

# THROUGH THE LIQUID LENS: QUESTIONS FOR LAUREL JOHANNESSON

By Lori Lofgren

Laurel Johannesson is an artist based out of Calgary, Alberta. She has a background in Drawing, Painting, Photography, Video, Printmaking and Digital Media. Her current work is an extensive series of underwater photographs with an intense focus on the body, time and place. Laurel was invited as an artist in residence in Iceland, Italy and Greece. Laurel is an Associate Professor at the Alberta College of Art + Design. Laurel was my Drawing instructor at Red Deer College in Red Deer, Alberta. She had, and continues to have a profound influence on my art practice.

**Lori Lofgren:** How do you feel that your art practice has changed/ developed over time? How did your art practice transform during your residency in Greece?

**Laurel Johannesson:** For the past eleven years, my work has involved water in some manner. Over this time, I have photographed primarily underwater in natural settings...in the Aegean, Adriatic, and Tyrrhenian seas as well as the Côte d’Azur, and Iceland’s Blue Lagoon. I sought out specific locations that would reveal minimal, but absolute characteristics of the water conditions in each. In some of my work, I have utilized the water as a means to camouflage the figurative self; a way of actually hiding myself in a skin that mimics the surrounding moss, sand, rock, reflections, or refracted depths. Also exploring mirroring, reflection, and refraction, I was looking for the oddities produced by this ‘liquid lens’. Through the water’s meniscus the outer world is transformed into a distant dreamscape. The imagery is sometimes disquieting and somewhat voyeuristic.

Although I have degrees in printmaking, painting, and drawing...which could be seen as somewhat traditional artistic pursuits... I’ve always been attracted to technology. Early on, that technology came in the form of SLR cameras and photo-based print techniques. However, when I first started utilizing the computer in my work (around 1997), I felt that I was close to having all of the tools that I needed to realize the images that lived in my head. Now technological advances have made it possible for me to work not only with still images but also moving images, generative code, and interactivity. Advances in technology also made it possible for me to make the work that started in Greece in 2005. The first residency that I did in Greece was a pivotal moment for me in so many ways. The idea for the

Metamorphosis project had been in the works for quite some time...but all the stars aligned in Greece to make that happen. Residencies provide the time and space to work through the technical and conceptual aspects in tandem. I had an idea of how things might look before I arrived, but it wasn’t until the first photo shoot that I knew it would work. I can still remember returning to the studio with my first images, uploading them from the camera, and having the feeling that I had just turned some kind of corner in my work. Greece is a very sensuous place...the sounds, the colours, the clarity of light...everything is heightened. I think this also allowed me to be in my own skin...and that feeling is reflected in the images.

**LL:** How did you come to utilize yourself as a subject within much of your work?

**LJ:** I have, for as long as I can remember, used myself in a lot of my work. However, the Metamorphosis series was the first instance I remember of using myself because my presence was simply integral to the concept. I’ve always been comfortable with using my own body as a subject...perhaps a result of many years of dance training and swimming. I was around, I was available, a willing participant, and knew what “the photographer” wanted. But with series’ like Metamorphosis, Thirst, and Respiro, it was absolutely necessary for it to be my experience of that underwater space.

**LL:** I am admittedly somewhat afraid of water but somehow your work emanates tranquility and light for me. What challenges have arose from working with such an unpredictable element like water?

**LJ:** The challenges have been great! For the first two underwater series, I worked completely alone. I would rig up systems so that I was able to be both artist and subject at the same time. I ended up with a lot of bruises. For Respiro and Acqua Vellutata Sospesa, I had an assistant, mainly due to the depths and remote locations that I was shooting in. Respiro, in particular, involved shooting in locations all around Greece and Italy. It was never easy. The water was always cold. Sometimes it was too rough. I’ve repelled into a grotto. I tore my meniscus two years ago. I also have an irrational fear of sharks...

**LL:** I always see such a fascinating amalgamation between clarity and distortions within your work. It is as though time is suspended. Does the philosophy of time enter your work at any point in your artistic process?

**LJ:** Time and temporality is an ongoing fascination for me. When temporality started to play a part in my work, I decided to delve deeper into philosophies of time and the contemporary interpretations of those philosophies. I looked at philosophers such as Bergson, Deleuze, and Serres and the more recent writings of Timothy Barker and Christine Ross. I did this as a way to understand how my work was already operating in a temporal manner and also to learn how I might explore the temporality in a more deliberate way. I’m currently working on writing a book chapter about temporality and art and technology, for an upcoming publication.

In my most recent work, I have moved above water to depict the expanse of the sea in relationship to land or horizon, and human or bird. Still involving water, the underlying theme of The Oblivion Seekers series, is that of instances of being in a state of precarious limbo. The cliff divers or swimmers are in between freedom (flight) and safety (land) and the turbulent sea is the uncertain suspension that they must navigate between the two. The seabirds depicted are a peculiar flock that hover over a particular inlet on a Greek island. They do this every day for very long periods of time. The birds intentionally fly directly into a headwind...going nowhere...occupying a kind of limbo space. It is this in-between space of protracted temporality that I am interested in revealing. I also use light to convey a sense of duration of time or perhaps timelessness. In some of the images, the time of day is unidentifiable...fluctuating between sunlight and moonlight...stars in the sky and sun on the waves. Spatial references are also manipulated ...with sky becoming sea ...and sea becoming sky. The Oblivion Seekers are searching for a space where time is suspended, where they can hover in limbo, and temporarily push memory and knowing into oblivion.

I’m now working on the next phase of the project...The Waters of Lethe. I’m interested in how philosophies of time can be present in a still image, but also how technology in the form of motion, generative, and interactive aspects can create an even more involved perception of time. Duration, speed, non-linearity, eternal recurrence, and open-ended narratives are all concepts that interest me. The present is an accumulation of temporal events that dip into the past and the future simultaneously. The



Laurel Johannesson, *The Oblivion Seekers 1*, 2015. Digital print on folded aluminum with automotive clear coat.

way we think with movement images and time images has changed our understanding of still pictures...and continues to present new ways to think about temporality through a combination of art and technology.

**LL:** Technology has advance tremendously within the art world. Have these advances been a significant factor in your art practice?

**LJ:** Yes, technology has changed my technical approach...the way I capture images, motion, and sound...as well as the manner in which I print or display the work. But more importantly, it has changed the way I think about the ideas. In particular, the way I think about temporality at the intersection of art and technology. The moving image and the responsive image are dependent on technology and lend themselves so perfectly to temporal interpretations. Now with digital technologies, the artwork can become a simulation of reality and contain the mystery and unpredictability of a natural phenomenon — a synthetic space that the visitor enters and becomes a traveller in a temporal environment of sensual information.

**LL:** What aspect does digital media and video bring to your work that photography does not? Which qualities does photography accentuate in your work that digital media and video cannot?

**LJ:** This is a difficult question. The moving image or generative image or interactive image enables having ideas that affect our nervous system. The moving image makes time evident. The generative code image can keep changing indefinitely. The interactive image can physically involve the viewer. All of these capabilities have their attractions. However, the still photographic image suspends or freezes time and allows for the focus on a moment of time to be emphasized. According to Brian Masumi, affect is registered prior to the consciousness of the effect. Sensation involves

a backward referral in time or to describe it another way...sensation is organized recursively before being linearized. Masumi goes on to say that this conscious thought in the mind may not arrive for up to half a second after it has been registered unconsciously by the body. I suppose photography allows for the capture of that moment. Of course the moving image can also allow for that phenomenon to happen on an unconscious level.

Clearly I’m conflicted.

**LL:** What will your next artistic adventure be? Where do you feel your art practice is headed?

**LJ:** I’m off to Greece for three months for a few different projects... an exhibition and lecture at the Ionian Center in Kefalonia, and I’ll also work on developing some new techniques while in residence there. Then I’ll travel to Paros and Naxos to collect images, video, and sound for the Waters of Lethe project. It will be many months before I complete work on the coding and technical aspects but these images will, in the exhibition space, transform over time and in response to human presence. Responding to proximity, the number of visitors in the space, speed of movement and so on, the still images will come to life on the video panels with small movements, changes in light mimicking daylight and moonlight, new bird activity, the flight directions of the birds, the attention of the subjects gaze, and so on. I’ve also been reading about some episodes of collective dreaming that have occurred on the island of Naxos over the past 200 years. It’s a fascinating tale of temporality. All dreams are curious specimens of temporality and I’m sure these island dreamers will play a part in some future work. Notions of oblivion, forgetting, dreaming, and remembering are very evocative concepts for me and I’ll continue to explore these ideas through the intersection of art and technology.