

TWO OCEANS

by DEREK MICHAEL BESANT

In an ancient European library, I once saw a venerable Spanish edition of the Old Testament open at Genesis, with illustrations of God making the Oceans of the World. Two accounts of the flood from the Jewish Old Testament were detailed; one in Hebrew, the other in Greek. Water seems to have been synonymous with creation for time immemorial. Canadian artist Laurel Johannesson's *Two Oceans* alludes to a fundamental memory that lurks in our psyche surrounding primordial life origins from ubiquitous water sources.

Her print images concentrate around her own body integrations into naturalized settings that are shallow depths of water along shorelines. In the summer of 2005, she ventured to record images of herself in two distinct locations where water was both a national protective boundary, and simultaneously a force that was respected as unpredictable.

For this scenario, she held two different artist's residencies: one at The Skopelos Foundation for the Arts on the Greek Island of Skopelos, the other at The Association of Icelandic Visual Artists in Reykjavik, in her ancestral Iceland. One location had to do with searching out a connection with someone who had been part of her past; while the other was searching out family origins that went back many generations. Her personal voyage might be looked upon as two pasts, two oceans...

The artist sought out specific locations that would reveal minimal, but absolute characteristics of the water conditions in each country; as ways to reclaim both halves of something she felt she had lost. In this, her work would become an investigation of all the perils associated with swimming into unknown waters.

Two Oceans as an art-based project, is an involvement where the artist chose to conduct visual submersions of herself into the crystal waters of the Aegean, and then into the pools of mineral encrusted rock of the Blue Lagoon and off Faxaflói beside the Atlantic. There is an automatic duality in her timing of these events to be parts of one whole, within the same season; and to investigate later the subtle differences that each site would indicate with the placement of the figure as a catalyst. The isolation of the figure in an outdoor natural setting, would act as a fulcrum for her psychological immersions, tipping the scales in finding clues to her pasts.

Johannesson's research followed a vision whereby she utilized the watery environs as a means to camouflage the figurative self; a way of actually hiding herself in a skin that mimics the surrounding moss, sand, rock, reflections, or refracted depths. On one level, of course, she is looking to be

swallowed up by these two places; her past lives in the present tense. Her personal isolation in the project, let her wander almost as invisibly as her alter-ego depicted in the images. Always photographing from a fixed point on land; the artist was able to place herself into the modesty of enclosed spaces of tidal pools or inlets. Each shot was carefully considered and planned out as to time of day, weather conditions, and accessibility or distraction by others. This created an opportunity to disguise both the form and the space to a degree, into her own personal ritual of bathing, and all that is associated with that solitary act.

And as I mentioned, water has had a defining role in our biological or theological beginnings; but also figures in water have long had a place in human storytelling for hundreds of years. Sirens, strange beasts, gods, demons, lost cities, edges of worlds and sunken treasures have enticed mankind into the water throughout literature. Hands across Water, Water biscuits, Water dance, Fountain of Youth, Rain of Frogs, the Biblical Flood; all have had reference to the properties and mysteries that water solicits.

Sailors who had been at sea for extended periods of time would give accounts of images of mermaids in the sea; sightings that conjured up the dilemma between fear and longing, from Ulysses to Columbus.

Johannesson's works could be described as fleeting glimpses of this allegory intact – and certainly the references that appear on Classical Greek vases of graceful figures at their bath or pouring water from jars comes to mind as well. But it is in the ongoing predisposition of Johannesson placing herself in the position of artist and model, that gives further clues to how one might read these printed works.

Past series of her work have alluded to Greek art history in the form of pillaresque muses as variations of her own mythic themes surfacing in many systems other than the Classical canon. Drawing upon the female form from mythology, Johannesson re-evaluates tradition from a contemporary perspective. Her figures celebrate both feminine mystery and Athena as a premonition of disaster. Archetypes such as Helen of Troy, the Valkyries, Cressida, Guinevere, or Nordic deities such as Freyia; have evoked the female presence in antiquity as something to be reckoned with. The alter-ego water-nymphs that drift silently under the surface between Johannesson's *Two Oceans* and allow their loosened tresses to entangle; recall the Symbolists' depiction of women in similar states, as reverence to nature. However, Johannesson's nature imagery is not a romanticized pastoral; but more a philosophical consequence of vulnerability. Her embrace of mythological themes with variations that maneuver our reference to the body as self-portrait, bring an over-riding contemporary regard to how women's bodies have been portrayed historically in art, particularly in the allegorical painting of nudes.

One must speculate too, on whether the murky figure is indeed the artist (or not) in these works. Her presence relies not so much on her being seen, as it does on her almost not being seen. And, as the figure assumes to take on characteristics of the surrounding qualities of light or shadow, textures of rock or submerged surfaces; one might ask if the figure is truly present at all. Or is it merely a mirage swimming up from our imagination, like so many sailors' accounts of sighting the elusive form of their desire?

The act of swimming underwater defies the sense of equilibrium the body requires, such as; gravity, sight, hearing... balance. Johannesson places the viewer in jeopardy, inside her shifting ground that contains both figure and water as one amalgam. The point of view is always from outside looking in and

under, operating in a kind of *lussuria ossidionale*; as sublimations of unattainable acquisition, just out of reach by the nature of our imperfect vision into water.

Johannesson's goals to investigate the same theme, but from two distinct studio locations (Greek Island and Icelandic shore), provides us with a symbolic incarnation of defining the divided self. Although geographically apart, the containment of persona in her imagery is always held together by the catalepsy that her alter-ego asserts as a female presence; whether underwater, cloaked in togas, bound in white dresses, or hidden behind screens of droplets.

Johannesson's figures are not subject/objects of oppression, downtrodden or vanquished women, nor are they *les belles dames sans merci*. Instead, in a contemporary context, her work remains as a prologue to feminine mystique; secret and ephemeral, devoted to the personification of the anonymous female body as an heroic and singular personal identity.