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When Humans Intersect With Oceans: Artists Explore



Hyung S. Kim, Kim Julja, Dodu Jeju, 2013 and Onpyeong Jeju, 2014.

Courtesy of the artist

By **Craig LeMoult**

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A new exhibit at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston and at Tufts University is taking a close look at how humans interact with the ocean, as well as at the environmental impact those interactions can have.

As curator Alaina Claire Feldman worked her way through the SMFA gallery showing "The Ocean After Nature," she pointed out to a photo of a submarine breaking through arctic ice. There's a science fiction film about global warming. One wall is dominated by two enormous photographs by the Korean artist Hyung S. Kim of figures wearing rudimentary diving equipment.

"These images are from Jeju Island, which is in the very south," she said.

The photos are of women called Haenyeo. In the 18th century, men on this Korean island were taxed on oysters and clams they gathered, so the women started supporting their families by diving for food – a tradition that's still going on.

"I love having them blown up here, because they look like real warriors, like ocean mermaid warriors," Feldman said.

The Ocean After Nature



Across the room are photos and video of soup – but not just any soup. They're illustrations from an exhibit called "Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent" by artists and brothers Tomoo and Ei Arakawa. They're from Fukushima, Japan, where a tsunami caused a nuclear disaster in 2011. The artists invited their mother to cook a soup and serve it to guests of an art gallery.

"The tricky thing about this is the soup was made with radishes and mushrooms that came from that region," Feldman said. "And you see in these images there's the performance of the soup being served. There's also documentation of the goods being tested to see if they're radioactive."

The question of whether the soup is radioactive is what the piece is all about.

"The government has said no, they're not," said Feldman. "And so the ambivalence in 'Does This Soup Taste Ambivalent?' is what are your emotions about consuming this, would you eat the soup?"

Feldman said she's hoping to get the artists to come to Boston with some soup before the exhibit closes, but she said with a laugh she probably wouldn't eat the soup herself.

Feldman said the works in the exhibit don't actually propose anything particular about how we should act, but she said they make us think more carefully about what we do. That's also true of the work of local artist Evelyn Rydz. She's also part of the "Ocean After Nature" exhibit, but her work got its own show called "Floating Artifacts" at the Tufts University Art Gallery.



One of the images in "Floating Artifacts" by Evelyn Rydz.

Courtesy of the artist

The gallery is full of her portraits of colorful and oddly shaped objects against a black background. They're all things Rydz found on beaches around the world.

"What you're looking at in the room, these are all plastic," Rydz said. "Although they feel completely different. Different colors, textures, surfaces, some of them have become micro-habitats."

Ordinarily, plastic in the ocean is considered trash, but there's something beautiful about these images. However, that's not the point for Rydz.

"So, I'm less interested in making them beautiful. I'm not interested in the objects themselves so much as I am their history and what's happened to them," she said. "I'm more interested in the ocean and the way the ocean has sculpted them, changed them."

In the middle of the room is a microscope and a typewriter. Rydz is inviting guests to take a close up look at the actual specks of plastic, and then to fill out a card like you'd see in a natural history museum.



"Just like an archaeologist in the past would collect ancient pottery shards to tell us something about past civilizations, I think future archaeologists might unfortunately be looking at pieces of plastic along the coast as an index back to who we are today," Rydz said.

Rydz said she hopes this is something that we'll think about when we throw things away, and as people look at her exhibit, she wants them to think, maybe it is a piece of something that was once theirs. These are tiny things, she said, but they have a huge lasting impact through geologic time.



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Craig reports on a wide range of topics, including environmental and public health issues. He's covered the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2018 gas explosions in the Merrimack Valley. Craig's stories have brought listeners flying over the Arctic Ocean and up close with whales and sharks. Previously, Craig reported for 7 years at WSHU in Connecticut. He's the recipient of two national Edward R. Murrow Awards and a national Sigma Delta Chi award, as well as many regional honors, including a 2020 Murrow for "excellence in sound." He's a graduate of the Columbia Journalism School and Tufts University.

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