Drawn by Water

ELIZABETH DELOUGHREY

The sea is heavy
with bodies
overcast souls

—Deborah Jack, “waterpoem 4”

To enter the exhibit *Deborah Jack: 20 Years* is to submerge into transoceanic history, imagery, sound, and to descend into the element of salt. As we know from Nobel-Prize winning poet Derek Walcott, “the sea is history,” monument, vault, and elemental force of erasure. In Deborah Jack’s oceanic imaginary, the sea is “heavy/with bodies,” dissolving its human subjects and “a/salting” the Caribbean region as a hurricane force. The region’s cultural imaginaries have always been extensively engaged with the ocean as a space of origin as well as destiny. As a St Maarten poet/artist, Jack has long engaged the representability of embodied fluidity and flow

through poetry, still images, video, and sound. Here I place her visual allegories of oceanic embodiment in a conversation with scholarship arguing for an ontological turn to “wet matter” at a critical moment of sea-level rise in a crisis some call the Anthropocene.

In recent years an oceanic imaginary is apparent in scholarship and art that is responding to the threat of sea-level rise, adding a new dimension to how we might theorize our relationship to the largest space on earth—our planet’s oceans. With glacial melt and ocean thermal expansion, our planetary future is becoming more oceanic. Sea-level rise may

be one of our greatest visible signs of planetary change, connecting the activity of the earth's poles with the rest of the terrestrial world, producing a new sense of planetary scale and perhaps even interconnectedness through the rising of a world ocean. So while the Anthropocene locates humans as geological agents, one might also trace out a discourse of oceanic agency that makes the (false) boundaries between humans and nature all the more porous and fluid. Of course, much of this work arose from the Caribbean, due to its complex oceanic history from the watery origins of the Middle Passage to the contemporary experience of climate change.

Writers as diverse as Rachel Carson and Derek Walcott have long called attention to the historical, evolutionary, and material relationship between our bodies and the sea. Walcott refers to one of his speakers as "foetus of plankton," while other regional writers and artists, including Jack, recognize the African-derived water deity Yemanjá as a founding mother'. While there is poetry in associating our evolutionary origins with the sea, Jack's work brings this to tactile, micro-scalar, and macro-scalar levels that are abstract yet fully embodied. And she reminds us, poignantly, of the human body's constitution by salt. At the smallest scale, the human cell consists of water and salt in a shifting and dynamic relation of osmosis. In fact, two-thirds of the water in the human body is made up of this intracellular relationship, while the remaining third consists of blood, a carrier of corpuscles, and water. Since life is thought to originate in the oceans, the salt of our cells is imagined as an evolutionary microcosm of the ocean in our

blood, in what chemist Pierre Laszlo refers to as "cell consciousness."²

In turning to the Caribbean context, we can take this evolutionary framework of the oceanic body and engage with more historical, colonial, racialized, and gendered contexts and scales. Caribbean literature and arts have developed some of the most complex discourses on the oceanic imaginary in which the sea represents:

- simultaneous origins and the future (sea level rise);
- a sacred space of the orishas and ancestors;
- the fluidity of identity;
- the space of encounter with non-human bodies;
- the maternal body (*Mar/Mere, Yemayá*)
- the terrors of crossing the Middle Passage and *Kala Pani*;
- and the more recent refugee experiences of *balseros* and *botpippel*.

To Trinidadian scholar Carole Boyce Davies, "the Caribbean Sea is [...] a site of continuous change and the ongoing questioning of self, origin, direction."³ To Kamau Brathwaite, Caribbean "unity is submarine," a fluid regional imaginary that Martinican author Edouard Glissant has often reiterated.⁴ To him the Caribbean is not insular, but rather is defined through rhizomatic "submarine roots [...] floating free, not fixed in one position in some primordial spot, but extending in all directions in our world through its networks and branches."⁵ This worldly if not

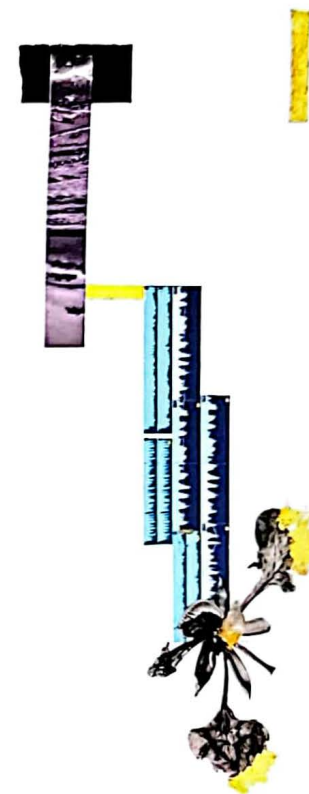


Figure 16:
 ...the salt of their blood, still in the ocean, the sea kissing our shores...every wave a
 hymn...every tide a poem...the sea is an elegy. 2021
 Photographs, archival paper, gold leaf, salt
 43 1/2 x 29 inches (110.5 x 73.7cm)

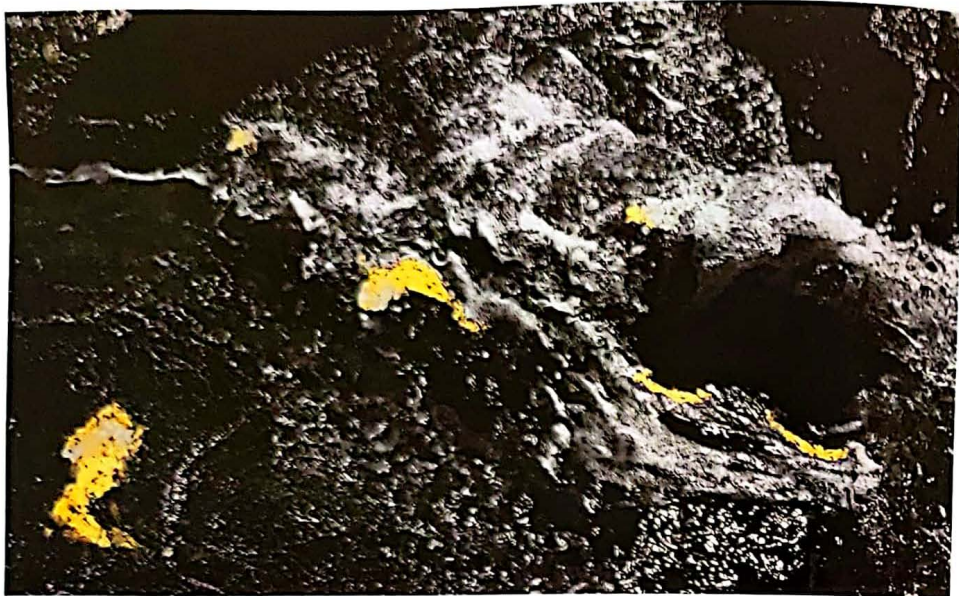


Figure 17:

the salt in our blood, the salt in the sea, the sea in our blood #2, 2021
 Photograph printed on archival paper, gold leaf, salt
 14 x 29 inches (35.6 x 73.7cm)

cosmic viewpoint has been echoed by Cuban author Antonio Benitez-Rojo, who imagines the region consisting of “Peoples of the Sea (who are) traveling together toward the infinite.”⁶ This sense of grasping towards the infinite is represented in Jack’s multi-scalar connections between the ocean (what was once called inner space) and the constellations (outer space).

The challenge of representing watery bodies and bodies of water in the Anthropocene is critical to the poetry, photographic, and video installation work of Jack, whose visual iconography provides a multi-scalar lens for thinking through watery embodiment. This embodiment is rendered at the cellular level,

which we glean from her poetic titles such as, *...the salt of their blood, still in the ocean, the sea kissing our shores...every wave is a hymn...every tide a poem...the sea is an elegy* (2021) (Figure 16) and *the salt in our blood, the salt in the sea, the sea in our blood #2* (2021) (Figure 17).

Although these pieces refer to the way in which our evolutionary origins come from the sea, the images themselves place organic natural forms that are circumscribed by rectilinear and technological shapes, calling attention to the very construct of a ‘natural’ oceanic imaginary and the ways in which we continue to rely on satellite technologies to imagine our oceanic relationships. Moreover, the photographs are

overlaid with salt crystals and gold leaf, a testimony to the European commodification of the minerals of the Caribbean in an early modern context in which salt made transatlantic colonialism possible through the preservation of food, an element that used to be more valuable than gold.⁷

While some contemporary Caribbean artists have explored the azure blues of the Caribbean Sea, such as María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Jack’s oceanic imaginary often foregrounds a brooding, greyscale, and agential ocean. Eschewing the tropical blues of the tourist industry, Jack strips the color and fragments the images to create an uncanny ocean. In the video series *Drawn by Water, (Sea) Drawings in (3)Acts* (2018) (Figures 17-19) the ocean finds voice, but it’s not the expected rhythms we hear with human ears. In a series of films that focus on waves crashing on the shore that do not prioritize human figuration, the (human) body is not the metaphor for ocean but rather the ocean becomes the metaphor for bodies. This is the inverse figuration of the ways in which human bodies (or cells) embody and scale up to the immensity of the ocean.

Drawn by Water, (Sea) Drawings in (3)Acts stages a visual narrative of the oceanic, beginning with *Wait(weight) on the Water* (Figure 18), calling attention to the temporality of fluidity as well as the literal and symbolic volume of the ocean. In this piece our vision becomes diffracted into rectangular segments that interrupt the assumed ebb and flow of what Brathwaite would refer to as “tidalectics.” To “wait” on the water is also to

have an apprehension, perhaps of the way in which this body will rise to take other bodies. As the artist asks:

*Does water have memory? What is the tension when the water and the land connect, when different bodies of water connect and when bodies and water connect? How is this drawn on the water? What are the shared vulnerabilities of colonizer and the colonized when rising sea levels threaten the existence of both?*⁸

Certainly in all of her work, which has turned repeatedly to the ocean, to salt, and to sites of memory, we can see that the return to sites of trauma is to recognize that, in the artist’s words, “they’re also sites of healing. Those spaces live together...you have to return...(because) there is a spirit.”⁹

In her invocation of oceanic bodies, the artist has been inspired by Toni Morrison’s theory of “re-memory,” where, as Jack observes, “memory is a sort of energy that travels right through time and space...water has a memory. So when there is a flood it’s not that the area gets flooded it’s that the water remembers where it used to go.”

This memory of water in and outside of human history is critical to understanding the way in which Jack represents the hurricanes that are simultaneously the mark of anthropogenic climate change as well as the re-memory of the unburied souls who have perished in the crossing of both the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic.

Pointing out that the hurricane derives its liquid fuel from saltwater which in turn rains

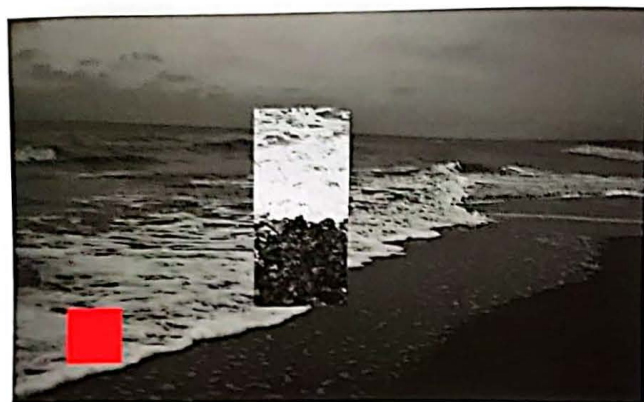


Figure 18:
Drawn by water: (Sea) drawings in (3) acts, Act One: Wait (weight) on the water (still), 2018

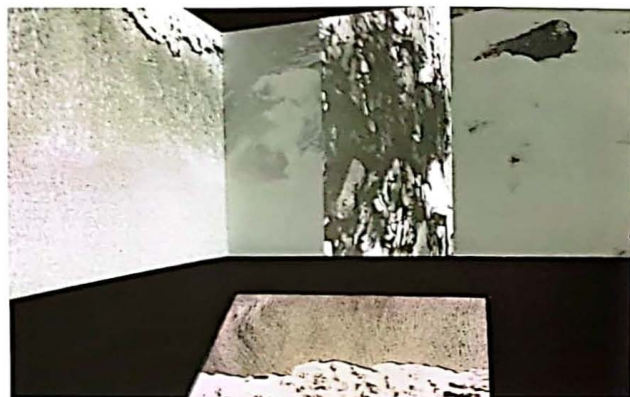


Figure 19:
Drawn by water: (Sea) drawings in (3) acts, Act Two: Saltwater Requiem...and then the wind whispered sometimes the aftermath is the storm (still), 2018



Figure 20:
Drawn by water: (Sea) drawings in (3) acts, Act Three: sinking, I remembered that the embrace of the oceans is the love I know (still), 2018

down on the region, Jack provides a complex figuration of time and of the bod(ies) that circulate through the deep time of hydrological cycles. In this image there is a juxtaposition of the shore-level view of the oceanic and its creation of a 'contact zone' at the beach, a space of transition and change, as well as the satellite view of a hurricane system, hundreds of miles wide. We have a larger scale figuration of inner and outer space—juxtaposed in ways that allow for the non-ontological, god's eye view of the planet rendered possible by technologies developed through the Cold War, to be reconfigured and localized and embodied.

The juxtaposition of the satellite view of the hurricane with a bouquet of flamboyant blossoms held in the hand of a child highlight the multi-scalar narratives of the Anthropocene as well as the critical need to place these global technologies derived from militarism in relation to the embodied experience of the region, of the memory and agency of water, and of watery bodies. In the words of NourbeSe Philip "To read the text that lies 'missing' in the silence of the inner space, we need a new language."

This language may not necessarily be human derived. In much of her recent video installations Jack has incorporated the Rossby Whistle, a sound created by the westward movement of a massive submarine wave from the Atlantic across the Caribbean basin and its movement back over the course of 120 days. First observed by scientists in 2016, the Caribbean "is emitting a hum that can't be heard by human ears"—only by outer space satellites. Viewers can see the rhythm of the waves and hear the dissonance of the augmented sound of the Rossby Whistle in Jack's *Drawn by Water: (Sea) drawings in (3) Acts*, 2018 (Figure 18-20).

To Jack, this is the sound of the violent ecological and colonial history of the region, the submarine connection between the islands (the unity is submarine as we heard earlier from Brathwaite) as well as the dissonance of the human relation to nonhuman nature. It is also, to her ears, "like a heartbeat," connecting the inner space of the human and earthly body in

ways that cannot be measured except through that telescoping to a planetary outer space. To quote from her "waterpoem 5":

There is a sea inside me

Sprawling wide...

Unplumbed depths

The embrace of oceans

Is the love I know

New currents chilled by

The melting of icecaps

--

There is a sea inside me

Witness to countless crimes

I carry evidence in my belly

Witness a flotilla of bodies

Bleached bloated blurred pixilated

Adrift in history still seeking remembrance

Her work reminds us, in the words from Astrida Neimanis, that "water connects the human scale to other scales of life, both unfathomable and imperceptible." This is ocean being and becoming, and the ways in which human bodies are continually "drawn by water."

Endnotes:

¹ See Walcott Collected Poems, *Jack skin*, House of Nehesi Publishers, 2006, 2-3.

² Laszlo, *Salt: Grain of Life*, Colombia University Press, 2001, 91.

³ Carole Boyce-Davies, *Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁴ Kamau Brathwaite, *Caribbean Man in Space and Time: A Bibliographical and Conceptual Approach* (Kingston: Savacou, 1974), 1-11.

⁵ He continues, "the abyss is a tautology: the entire ocean, the entire sea gently collapsing in the end into the pleasures of sand, make one vast beginning, but a beginning whose time is marked by these balls and chains gone green." Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 67.

⁶ To Benítez-Rojo, "the culture of the Caribbean . . . is not terrestrial but aquatic . . . [it] is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double folds, of fluidity and sinuosity" (see Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 11). Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 16.

⁷ For more on Jack's figuration of salt, see C. C. McKee (2019) "a salting of sorts": Salt, Sea, and Affective Form in the Work of Deborah Jack, *Art Journal*, 78:2, 14-27, DOI: 10.1080/00043249.2019.1626155

⁸ Deborah Jack artist statement

⁹ Deborah Jack artist statement