

apexart

291 church street new york, ny 10013

t: 212.431.5270

info@apexart.org www.apexart.org

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Cover image: Tabita Rezaire, *Deep Down Tidal*, 2017, Video installation, 18 minutes (still).

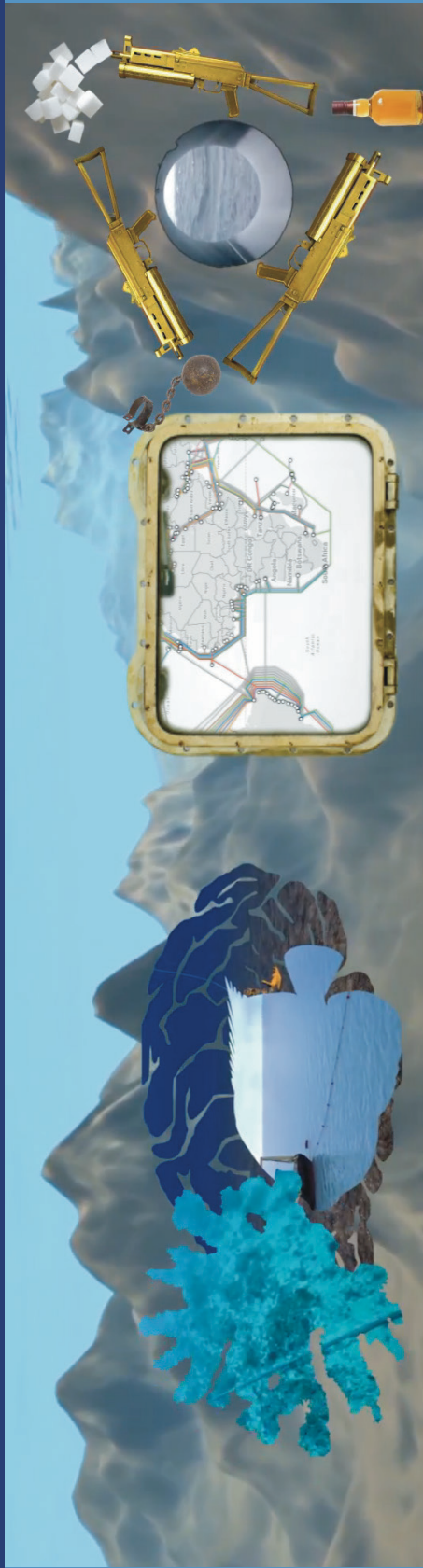
A Thousand Secrets

curated by Mae A. Miller

June 3 - July 31, 2022

Beatrice Glow
Renée Green
Deborah Jack

Tuan Andrew Nguyen
Trevor Paglen
Tabita Rezaire



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A Thousand Secrets

The sea sounded like a thousand secrets, all whispered at the same time. In the daytime it was indistinguishable to me from air. It seemed to be made of the same substance. The same substance which carried voices or smells, music or emotion.

-Dionne Brand¹

A Thousand Secrets is an immersive, multi-sensory exhibition that engages the sonic multiplicity and opacity of water as a provocation for alternative modes of collectively listening to a world in crisis. The exhibition journeys with the words of Caribbean feminist Dionne Brand whose book, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging*, offers a blueprint for listening to oceanic pasts and futures. *A Map to the Door of No Return* is a collection of fragments “disparate and sometimes only related by sound or intuition, vision or aesthetic,” of navigational instructions, wanderers’ tales, intimate gestures, and shards of history that hint at, but never fully index, the complexities of Black being and belonging in the so-called New World. Taking cues from Brand, the exhibition, *A Thousand Secrets*, weaves together epistolary experiments, speculative fiction, object studies of nutmeg and napalm, indigenous storytelling traditions, creative mappings of underwater infrastructures, found objects and forgotten futures. Rather than a quest for reason or closure, the artworks in this exhibition provoke a series of questions about how we might hold these fragmented histories in tense relation, what it means to listen to the subtle, submarine spaces and sonic registers where ideas take hold and people hold one another.

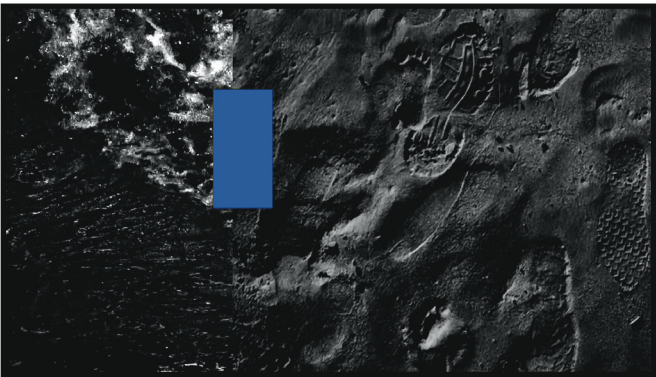
From the sensational reporting of megaship *Evergiven* stranded in the Suez Canal, to stark accounts of sea-levels rising, and the destruction of marine ecosystems, to the extraordinary renditions of the world’s oceans as a graveyard for those who have been variously enslaved, displaced, or colonized across space-time, the spectacle of oceanic currents looms large within the contemporary political imagination. Yet, in the rush to resuscitate the violent archive of transatlantic slavery, racial capitalism, and dehumanization against the reactionary forces that seek to further submerge these histories, there is a danger to fixating solely on their spectacle. There is a danger to rehearsing the litanies of abjection and titillating over the abstractions of bottlenecks, body

counts, and barracoons. In many cases, such visual brandishings normalize modes of suffering. Rather than disrupting normative orders, the dramatic displays often produce a numbing effect that renders violence intractable and obscures other forms of emancipatory being, relating, and creating.

“Abolitionist critique,” as geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore argues, revisits “relationships of un-freedom [...] not for the purpose of documenting misery,” but to urgently show “how radical consciousness in action resolves into liberated life-ways, however provisional.”² Working across the writings of Gilmore and Brand, we can understand that the whispered secrets of the world’s waterways cannot be reduced to an index of state violence. Rather, this indistinguishable substance is also a conduit for intimacy, experimentation, and imaginings of the world otherwise. Brand’s emphasis on whispers—to the sonic, sensority, and intimate properties of water—offers an alternative mode of being and breathing beyond the spectacle of mangled boats and disfigured bodies, while also challenging the epistemic enclosures of time, borders, and cartographic conventions.

This exhibition asks: What modes of world-making come into focus when critical oceanic studies bridge the poetic and the geopolitical, wrestling with the possibilities of radical humanism forged through and below the waterline? What histories of imperial extraction, racial-colonial violence, and relationality come into focus as we listen across the storied waters of the Atlantic, Pacific, and Indian Ocean littorals?

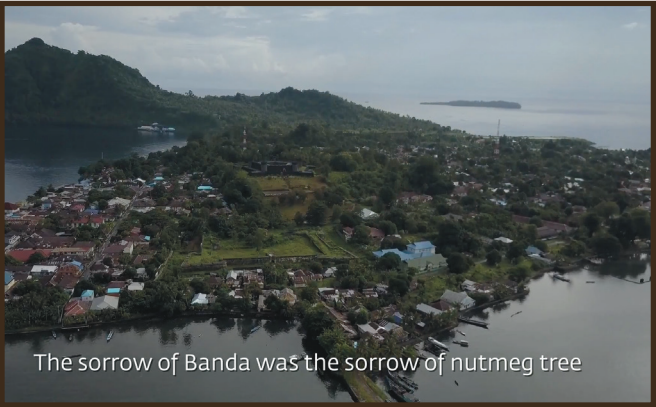
The artworks are accompanied by an archival installation of sheet music and songbooks inviting



Deborah Jack, *Drawn by water: (Sea) Drawings in (3) Acts: Act Three: (...sinking), I remembered that the embrace of oceans is the love I know, and yearned for a familiar shore that...*, 2018, Video installation, 5 minutes (still).

visitors to interact with the illustrated and annotated collections of sea shanties, spirituals, folk songs, and ballads that span from the eighteenth through twentieth century and across the seven seas. Some collections lyrically recount travels through the lands of “savages,” ever reminding of the banal ways hierarchies of human life become routinized and codified, while others act as a salve—or perhaps a creative salvage—in the midst of conquest and catastrophic suffering. Wading, meandering, skimming, or plunging into the texts holds radical possibilities for staging encounters across genres, regions, and epochs. Likewise, the impetus to listen to rather than simply look at the images and illustrations within these song books is, is in the words of cultural theorist Tina Campt, “a conscious decision to challenge the equation of vision with knowledge by engaging photography through a sensory register that is critical to Black Atlantic cultural formations: sound.”³

St. Maarten and Jersey City based artist **Deborah Jack**’s single channel video installation engages the dualities of erosion and embrace from the coastal regions of the Caribbean Sea. Contrasting the idyllic scenes of leisure that most often shape popular imaginaries of the region, *Drawn by water* invokes a feeling of melancholy, uncertainty, and tension. The dynamic motion of the tides and shifting seafoam are set against the droning frequency of the Rossby Whistle, a phenomenon that occurs when a large westward propagating wave interacts with the seafloor. The bottom pressure causes a whistle-like sound in A-flat, and any variance can be used to predict and measure coastal flooding and changes to the Gulf Stream.⁴ The soundings of the ocean floor



Beatrice Glow with Rudi Fofid, Alexandre Giradeu, and Pauchi Sasaki, *O Banda, Rhunhattan Project*, 2017, Single channel video, 3 min. (still).



Tuan Andrew Nguyen, *The Last Woman on Earth*, 2020, Pigment print on Hahnemuhle paper, 27 x 48 in.

invite us to consider the various markers of ecological crises and the complex interplay between erosion of memory and ecology in the Caribbean Basin, as well as wider reverberations.

Beatrice Glow’s video and olfactory installation probes histories of Dutch colonial extraction and indigenous knowledge systems in the Banda Islands of Indonesia. The exhibition presents part of her larger *Rhunhattan: A Tale of Two Islands* project, which explores imbricated histories, afterlives, and indigenous knowledge ways that developed in the aftermath of the 1667 Dutch decision to trade Manhattan for the English colony of Rhun, one of Indonesia’s nutmeg-rich Banda “Spice” Islands. In Glow’s *O Banda*, poet Rudi Fofid recounts the sorrows of the island and the memories and imaginations of a new generation. The poem is accentuated by the smell of nutmegs and clay sculptures infused with fragrance, which invite us to consider what it might mean to plant the nutmegs again without blood or destruction.

Set in an unspecified future, **Tuan Andrew Nguyen**’s single-channel video, *The Boat People*, follows a group of children led by a strong, resourceful little girl, who travel the seas and collect stories of a world they never knew through objects that have survived through time. Upon arriving in a place formerly known as Bataan, Philippines, the group encounters material traces of war, conquest, refugee crisis, and ecological crisis and engages in dialogue with ancestral spiritual objects that, literally and figuratively, bring the dead objects to life again. Nguyen’s three hand-carved replicas—of foliage decimated by napalm, a memorial plaque dedicated to those who perished at sea while escaping from Vietnam to the Philippines, and a kampilan (a traditional Filipino sword that, according to legend, killed Spanish Conquistador Ferdinand Magellan)—invite

urgent questions about how we understand multiple geopolitical processes that have shaped this place, and the possibilities for listening before the edge of extinction.

Renée Green’s single channel video essay, *Endless Dreams and Water in Between*, further grapples with the challenges of unfolding relations across islands. Situated across the islands of Manhattan, Yerba Buena, and Majorca, the video’s characters build intimacies through an experimental letter exchange, the goal of which is “not a utopia but a momentary nexus and embrace of time’s expanse.” The video is a meditation on the various dreamscapes, temporalities, geopolitical and geological processes, and literary traditions that mediate oceanic histories and offer a praxis of relation and intentionality against a turbulent and fractured world. Here, the sea and the long histories offer a kind of balance, both real and imagined, to contemporary war machines.

Like Green, **Tabita Rezaire**’s video installation *Deep Town Tidal* excavates the communicative properties and interfaces of the world’s oceans. Rezaire’s focus is on contemporary manifestations of “electronic colonialism” enacted through submarine fiber optic cables, and considers how the cables are layered onto colonial shipping routes as well as the Middle Passage, all of which mediate the quotidian practices of daily life. Grounded in the knowledge systems of the African diaspora, the artist’s rich tool kit of speculative fiction, spiritual traditions, and situated histories offer urgent lessons for our planetary future.



Renée Green, *Endless Dreams and Water Between*, 2009, Film, 74 minutes, (still).



Trevor Paglen, *NSA-Tapped Fiber Optic Cable Landing Site*, Morro Bay, California, United States, 2015, C-print, mixed media on navigational chart, 48 x 60 in.

Rezaire’s work insists that the Internet exists in material infrastructures under the ocean, rather than as abstraction in the “clouds.” Multimedia artist and scholar **Trevor Paglen**’s *NSA-Tapped Cables* series similarly plummets to the ocean floor. Paglen’s photographic series unearths visible traces of government surveillance at telecommunications chokepoints off the coasts of Hawaii, Florida, and Guam. The series includes photographs taken during more than 30 dives alongside collaged displays of Edward Snowden’s leaked NSA documents. Building on the exhibition’s theme of listening through and underwater, Paglen’s series demands an attentiveness to the underwater infrastructures of state secrets and to the technologies through which nation-states listen to us.

Mae A. Miller
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Open Call Exhibition

1. Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return: Notes to Belonging* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001).
2. Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Abolition Geography and the Problem of Innocence,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London & New York: Verso, 2017).
3. Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2017).
4. Chris Hughes, et. al. (2016), “A Rossby Whistle: A Resonant Basin Mode Observed in the Caribbean Sea,” *Geophysical Research Letters*, 43 (13), 7036-7043.