Dreams of Unknown Islands

Sasha Wortzel
Let us begin with “sea shell resonance,” the folk myth or phenomenon claiming that when you place a conch shell against your ear, you can hear the ocean. In actuality, the unbounding and rushing sounds are generated by ambient noise passing through the shell’s spiral body into our spiral ears, creating an occlusion effect. It is, in this moment, that the imagined sounds of waves and the very real blood flowing through our curving veins/core begin to sing to each other. We feel connected, transported—transformed! We are the oceans.

In her solo exhibition Dreams of Unknown Islands, Sasha Wortzel proposes similar plangency between the natural, political, corporeal, and metaphysical world(s) we inhabit. The artist manipulates voices, recorded souvenirs, snake skins, shells, color, and light into new video, sound, and sculptural works that act as stand-ins for shorelines, boundaries, horizons, endings, and beginnings. The installation references cycles of life—be they natural, influenced, extracted, or, at times, accelerated by human interference—and creates an atmosphere conducive to contemplation, stillness, and questioning. There seems to be a shifting positionality at play: the things we are looking at are familiar but also skewed. The things we are hearing are somewhat comforting but at times gut-wrenching. The tone and mood of the room is seductive and peaceful, all the while asking, “Is this a place to breathe or to mourn—or both?”

The work contained in this show is the result of long-term research, observation, and recording by Wortzel of the South Florida coast. More recently, this surveying has run alongside navigating the day-to-day news of collective loss, ecological collapse, and political uprisings. Wortzel made this exhibition while in residence at Oolite Arts during a global pandemic, a political regime change, and while living and working in various sites on land that is the ancestral and traditional territory of the Calusa, Tequesta, Mayaimi, and the unceded ancestral homeland of the Seminole Tribe of Florida, the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, and the Independent Miccosukee-Seminole. Additionally, they are in the process of making a film, titled River of Grains, which seeks to reimagine Marjory Stoneman Douglas’s groundbreaking nonfiction book The Everglades: River of Grass (1947), while exploring how Florida’s climate crisis is historically rooted in the Everglades’ ongoing legacies of colonization. In a recent conversation with the artist, they admit that the exact meaning of this exhibition has yet to reveal itself but that they know it has something to do with this precarious time. They mention that in their filmmaking they almost always have a clear direction, plan, and intent but that right now they are comfortable with this new work being more abstract, open, and unmediated. They go on to say, “I think I am creating a wider container to hold more things, and therefore it’s been harder for me to articulate specifically. I am thinking about different binaries around gender and around time—around people, plants, and animals being labeled as invasive versus native—about queer ecology and queer communities and histories.”

We spent some time talking about Hito Steyerl’s writings and her use of the term “free fall,” where the artist/author describes the mixed-up-ness one feels in times of disorientation or when there is a lack of an orienting horizon in the distance. Steyerl expands on the potential space of unknowing when she writes, “Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of casualty arise.”

At the center of Dreams of Unknown Islands is a sound installation comprised of seven 3D-printed polymer-PLA filament sculptures designed by Wortzel. They look as if they have been thrust into real space from what is referred to as the “Museum of All Possible Shells,” a sort of running computer-generated database of potential spiral shell forms started by Scientist David Raub in 1866. However, these sculpted shells are intentionally weirded with sharper edges, somewhere between something real and the ghost image of the familiar. Their morphoscopic structure is skewed; they are not natural but rather represent and amplify difference and change. Serving as speakers, they broadcast a mashup of voices that act as a meditative rallying cry, their soundwaves flowing through the gallery and filling the space with an ethereal presence. The artist, in their consideration of how to process the crushing weight of the current ecopoitical climate, turned to the Mourner’s Kaddish—a thirteenth-century Aramaic prayer, as a primary source. They reached out to members of their extended community of friends, activists, and artists and asked them to send back readings of this sacred text. Wortzel then wove the audio files into a soundscape inviting visitors to come together into this collective process that moves grief towards healing. While the prayer makes no mention of death, it does call for peace, both personal and universal. Wortzel remarked that the recordings took many iterative forms in which people took the prayer and made it their own. The invitation to participate was a kind of offering for people to use during this time of pandemic, in whatever self-determined way they wanted, in whatever way made sense. Wortzel says of the recordings, “I feel like I am collecting the specter or the enigmatic remains of these private performances and then bringing them together to create something collective. I hope that it links up with visitors to the exhibition who can then become a part of something evolving and morphing, so that we may not feel alone in this moment when gathering is forbidden or layered with risk.”

In a lecture Wortzel shared with me by Dr. Kim TallBear, Canada Research Chair (CRC) in Indigenous Peoples, Technoscience & Environment,
the scholar talks about our obsession and reliance on forward movement and progress (she goes so far as to call it “our religion”) and that the greatest struggle right now is that people are grappling with the idea of “end times” or perhaps the end of an empire. For many months, Wortzel has been livestreaming a view of the ocean each night. Looking out at the horizon, there seems to be no end in sight. We return to these spaces, the water’s edge, the sunrise and sunset, to feel in tune with the world’s clock, forever ticking in the form of slow- shifting light and tides. These kinds of constants bring us comfort, but, as TallBear suggests, our obsession with the never-ending future, or the idea that things will and must always go on, acts as a numbing drug allowing us to ignore the upsetting truth. We have become dominant, affecting the environment in catastrophic ways. We cannot expect things to always go on if we do not help correct the imbalance we have brought to the world. Wortzel has placed three discreet videos on a constant loop in the alcoves of the gallery. In one alcove, a sunset and a sunrise face each other, both featuring bobbing suns creeping along their natural path with equal parts anxiety and grace. And in the other alcove, a dreamy, pink-hued sea turtle lays its eggs, carefully depositing them into the sand one by one. These real and yet digitized, colored, edited, and spliced realities—glitches—are something perfectly imperfect to reflect upon. Here, the artist shares with us their acute eye. Pay attention! We are receiving downloads from the Anthropocene! For many months, Wortzel has been creating glitched videos. According to Russell, “glitch feminism” suggests that “to exist in the in-between is a core component of survival.” Wortzel’s work sits in this liminal space, quietly building a new world that does not wash out the messy stuff but, rather, acknowledges it, traces it, records it, and plays it back for us to absorb. Shouting out that it is possible if we would just pay attention. If we would just tune in to the details and subtleties and ask ourselves what kind of place we would like to rebuild. Whispering, shell-to-ear messages about how we might partner with the natural world to do so. As waves and sea levels rise, Wortzel marks and distorts time, all the while calling out for some semblance of peace, care for the land and each other and eventual liberation, inspiring us to fight for survival.

1. “The Museum of All Possible Shells” is a new video by Richard Dawkins For what is commonly known as the “shell equation,” a mathematician creates a map of all possible shapes of spiral shells, and then explores how those shapes can be created by snails. “The Secret Life and Curious Feelings of Spiral Shells” is a poem by David Borg. In the 21st and 22nd centuries, people will still be asking the question of how these shapes are created. The movie is accompanied by a scientific, mathematical model. The video is eventually moving into an interactive computer-generated version of the equation. For more information, see Richard Dawkins, “A Sharpening of the Senses,” 2020 via Zoom.
2. In Stefan Helmreich’s article “A Manifesto for Kraken,” the author writes that the word “glitch” finds its roots in the Yiddish “glitsh,” meaning slippery area. In the remaining works in the exhibition, Wortzel plays with this in-between space. Her sculpture, Sitting Shore places two ubiquitous aluminum beach chairs side by side, empty and waiting for bodies. Wortzel is thinking here about the void left after the great loss in Miami Beach’s queer community during the height of the AIDS epidemic, the ecological shock from dredging in the Everglades in the name of real estate development, and the consequent toxic algae blooms and red tides. Layers and layers of meaning, interconnected and interdependent histories, are woven together in the seats of these chairs. In a telling gesture, Wortzel has replaced the chairs’ traditional nylon webbing with skin from the Burmese python, a stunning beast that is also considered a dangerous invasive species and wreaking a particular havoc in Florida.
Invasive Burmese python skin, vegetable tanned hide, aluminum, plastic
23 x 36 in.
Photo courtesy of Juan Matos

Sitting Shiva
2021

Dreams of Unknown Islands
2021

Sitting Shiva
2021

Dreams of Unknown Islands
2021

Sound installation, polymer PLA filament
9.5 x 9.5 x 18 in.
7 min
Photo courtesy of Pedro Wazzan
Lost in the Music 2017

Happy Birthday 2018 Marsha!
Video Installation
Color, sound, pressure
Treated timber, and MDF
120 x 85 in.
6:25 min

Installation, Transitional Nature, Phillip and Patricia Frost Museum, Miami, Photo courtesy of Zachary Balber

2019

Somewhere Between
We Have Always Been On Fire

2018

Video, color, sound 6 min

Installation, On Fire—Vulnerable Footage, SALTS, Birsfelden

Interior view
Video, color, sound
18 min

This is An Address
2019–20

Two-channel video installation, Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art 50 Years After Stonewall, Brooklyn Museum, New York, courtesy of Jonathan Dorado.
Last spring, amidst the perpetual solitude of a citywide lockdown, Sasha Wortzel started taking long, meditative walks to the beach at sundown. Miami sunsets are remarkable, granting a brief quietude and drenching spectators in a gradient of peach-pink-purple-green, though the term alone is illusive—by the time the sun seems to disappear below the horizon, it already has. Atmospheric refraction allows us those extra, sanguine moments.

“I was deeply sad,” says Wortzel. From her perch on the sand, she began recording and live-streaming the skies. She privately mourned the mass death of the pandemic and the lives lost to police brutality and other systemic cruelties, in recent public instances and those never reported—“the people we don’t see.” Parts of Miami Beach, where she sat, were once dredged from beneath the sea during the mechanization of Florida’s Everglades, a process that drained the land, established settler-led industries responsible for toxic runoff today, and ripped apart Indigenous communities—from the Tequesta and Calusa to the Miccosukee and the Seminole—while threatening their sovereignty.

“The ritual of watching the sunset did something for me,” she says. “I was thinking, What do I want to leave this world? What do I want to dismantle? As the sun set, I imagined that more.” There’s a passage by José Esteban Muñoz, from Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity, in which Wortzel finds loving solace, a quote that manifested itself into tangibility on the beach: “Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”

The sunset reminded her, she says, “to feel the warmth of the possibility of this moment. It’s been devastating. As the world comes undone and things crumble, there’s power in asking what we want to usher in next. To get there, first we have to mourn.” After walking back home, Wortzel would participate in an online Kaddish session—a nightly video call collectively organized by the Kaddish Call Constellation, a rotating group of ritual leaders—which allowed Jews and Gentiles alike to mourn the pain of this moment and its uncountable historical precedents. To speak of the Kaddish is...
For Sasha Wortzel, the land we walk on is sacred, never to be taken for granted, and every place bears the history of those who walked before us. The artist responds to sites with empathy, often responding to traumatic events with a collaborative spirit for investigation. They invite collaboration oneland acknowledgments; they appropriate archival footage, record sounds and fleeting moments, and transport us to new islands where queenside is the horizon. It is both a pleasure and a privilege to honor this prolific artist with their first solo exhibition curated by Kristan Kennedy. Visual Art Curator at the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art in Portland, Oregon. We are grateful to Kennedy for her executive curation of sculpture and video as a place of reckoning. We are grateful to Monica Uraezos, writer and photographer who is a recent grantee of the Andy Warhol Foundation and ongoing writer for Hyperallergic, for contributing her poetic essay exploring the role of the Mourner’s Kaddish in Sasha’s work.

Oolite Arts supports the practices of Miami artists and improves their visibility both within and outside of Miami—as our founder, Elisa Schnetman, says, “in an effort to help artists help themselves.” It is our commitment to foster artists through exhibitions, public programs, artist residencies, professional development, direct funding, and publications. Contributions from numerous talented individuals have made this exhibition and publication a success. Many thanks to Laura Marchi, Oolite Arts Director of Programming, for coordinating all facets of this publication. Thanks also to Amanda Bradley, Program Manager, for organizing the details of the exhibition. And my deep appreciation to all of the Oolite staff who contributed to this effort and bring their talents to the organization every day—along with our Board, whose members generously embrace and champion the dynamic vision for Miami arts that Sasha’s work.

I would like to give special thanks to Mike McGinn and Melissa Syers at Mike McGinn, for taking the lead on design, it is our hope that this publication will serve as the artist as well as remain a thoughtful, meaningful study after the exhibition.

Dennis Scholl
President and CEO
Oolite Arts
January, 2021

Sasha Wortzel bacterium—once profoundly affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, “a whole generation of queer elders, a lineage I don’t get to know,” says Wortzel—and to its home living Jewish community. “My relatives and many Jewish people who survived genocide came here and first experienced leisure and rest, looking at the ocean. That is a form of sitting shiva.” The chairs are for ghosts, for the many bubbles who found refuge on the sand, who sang the hypnotic rhythms of the Kaddish for their people. “When Maydy Stroman-Douglas wrote of ‘dreams of unknown islands’ in River of Grass, her seminal work on the Everglades published in 1945 she was describing a threat guided as potential, a dream that proved poisonous: ‘There is no reason to believe that the Indian world was not aware of a great change impending before news of that first soil was burning among the Florida coastal villages…’ Because for a longer time Europe, across the Atlantic… had been tossing with dreams of unknown islands west beyond the black pearl of Ocean-sea.’ Douglas might be Wortzel’s cosmic ancestor, a spelter in the in the room, but it is not those dreams for which Wortzel named her exhibition. It is, instead, islands of the future, where the vestiges of settler-colonialism are dismantled and purged. ‘What are the unknown ways of living in the world?’ Wortzel asks. ‘An island may be not somewhere else,’ somewhere distant. ‘We’re on it now.’

Perhaps the dreamers guessed the repercussions, that exploding the world would upheave its natural cycles, the lives of the people who understood them, the immanent knowledge that human beings and nature were never separate bodies. As they sparkled generations of human and environmental losses—deaths that reflect too plainly the racist injustices growing us today, the dreamer’s fantasies made real—eral paity imaginings, can lead to the reanimation vision, still could not have precluded such foresight. They were unaware that the ancestors dreamt that all of us kept dreaming, that it is these visions—far more expansive than theirs, and bright as an swepting as horizons at sunset—that bless us with memory and time to honor this land, return to those who cared for it, the descendants who came first. ‘There are so many ghosts on this island,’ says Wortzel. So many to grieve. With them, we build the island anew.
Eroded Moon

2019

Installation
Seashells, sand
Dimensions variable
Abrons Art Center,
New York
Photo courtesy of Max Marshall