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Sesow in "Holy H2O": Fluid Universe

The American Visionary Art Museum

Baltimore, Maryland
October 2, 2004 - September 4, 2005.

at the exhibit:









Three paintings selected for the show ("Setting Sail" and "Out of Water" were displayed):







"Setting Sail (with sesow)" 30" x 40" oil/mixed on chipboard *SOLD	"Out of Water" 13" x 16.5" oil on matboard nfs	"Mars Water Sample, (completed in March 2004)." 20" x 15" DETAIL (with frame) oil/acrylic on watercolor board (framed behind glass) $850

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editorial review

Entertainment Guide

Holy H2O: Fluid Universe
editors' pick

where
American Visionary Art Museum
800 Key Hwy.
Baltimore, MD

when
Oct. 2-Sept. 4

A Deluge of Water Works
By Michael O'Sullivan
Washington Post Staff Writer
Friday, October 29, 2004

"WHERE IS the water?," you might find yourself wondering at some point as you wander through the American Visionary Art Museum's newest, aqua-themed exhibition, "Holy H2O: Fluid Universe."

I'm not talking about Baltimore's Inner Harbor either, the view of which will soon disappear as construction proceeds on the Ritz-Carlton Residences, a luxury condo project taking shape just across the street from the museum and its new wing (scheduled to open to the public Nov. 16). I'm talking about art.

While water is certainly prominent in this show -- most notably and literally in a burbling fountain at the center of a mermaid-centric installation by artist and voodoo practitioner Nancy Josephson -- there are certain works whose connection to the sea around us is tangential, or technical, at best. Washington artist Matt Sesow's "Out of Water," for example, which depicts, in deceptively prosaic fashion, a man in a wet suit, or Los Angeles-born Christopher Moses' twisted, Disneyesque, cartoon sea creatures may strike you initially as having only the most tenuous connection to the notion of a "Fluid Universe."

That's probably because asking "Where is the water?" is asking the wrong question to begin with. "Where isn't it?," the show seems to reply.

Water, after all, doesn't just reside in the oceans, streams, lakes and swimming pools of the world, but in the very air we breathe. It's in the snow and ice of winter, the rains of spring, the humidity of summer and in the leaves that fall in autumn. It's in the fruits and vegetables we eat. We drink it, sweat it, bathe in it, excrete it and then, further down the line, drink it in again. We are, in fact, mostly made of it. It is there even when it doesn't appear to be there.

That's one reading of "Fluid Universe." Water is primal, ubiquitous. It's why so many of us are drawn to it like lemmings, as is so evident in Tom Duncan's "Dedicated to Coney Island," a wonderfully sprawling, miniaturized and motorized rendition of the beachside resort that, along with Josephson's room-size sculpture, hogs the show's center stage.

The other reading plays on the double meaning of "fluid," not just as in liquid but as in flexible, in flux. For "Holy H2O" is as much about a state of being as a physical substance. To that end, there's a strong component of the spiritual here. ("Holy," anyone?) Water, in all its plasticity, is a metaphor for the soul. That word may be anathema to some, but never at the Visionary Art Museum, where the creative spirit is sacred.

There are always so many themes and sub-themes percolating up through everything this museum does, and this

exhibition is no exception. Pollution, the history of the ship-borne slave trade, ritual ablution, even hints of the River Styx make appearances here. One could argue that, by throwing so many ideas in the soup, the museum has unintentionally diluted its own thesis.

I would argue that the opposite is true, that the show is, paradoxically, more, not less coherent for all its liquidity. Yes, the show is slippery at times and takes many forms. Just as soon as you think you've gotten your hands on it, it runs through your fingers. And yet it provides refreshment and rejuvenation, even as it frustrates our desire to hold it still.

Just like water.

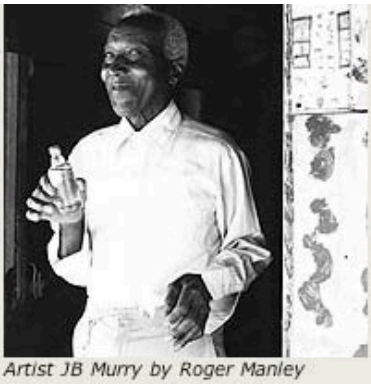
HOLY H20: FLUID UNIVERSE -- *Through Sept. 4 at the American Visionary Art Museum, 800 Key Hwy., Baltimore. 410-244-1900. www.avam.org. Open Tuesday-Sunday 10 to 6. $9; children, seniors and students $6; groups of 10 or more $5 per person; ages 4 and under free.*

With next month's opening of the Jim Rouse Visionary Center, a converted whiskey barrel warehouse housing classroom, exhibition and public program space, the museum's prices will increase by $2 in all categories, beginning Nov. 16. Children ages 4 and under will still be admitted free.

From the AVAM website:

VISIONS ONLINE

AMERICAN VISIONARY ART MUSEUM



HOLY H_2O

FLUID UNIVERSE



Artist JB Murry by Roger Manley

Holy H2O: Fluid Universe

October 2, 2004 - September 4, 2005

In this world there is nothing softer
or thinner than water
But to compel the hard and unyielding,
It has no equal.
That the weak overcomes the strong,
That the hard gives way to the gentle -
This everyone knows,
Yet no one acts accordingly.
--Lao Tzu 6th c. B.C.

The simple truth known to the brokenhearted, the mystic, and the physicist: what we think solid is not. What most of us believe constitutes the "real" material world - the stuff we can reach out, touch, hold, buy, and see - physicists all agree is actually not solid at all. In fact, what appears "solid" or material in our world is really 99.999999999999 percent empty space made "solid" by a miniscule fraction of matter that may not even be matter but wavelets of energy. Light is a particle that when we try and measure by passing it through a narrow opening behaves just like an ocean wave passing through a narrow harbor. Once through the slender opening, light wave and water wave fan out, each forming a crescent pattern. A far more accurate characterization of our universe would be "fluid."

Even our human bodies are far more fluid than they are solid. Like earth we are mostly water--both in the range of 70%. Even human bones that feel so substantial are themselves 30% water and on close examination reveal pockmarked patterns of tiny rhythmic holes that mimic the flow of water that pits flow patterns into seabed rock. Our eyeballs, the very same by which we read these words, are washed 25 times a minute by water squirted from tiny ducts. Aquatic by nature, we begin life in a fluid mix, are nurtured in womb waters, born to suckle milk, and continue to take in fluids to survive. As the Koran sura 21.30 puts it, "We are made from water every living thing."



UNDERSEA CHARIOT
Andre Blaise

Fanta≈Sea

Deep below the ocean's surface, sea creatures that may never be brought to light compete with those that live only in our imagination for "most bizarre assemblage" honors. The six-inch "vampire squid from hell," Vampyroteuthis infernalis, has eyes the size of a large dog's. The female angler fish, or triplewart sea devil, has a lightable lure dangling on a long stalk above her eyes. And the viperfish, Chauliodus sloani, has long lower fangs that project all the way back to its eyes. If deep-sea fish resemble fantasy, could fish resembling those that artists imagine be brought up from the depths one day?



UNTITLED SPIRIT PAINTING
JB Murry

Water as a Door to Initiation and the Spirit World

Many of the world's most moving communal rituals revolve around water and its power to cleanse and invigorate far more than just our bodies. Specific rivers, springs, wells, and lakes have long been synonymous with healing, divination, initiation, or baptism. For the Hindus it's the sacred River Ganges, for Christians the River Jordan, for the Greeks the River Styx, and for the ancient Egyptians the sacred Nile. Native Americans revered specific lakes believed to be repositories for powerful spirits.

Still water was also humanity's first mirror, permitting the first reflected glimpse of oneself. The act of staring into water, rock crystal, polished metal, or mirror for purposes of divining images of the future or information from the spirit world was called "scrying." Scrying and crystal gazing were widespread in fifth century Europe, so much so it was officially condemned by the medieval Christian Church as the work of the Devil, but later revived in the Victorian era as a popular pastime.

Forms of baptism exist throughout most of the world's cultures. Water submersion—total, partial, or sprinkled—accompanied by words of directed intent is symbolic of bestowing new life and consecrating a new relationship between body and spirit. Water, capable of becoming a crystal when frozen, was perceived as a natural magnifier of thought with particular benefit in magnifying spoken blessing. This belief is at the heart of why we lift our glasses to speak a word of blessing over wine and alcohol—wishing the other honoree "cheers," good health, and blessing. Many creative people observe that their best ideas come to them while taking a shower.

Orthodox Jewish observance mandates the use of ritual baths in free flowing waters—mikvah—for both men and women. Tashlich is the name of another water-based Jewish ritual tradition performed in observance of the Jewish New Year. The word tashlich comes from the Hebrew verb "to throw," in which observant Jews bring bits of bread to throw into a body of water, preferably one with live fish, to symbolically cast off sins accumulated in the past year and to publicly affirm God's Kingship.



LA SIREN SHRINE
Nancy Josephson

La Siren

'Vodou is one of the inspirational forces behind the rich abundance of painters, metalworkers, and flag-makers in Haiti. The role of priest and artist is often interchangeable, as the netherworld they inhabit, between spirit and material, is enlightened by dream and imagination. Art has become the material expression of the Vodou faith."

Vodou "was born in west and central Africa and traveled on the transatlantic slave ships to the New World, where it flourished in Haiti, on the island of Hispaniola. Vodou is characterized by ceremony, music, dance and sacrifice, through which participants commune with the spirits of their ancestors via divine possession."

La Siren is the queen of the ocean, called upon every time a boat is pushed out into the water. La Siren is a temptress, but also fierce and powerful. "The mermaid spirit La Siren beckons those at sea to return to Ginen, the tranquil ancestral home below the choppy waves of life and the ocean. The ambiguity of her allure lies between the fear of drowning and the strong infantile desire to return to the Mammy Waters, the spiritual refuge. This is a choice that faced many of the slaves on the barbarous journey from Africa to the West Indies, as the sea was the only escape from the savagery of slavery."

—Leah Gordon, The Book of Vodou



UNTITLED LAS SIREN en CONSORT
George Valris

The Sacred Flags of Haiti

Where the sacred slams into the secular, you'll find the sequin banners of Haiti. The exuberant display of devotion is realized as the tireless process of sewing sequins and beads to fabric blossoms into a dynamic offering or invitation to any one of the hundred of spirits of the Vodou pantheon.

The sacred flags, or drapo Vodou, are unfurled at the beginning of a ceremony, acing as a "call to order." The beauty of the invitation speaks of the artist's desire to honor the spirit or lwa depicted in the flag.

Typically, the sequin-covered measure 36" x 36" with a decorative border with the name of the spirit written at the top and the name of the artist written at the bottom. An average flag will be covered with as many as 20,000 sequins, all applied by hand.



DOOMED DEAD
Steve Shepard

Troubled Water

Thirty-five years ago, Jacques Cousteau warned: "Only recently have we become aware of how severely we are plundering our planet. Some argue that pollution always existed, that we should be no more upset by the extinction of the bald eagle than that of the dinosaurs. This ignores the basic fact that we are no longer in a slow evolution process but in a violent explosive one. No comparison is possible. There are no precedents. We have to face the danger as a new kind of human peril that only human measures can remedy. The life cycle and the water cycle are inseparable; we must save our oceans and waterways if we are to save mankind." Today, if anything, the pace has accelerated—there is lead in our water and mercury in the fish we eat. New biomonitoring tests reveal "body burdens" of DDTs and PCBs, chemical pollutants banned some 20 years ago. In England, the federal Environment Agency recently found birth control pills in sewage to blame for widespread evidence of sex changes in river fish. The female hormones—1,000 times more powerful than natural ones—feminized the male fish, leaving them unable to reproduce.

The pure drinking water we need to replenish our personal stores is becoming harder and harder to obtain. In 2002 the United Nations estimated that 1.1 billion people have no access to safe drinking water, 2.5 billion lack proper sanitation and more than 5 million people die from waterborne diseases each year—10 times the number of war casualties. In early 2004, a secret Pentagon report warned that "catastrophic" shortages of potable water and energy will lead to widespread war by 2020, with the United States becoming a "virtual fortress" trying to keep out millions of migrants whose homelands have been wiped out by rising sea levels or made unfarmable by drought.

Is there reason to believe we can change this outcome? Kofi Annan, secretary general of the United Nations (which proclaimed 2005 to 2015 as the International Decade for Action—Water for Life) thinks so: "What I would say is that individuals should never underestimate their own influence and the role they can play in changing things for the better. I think they should speak up in their communities and say: 'Stop polluting our rivers. Stop wasting water.' "

Voice of Water

We can't help being thirsty, moving toward the voice of water.
Milk drinkers draw close to the mother.
Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddists,
Hindus, shamans, everyone hears the intelligent sounds
And moves with thirst to meet it.
—Rumi, Voice of Water



JONAH AND THE WHALE
Rose Walton

Water Like Stone

In the bleak midwinter Frosty wind made moan,
Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone;
Snow had fallen, snow on snow,
Snow on snow,
In the bleak midwinter, Long ago.
—*English poet* Christina G. Rossetti

Why is snow white?
Snow is made of small ice crystals, and close inspection reveals that the individual crystals are pretty clear. However when light travels from air to ice, or vice versa, some light is reflected (like the way light reflects slightly from a pane of glass). Since there are a lot of air/ice surfaces in a bank of snow, light shining into the snow gets scattered about many times. After bouncing around a while inside the snow bank, some of the light scatters back out, and that is the light we see. Since all colors are scattered roughly equally well, the snow bank appears white.
—*A Snowflake Primer* by Caltech Physics Professor Kenneth G. Libbrecht

Afloat

Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.
—Writer Zora Neale Hurston



UNTITLED
Mark Casey Milestone

For many the romance of the sea is embodied in ships. The romance of travel, the mystery of the depths, the challenge of staying afloat are all found at sea, whether one is working or playing. As the Book of Common Prayer expresses it: "They that go down to the sea in ships; and occupy their business in great waters; these men see the works of the Lord; and His wonders in the deep."



SLAVE SHIP
Tom Duncan

Not all ships embody romance. Historically, some have been vehicles of extraordinary pain. During the slave trade, some 50 million human beings were seized from their native Africa and loaded onto ships. The journey was nightmarish. As described by Howard Zinn in A People's History of the United States, people were packed "in spaces not much bigger than coffins, chained together in the dark, wet slime of the ship's bottom, choking in the stench of their own excretment." The space between the decks was sometimes as little as 18 inches, so that the the occupants couldn't even turn on their sides, much

the occupants couldn't even turn on their sides, much less stand up.



CONEY ISLAND
Tom Duncan

Coney Island

People have always taken their leisure by the sea, their minds and bodies simultaneously relaxed and invigorated by the waters. The words "two weeks at the beach" have become synonymous with vacation. Nowhere has the phenomenon been more fully expressed than at Coney Island, which in its heyday teemed with as much life and energy as the ocean itself. According to historian Elliot Willensky, Coney Island at the turn of the century was "a forest of glittering electric towers and a riot of rides, restaurants, recreated disasters, freak shows, and historical displays." As described by the PBS show "Coney Island," there was a simulated trip to the moon, the largest herd of show elephants in the world, and huge moving panoramas showing the Creation, the End of the World, and Hell. There were re-enactments of the Boer War and the Fall of Pompeii, and an Infant Incubator where premature babies were placed on display. An Inexhaustible Cow with mechanical udders dispensed limitless glasses of milk and 300 little persons inhabited the perfect miniature town known as Lilliputia year-round.

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