



Nottingham  
Contemporary

# Aquatopia

The imaginary of the ocean deep

20 July — 22 September

Free Entry

## For more information

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We also have free Spot Tours of the exhibitions every day, Tue – Fri. Please ask for times at Reception.

## Aquatopia

### The imaginary of the ocean deep

*“Consider them both, the sea and the land: and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself?”*

*Herman Melville, Moby Dick*

The sea in art is a common theme in art history – particularly Western art history. But strictly speaking seascapes aren't seascapes at all. They are depictions of the exterior surface of the ocean seen from dry land, or perhaps a boat or ship. They are “terracentric”, as the American historian of the Atlantic, Marcus Rediker, suggests. They reflect a land-based worldview that renders the ocean, as an historical arena, obscure. The actual three-dimensional space of the ocean is a very rare subject in art, and a necessarily imaginary one.

The sea may colour our planet blue, but it is an alien environment to us, and we are alien to it. We cannot breathe unaided in it – the sea literally repels us. To exist in it for any amount of time, we must become cyborg-like aquanauts, put on protective suits and respiratory equipment. To go deeper and resist the force of the ocean's mass, we must ride in heavily fortified spaceship-like submersibles.



Logo by Anthea Hamilton

*“We are unfaithful to our trust if we allow biology to become a colourless, aridly scientific discipline, devoid of living contact with the humanities.”*

*William Beebe, Half Mile Down*

Science lags behind the imagination when it comes to the ocean deep. We are more familiar with the myths and fantasies that apply to it than its actual natural conditions. This reflects our relative ignorance of its spaces and species. The ocean may cover seven-tenths of our planet, but 95% of the ocean floor remains unexplored – it is less known to us than the Solar System. It is still essentially an imaginary space for us. Every time a submersible descends to its trenches scores of marine species are encountered for the first time – species whose realities are often weirder than the alien fictions fashioned in movie studios. Most science fiction is located in either outer space or the ocean deep, and we are not adapted to either environment. The difference is the ocean belongs to our planet, and is in that sense a part of us – its spaces and species are our alien within.

That sense of the ocean deep being an alien space that we are nevertheless implicated in plays out in both utopian and dystopian ways in *Aquatopia*, as the title suggests. Our exhibition is about the ocean deep as a cultural space, rather than a natural space we can know straightforwardly. “The imaginary” refers to the collective imagination of a society or culture – that is what distinguishes it from “the imagination” which belongs to the individual. The culture that *Aquatopia* refers to is often both “modern”



Rudolf and Leopold Blaschka, Pelagia cyanella, 19th Century, Glass model  
Ar fenthyg gan/Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales  
Photo: James Turner

and “Western” – a worldview that began in Europe during the Renaissance, around the time of the “discovery” of the Americas in 1492. Other cultures have imagined the ocean deep differently, often in opposition to this Eurocentric imaginary, as Aquatopia also tries to reveal.

*“We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.”*

*HP Lovecraft, The Call of Cthullu*

Seawater is a transparent substance, but the colours and shapes of things appear distorted in its shallows, while in its depths they are altogether opaque. The ocean is to land what sleep is to wakefulness. At its deepest and most opaque it is analogous to the oblivion of deep sleep. In its translucent and refractive shallows its life-forms – which are the peculiar inversion of terrestrial flora and fauna – become easily equated with the play of strangely defamiliarised images and events we associate with dreams.

Unsurprisingly, the deep was a favourite motif for the Surrealists. Salvador Dali delivered a lecture in a deep-sea diving suit at the opening of the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936 – and, like a fish pulled from the sea, he nearly suffocated in the process. For Freud and his followers the unconscious accounts for nine-tenths of the psyche – at least that proportion of the ocean’s depths remains uncharted.



Lucian Freud, Still Life with Squid and Sea Urchin, 1949.  
Courtesy Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston.

*“The sea was distinctly visible for a mile all round the Nautilus. What a spectacle! What pen can describe it? Who could paint the effects of the light through those transparent sheets of water, and the softness of the successive gradations from the lower to the superior strata of the ocean?”*

*Jules Verne,  
Twenty Thousand Leagues Under The Sea*



JMW Turner, Sunrise with Sea Monsters, c.1845 © Tate, London 2013

*“These animals are indeed phantoms as much as monsters... They are the amphibia of the shore which separates life from death... They touch the frontier of man’s domain and people the region of chimeras... They mark the transition of our reality into another. They seem to belong to that commencement of terrible life which the dreamer sees confusedly through the loophole of the night.”*

*Victor Hugo, Toilers of the Sea*

Outside of Surrealism itself, it is often marine species dredged from its depths that appear most surreal in art history – the grotesquely fleshy pilings of fish and crustaceans common to Baroque painting of the 17th century, for instance.

Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, whose refined naturalist work is much more restrained than Baroque art, painted an otherwise ordinary still life motif with what Marcel Proust described as a “strange monster” at its centre – the “monster”, a kind of hideous nude, was an exquisitely rendered skate. Proust admired “the beauty of its vast and delicate structure tinted with red blood, blue nerves and white muscles, like the nave of a polychromatic cathedral.”

Marine species have a long history of exercising the imagination, of becoming monstrous in the human mind. Cephalopods – octopi and giant squids in particular – have inspired a whole genealogy of sea monster, known as Kraken, originating in Icelandic and Norwegian myths, and making extraordinary appearances in great literary works of the 19th and 20th centuries by Alfred Tennyson, Victor Hugo, Jules Verne, H G Wells and H P



Utagawa Kuniyoshi, The Rescue of Minamoto no Tametomo by Goblins (detail), ca. 1851 (printed)  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Lovecraft. China Miéville, a contemporary exponent of tentacular literary horror, distinguishes this genealogy of cephalopod-inspired fantasy-horror from the gothic literary tradition dominated by ghosts and hauntings. The “weird”, as exemplified by Lovecraft, is not about the Gothic fear of the disrupted threshold between life and death, expressed through ghosts, vampires, zombies and Frankensteins. ‘Weird’ horror is often inspired by rarely sighted giant elastic cephalopods. Their menacing appearance represents the unknown and unidentifiable, and the apparent attendant shift in the natural laws that otherwise govern our physical environment. The surfacing of monsters of the deep, in both ancient times and speculative futures, threatens our understanding of our selves and our position in a world, a world whose stability is usually assured by our rational knowledge and our technological might.

*“I cannot think of the deep without shuddering at the nameless things that may at this very moment be crawling and floundering on its slimy bed...I dream of a day when they may rise above the billows to drag down in their reeking talons the remnants of puny, war-exhausted mankind – of a day when the land shall sink, and the dark ocean floor shall ascend amidst universal pandemonium.”*

*HP Lovecraft. Dagon*

Cephalopods abound in Aquatopia, often exhibiting this weirdness – a weirdness at times nervously defused by comical and sensual interaction with the human. The octopus, especially, with its strikingly human trunk and head, and its monstrous excess of suckers and



Wolfgang Tillmans, *astro crusto*, a. 2012. © the artist.  
Courtesy Maureen Paley, London.

limbs, achieves a particular intimacy with the human in Aquatopia. Shimabuku presents stones and shells that were found nestled, like a child's "transitional objects", in the curled arms of octopi when caught in the traditional way in ceramic pots. In another of his octopus pieces, the artist gives an octopus a tour of Japan. Hokusai's Pearl Diver and Two Octopi – which Spartacus Chetwynd re-enacts in a sculpture and performance also included – instigated a whole genre of cross-species tentacular eroticism still very active in Manga today.

*"Those are pearls that were his eyes:  
Nothing of him that doth fade  
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange."*

*William Shakespeare, The Tempest*

Elsewhere in Aquatopia, there are many examples of humans becoming aquatic. The writer Philip Hoare, in the exhibition catalogue, coins the term "homo-aquaticus" for images of humans who have adapted to the element of water, either metaphorically, like sailors or pirates, or literally, as in mythological figures. Examples of the latter include the warring "sea gods" portrayed in an extraordinary etching by Italian Renaissance master Andrea Mantegna, or the water baby depicted by the British Victorian painter Herbert Draper. Charles Kingsley's children's novel *The Water Babies* combined social commentary with the then new and controversial theory of evolution. The chimney sweep hero acquires gills to escape into a new life in clean water.



Herbert James Draper, *A Water Baby*, c. 1895, Oil on canvas  
© Manchester City Galleries





Dorothy Cross, Relic, 2010  
Shark (Porbeagle), 21 carat gold leaf  
Private Collection, London  
Image courtesy of the artist and Kerlin Gallery, Dublin

*“There is heroism and brute warfare on the ocean floor, unnoticed by land-dwellers. There are gods and catastrophes.”*

*China Miéville, The Scar: An Excerpt from the Prologue*

Allegories of the human becoming aquatic are often fueled by powerful ideological forces. The siren, the classical form of the mermaid, was a terrifying oceanic femme fatale, who used seductive song and her alluring physique to try to lure sailors – including the Greek masculine ideal Odysseus– to their watery graves. (The mermaid was later domesticated by the Victorians and the Disney Corporation.) Caliban, the island dweller that Prospero captures and enslaves in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*, is a fish-like savage in the eyes of the shipwrecked Europeans. Alone and prostrate on the shore, he is the subject of a painting by Karl Weschke. Here homo-aquaticus is a monstrous sign of radical and feared difference. He or she has had to be subjugated by the self-justifying forces of colonialism and patriarchy, forces that have traditionally equated authority and reason with the elements of earth and air. In contrast to the world of water, land is typically stable. It can be surveyed, parceled out and owned, while the skies are clear, transparent and, supposedly, heavenly.

These pejorative homo-aquatic allegories produce a counter-reaction in Aquatopia. There are feminist mermaid hybrids, as in Hannah Wilke’s *Hello Boys*, and revolutionaries, as in Madsen Mompremier’s Vodou spirit Lord Agoue, the much-loved mythological Haitian admiral of the ocean deep who rose up against slavery.



Liz Craft, *Old Maid* (AP), 2004, Bronze  
Courtesy of the artist

Perhaps the most powerful recent example of an avenging homo-aquatic counter-allegory is found in The Otolith Group's film, *Hydra Decapita*, whose touchstone is a myth created by Drexciya, the African-American electronic duo active in Detroit in the 1990s. Drexciya's powerful abstract music suggested an aquatic utopia/dystopia tantalisingly underscored by song and album titles like *Bubble Metropolis*, *Aquatic Invasion*, *Hydro Doorways*, *Neptune's Lair*, *Molecular Enhancement* and *Journey of the Deep Sea Dweller*. Towards the end of their brief career, Drexciya spelt out their myth on the liner notes to their compilation album *The Quest*, in what has become one the most powerful allegories of the "Black Atlantic" – a term coined by the post-colonial writer, Paul Gilroy. In their work *Hydra Decapita*, The Otolith Group connect the Drexciyan myth with JMW Turner's masterpiece *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* (1840), via eerily sung extracts from John Ruskin's account of the painting in *Modern Painters*. Those liner notes are reproduced overleaf.

### **Alex Farquharson**

Director, Nottingham Contemporary

*Aquatopia is curated by Alex Farquharson and is a collaboration with Tate St Ives where it will be presented from 12 October 2013 to 18 January 2014.*

*An Aquatopia catalogue is available.*



Simon Starling, Proposal for Lake Ontario-Infestation Piece (Warrior with Shield VS the Zebra Mussel), December 2005 - October 2006  
2005, Collage on paper  
Leeds Museums and Galleries (Leeds Art Gallery)  
Photo: Ruth Clark

*“Could it be possible for humans to breathe underwater? A foetus in its mother’s womb is certainly alive in an aquatic environment. During the greatest holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Recent experiments have shown mice able to breathe liquid oxygen. Even more shocking and conclusive was a recent instance of a premature infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its undeveloped lungs. These facts combined with reported sightings of Gillmen and swamp monsters in the coastal swamps of the South-Eastern United States make the slave trade theory startlingly feasible.*

*Are Drexiciyans water breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorise us? Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi river basin and on to the great lakes of Michigan?*

*Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us and why do they make their strange music?*

*What is their Quest?*

*These are many of the questions that you don’t know and never will. The end of one thing...and the beginning of another.*

*Out – The Unknown Writer”*



The Otolith Group, Hydra Decapita,  
2010, film still. Courtesy of The Otolith Group.



Bernard Buffet, Vingt mille lieues sous les mers; Le hublot géant du Nautilus  
(Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea; the Giant Porthole of the Nautilus)  
1989, Oil on canvas  
Fonds de Dotation Bernard Buffet



The Kraken  
Lord Alfred Tennyson

Below the thunders of the upper deep;  
Far, far beneath in the abysmal sea,  
His ancient, dreamless, uninvaded sleep  
The Kraken sleepeth; faintest sunlights flee  
About his shadowy sides: above him swell  
Huge sponges of millennial growth and height;  
And far away into the sickly light,  
From many a wondrous grot and secret cell  
Unnumber'd and enormous polypi  
Winnow with giant arms the slumbering green.  
There hath he lain for ages and will lie  
Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep,  
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;  
Then once by man and angels to be seen,  
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.



Nottingham Contemporary

Logo by Evan Holloway

*Front cover image:*

The Otolith Group, Hydra Decapita, 2010, film still.  
Courtesy of The Otolith Group.

*Reverse image:*

Juergen Teller, Björk, Spaghetti Nero, Venice, 2007.  
Courtesy of Juergen Teller

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