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I tried not to listen but it came back louder - from the Situations series, photographic digital collage direct printed on folded aluminum, 43 x 60 x 1.5 inches, 2021.

Art Talk Magazine: Good afternoon Laurel. Can you tell us a little about yourself, and what brought you to art?

Laurel Johannesson: Art has been an integral part of my life since I was young. As a child, I was always drawing and painting and I can't remember a time when I didn't have a camera. There was never any doubt in my mind that art was my passion. I went on to study fine art at University, earning an MFA specializing in Printmaking and Digital Media, and much later, a PhD Candidacy in Computational Media Design at the University of Calgary, and earlier a BA and BFA from the University of Saskatchewan. I was also fortunate to attend the Royal College of Art in London during my graduate studies... an experience that had a tremendous influence on my work.

ATM: Where do you find your inspiration?

LJ: For many years, I've been researching philosophies of temporality and their relationship to art and technology. These ideas show up in the work in both a technical sense and also in the concept. Looking into these theories led to my thinking about the beach as a liminal site.

Cinema has also affected how I construct an image, in the sense of developing a series of images that work together as a non-linear narrative. I also want the scene to feel familiar but at the same time foreign. I play with light and space to elicit a sense of the uncanny. Something that I believe that I was attracted to as a child while watching films. I can recall suddenly becoming aware that the otherworldly night scene on the screen was actually shot in daylight using the 'day for night' technique. Although I don't use this exact technique, I do employ the aesthetic experience of it.

I'm sure beach scenes in films like Fellini's 'Juliet of the Spirits' or 'La Dolce Vita,' or the final end of the world scene in Lars von Trier's 'Melancholia,' have influenced me in some way. When Fellini's characters find themselves at the beach, they appear to attain a form of self-realization that is instinctive and corporeal as the connection between the characters and the sea appears to act as a catalyst. The beach is neither land nor sea. It is constant and yet constantly changing. It is often a place of naked truth, of judgement, a site of initiation into consciousness. In 'Melancholia,' the three characters are all waiting for the end of the world. One is crying, one is perhaps in shock or accepting, another almost seems indifferent. I love that kind of tension. It's something I strive for in my work.

ATM: Your art mainly depicts women. Is your art "biographical"?

LJ: For as long as I can remember, I have used myself in a lot of my work. I suppose it started in those early days of exploring what the camera could do. Using myself to experiment with motion, timers, long exposures and so on. I've always been comfortable using my own body as a subject, perhaps due to many years of dance training and swimming. Now, with 'Situations,' I do use others when the terrain or elements warrant, but those "others" are ultimately a stand-in or proxy for myself.

Underwater series like 'Wake,' 'Metamorphosis,' and 'Thirst' were about exploring a personal connection to a particular place. This underwater work that I made in Greece and Iceland was very much about searching for a personal connection to those two places. In the imagery, I was kind of using the water and its ecosystem as a way of camou-



How to conjure an other - from the Situations series, photographic digital collage direct printed on folded aluminum, 43 x 41.75 x 1.5 inches, 2021.



Wake 5, archival inkjet print on hot press matte paper, 30 × 40 inches, 2006/2022.

flaging the figurative self. I was hiding myself in a skin that mimicked the surrounding moss, sand, rock, reflections, and refracted depths. On some level, I was probably looking to be swallowed up by these two places.

With ‘Wake,’ I didn’t really know what Iceland would hold for my work, but I went there in search of a connection to my ancestral homeland. I sought out solitary experiences to find my ancestral roots and perhaps most importantly, my primordial connection to water. At that time, I was still very involved with the imagery that I was making underwater. However, I was becoming more and more interested in what was happening on the shoreline, the liminal space of the beach and the solitude and vastness of the spaces. The light in Iceland added another aspect to those thoughts. Iceland plays with your concept of time. Nighttime that appears to be daytime / daytime that masquerades as night. Time in Iceland is a strange thing, and I can see now that my experiences there have coloured the way I think about temporality and the way I construct an image today. I think that the time that I spent there has led me to the ideas that I explore now in series like ‘The Oblivion Seekers’ and ‘Situations.’



The triangulation of a star-crossed love - from the Situations series, photographic digital collage direct printed on folded aluminum, 42 x 64 x 1.5 inches, 2020.

ATM: Can you tell us about your technique and mediums?

LJ: I prefer to work organically, so I plan the image only minimally beforehand. I photograph the locations and figures in response to the place, and then I work out the narrative over time later in the studio. Once I'm back in the studio, I look through my photographic archive, sometimes searching for a specific location. Then I'm taken back to the place where I photographed the original images—images that I will ultimately deconstruct and reconstruct into real and imagined scenarios. It's like a strange form of time travel, and suddenly I think that I can almost feel the negative ions from the sea, and then the process starts to flow, and the real work begins. I digitally collage bits and pieces together and add hand-painted elements. The final images end up directly printed on metal, sometimes on paper, and as bespoke lightboxes. Lately, I've been animating some of the images with particular aspects remaining static and frozen in time while other parts move subtly in the wind or are rained down upon in a torrential downpour. Hair dances in the breeze, plants grow, and the night sky comes alive.



You don't call me anymore - from the Situations series, bespoke lightbox with transmounted chromogenic transparency, 43 x 41.75 x 2.25 inches, 2020.



Wake 9, archival inkjet print on hot press matte paper
30 × 22.5 inches, 2006/2022.

ATM: Even though the women are mostly nude, there seems to be a barrier to them, making them unattainable?

LJ: My recurring cast of characters is essentially meant to represent the same individual, however, they are playing different parts. Each with their particular pose has a unique attitude and mood. When I insert them in the landscape, I consider whether that specific figure belongs within that particular scene. What is their posture saying? What part are they playing? My “cast members” are usually depicted alone. Sometimes, there may be another figure in the distance... possibly an “other” of the self. Sometimes a small group almost imperceptibly in the distance in the water. But the figures are definitely alone and isolated in their remoteness and distancing. I try to take this one step further by using somewhat awkward, uncomfortable, or vulnerable poses, positioning the figures so that they appear engulfed by their surroundings, allowing them to be immersed in a thick cosmos of sensations. Perhaps that is their protective cloak.

I started working with the liminal space of the beach after many years of underwater photography. Early on, I was focused on the water and the perception of suspended time when a body is submerged. However, during all of those photoshoots for the underwater work, I began to notice people at the seaside and how they stare at the water, seemingly mesmerized. Something in their posture and expression often conveys a longing for something unreachable or unknowable. The instinctual and physical connection between the body and the sea appears to act as a catalyst for some kind of self-knowledge. I started to combine celestial bodies and the human body after thinking about our temporal experience in relationship to the

cosmos. Our bodies are the source of how we perceive an environment. Since we are not physically able to be in two places simultaneously, this corporeal dependency contributes to our understanding of place being spatially and temporally singular. As the day progresses, our bodies align with the movement of the earth. If we don’t experience the light of morning and the shadow of night, our experience of time is lost. It is this in-between or liminal space of lost time that I’m interested in exploring. Where we can experience being in two places at the same time. Or perhaps it’s two different times in the same place. I’m interested in creating a sense of the uncanny. Places that look familiar but are strangely foreign. The underwater work responded to a singular and sensual connection with the element of water. The work at the shoreline is more of a psychological exploration that allows me more options for a narrative perception of temporality that can still veer to the sensual but can also observe the arcane.

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Waiting for you at the departure gate – from the Situations series, Photographic digital collage direct printed on folded aluminum, 42 x 65 x 1.5 inches, 2020.

NFTs, AI, digital graphic design - Have you experience with these “new” art forms? If not are you considering it? Or are you physical art all the way?

LJ: Although I have a background 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, I felt that I was close to having all of the tools that I needed to realize the images that lived in my head. My interest in philosophies of temporality and my research in that area feeds my approach to image-making from the technical and conceptual to the theoretical.

I suppose my initial research into the philosophies of temporality started in 2008 when I began creating interactive and generative works alongside my digitally manipulated photographic still images. ‘Respiro’ was a set of small display screens that, through a generative code algorithm, created an inexhaustible number of image permutations and narratives based on randomness and duration. Another example was an interactive video painting that operated on a generative evolutionary code that allowed audience interaction through a tablet or a smartphone app. They could create their own environment by moving around an

underwater video clip, the video leaving a trail or evolutionary history in its wake. Each resulting painting could not be duplicated again as the brush head constantly evolved and changed, never to be repeated. These interactive generative

works provided me with an opportunity to become familiar with working with code and to put into practice some forms of viewer interaction. However, I was frustrated by what I felt was a limitation of

generative art and interactive installation. I was never satisfied with this work. While the primitive forms of self-generative systems (a wind chime is one example) easily maintain their lyrical quality, I felt that as soon as I attempted to bring

in any interactive aspect to the work, it often became mechanical in appearance... destroying any subtleties, or elements of aesthetic emotion. So, I decided that in addition to advancing my technical skills,

I would also begin researching aspects of time that would inform the work more thoroughly and help sort out my misgivings. After a great deal of research into both the technical aspects of generative and interactive work and the philosophical aspects of temporality, I started to create more subtly ubiquitous experiences for the viewer with works like ‘Hypnos’ which consists of 6,500 photographs taken at two-second intervals to create a moving image of a night sky with a tiny sliver of active land and water at the bottom. The compiled photographs are then over-painted to create the shift in light and texture.

Since part of my practice involves moving images and I’ve had a life-long fascination with the intersection of art and technology, NFTs seem particularly interesting to me. I bought my first NFT in March 2021 and have acquired more since then. In relationship to my own work, I’ve been making moving images for a long time but the concept of a moving image was always a challenge to convey to my collectors who are most familiar with my physical works. NFTs seem like they might be the solution to connecting with collectors who are more interested in or perhaps more fascinated by, the moving image. So, I’m really looking forward to exploring this opportunity for creativity and dissemination. I’ll have some NFTs coming out in 2023.



Image: You were always too much and never enough – from the Situations series, photographic digital collage direct printed on folded aluminum, 42 x 67.25 x 1.5 inches, 2021.

ATM: How would you like your art to affect the viewer?

LJ: To me, the figures are travelling through a limbo space. A space sitting somewhere between night and day, or perhaps a combination of night and day, is a better description. They are in a liminal space in a temporal sense. The figures often appear slightly uncomfortable and are alone but not lonely. They are small and insignificant in the vast and harsh environment they inhabit. However, they also have a strength about them and seem unconcerned. The night sky, both beautiful and imposing, looms over their sunny landscape. To me, they are, each in their own way, waiting for the end of the world.

However, perception is not the same from one viewer to the next, and beyond that, each viewer's perception of a work is a step removed from the artist's intention. I can only make the work and hope that it resonates in some way with someone, somewhere. Our transformative experiences and perceptions of solitude, aloneness, euphoria, desire, vulnerability, strength, oblivion, longing, passion, discomfort, and so on are all unique. We can only recognize the sensation that resonates with us from our own point of view or perhaps on a subconscious level. The somewhat apocalyptic language in 'Situations' is open to interpretation. As the viewer makes their way through the unfolding series of images, they create their own narrative based on what's in front of them.



I can only offer my constructed imagery and let the viewer examine if it connects with their sensations.

ATM: If you had to choose one book, one song, and one piece of art, what would they be?

LJ: Choosing just one from each category is difficult!

However, if I had to pick one book, it would be Italo Calvino's 'Invisible Cities.' This book takes the reader to places

unconventional harmonies, creating a sense of unease and dissonance. Satie forgoes standard musical instructions and instead, the pianist is given a series of rather unusual guidelines. For example, to play a phrase "du bout de la pensee", which seems to mean something along the lines of "from the edge of thought."

As for an artwork... I cannot choose just one. When I'm looking at a work that resonates with me, I'm in love with it for that moment or perhaps forever. Choosing just one is impossible for me. I can't make myself do it.

*Images courtesy of the artist and ARTPOWHER Contemporary.

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Image: Love, and its unfortunate circumstances - from the Situations series, lightbox with transmounted chromogenic transparency, 27.5 x 48.5 x 2.75 inches, 2020.

that do not exist. Calvino sets aside conventions of form and narrative to contemplate ideas of memory, history, language, perception, and truth. Whimsical and, at the same time, melancholic, it is rich with opportunities for the visual imagination.

Erik Satie's 'Gnossienne #1' is a piece of music known for its experimental nature. Satie pushed the boundaries of traditional musical forms and structures, and one of the most striking aspects of this piece is its use of irregular time signatures and