



Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson

Janaina Tschäpe

Floating Worlds

The universe created by artist Janaina Tschäpe beckons one into a parallel world of ambiguous scale – indeterminate in both time and space. Reminiscent of Voltaire’s *Micromegas*, the fantastical scenes Tschäpe conjures collapse boundaries and fluidly mingle in a continuum of evolution and transformation. Recurring gestures become characters in a grand opera that touches on evolution, gender, and the construction of myth and history. In the end, Tschäpe’s work begs the big picture questions that tease us all. As Gauguin put it, *“Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?”*

Blood, Sea

The spring-fed grotto at the South Florida theme park provides the scenographic impetus for this grand production, but is in no way the origin of game. The sea maiden mythologies that inform *Blood, Sea* link endless stories from across time

and space. Millennia of previously unknown deep-sea creatures caught in fishermen’s nets spawned the mythic narratives that gave rise to these goddess/creature tales. From the Mami Wata cults of West Africa (which, ironically, anthropologist Henry Drewal suggests can be traced to a late 19th century German chromolithograph of a female Indian snake-charmer) to the water sprites of Irish lore, the trope of the sea maiden is overdetermined, to say the least.



Tschäpe’s primary connection is, of course, to her namesake, the Orixá Iemanjá of Candomblé, the Brazilian version of the many syncretic articulations born of the Yoruban diaspora. But Iemanjá is merely one character in the global pantheon of the water goddess. The split-tail mermaid imagery that adorns the exterior walls of centuries old homes in the landlocked Swiss Alps are testament to the enduring imagery of

the fish-woman. The split-tail represents the hybrid presence of both home and away, the perpetual dual identity of the émigré, and a curious cipher of Tschäpe's experience living between the culturally antipodean points of Germany and Brazil. This existence places her between logic and magic, between Protestant rationalism and the mystical worldview of Candomblé, between the grey angst of northern



Romanticism and the sensual elegance of the southern hemisphere. This intrinsic cultural paradox allows Tschäpe to fluidly operate as both subject and object, both voyeur and agent, and to embody the participant-observer position of the ethnographic model. This is evidenced clearly in *Blood, Sea*, where the point of view witnessed in the photographs and the video perpetually shifts – at times the viewer is on board the ship, cast in the role of scientist discovering a

previously unknown life form. At other times, we are privileged to swirl amidst the creatures, as one of them. One can readily locate the work in a range of critical gestures designed to trump the gender inequities that continue to haunt human relations and stymie the possibility of a truly enlightened society. It would be easy enough to connect the dots of the sea maiden myth across culture and time, and to posture a critical feminist ethnography examining the trope of the ideal woman. But I'll leave that to someone else. Though the work may have narrative origins in these mythical tales, it transcends the trope of the sea maiden and enters the cosmic and microcosmic realm of a far more grand story – evolution. The Eames' *Powers of 10*, Smithson's spiral, Vonnegut's *Galapagos*, Voltaire's *Micromegas* and Tschäpe's experiments in alternate evolutionary paths and the imagined worlds they might produce all share a line of inquiry. Each of these gestures seeks to locate the big in the small, the infinite in the infinitesimal. Tschäpe's choice of Italo Calvino's passage from *t zero* confirms that there is more at play in her work than simply sirens and fish tales/tails. In the realm of evolution – change over time – elemental issues of art meld with elemental issues of evolutionary biology – namely, form

and scale. *Blood, Sea*, and Tschäpe's drawings, articulate a magnificent and fantastical taxonomy of creatures and environments that toy with scale – one never knows if the imagined scene is interstitial or interstellar. The experience of watching *Blood, Sea* is, by design, mesmerizing. The creatures float languidly by the camera, the silence punctuated by the eerie and organic minimal soundtrack evoking Homeric sirens and cetaceous echo-location. Overhead, trees morph into beds of kelp, a body transforms into a rusty inkblot released by a giant squid, organisms appear to collapse time by evolving before our eyes. This organically orchestrated ballet undulates like an organ pumping liquid. The viewer is unmoored, lost tumbling in space and entirely unable to determine the scale of the beings. Is this entire lagoon merely a microscopic view of the tiniest interior of a valve of that organ? Or is this scene played out on a cosmic scale, where each shifting body is celestial and universal? The creatures are evolutionary experiments in bodily forms. Tschäpe plays creator, then deploys her spawn in a field to see how they may live, like a child's science experiment writ large. Functions of the body like gestation that were internal are now external, the

boundary between body and environment disappears.



Ichthyological reproductive practice finds creatures depositing eggs, and appropriating the entire ocean as the amniotic fluid until another creature comes along to fertilize them. One imagines the pure delight the artist must take in this Petri dish approach to art-making, as the behavior of her subjects – off-spring in an fashion – begins to reveal itself. As her creatures move through the world, the horrific and fabulously amusing account of Kafka's Gregor Samsa negotiating his new form comes to mind as the creatures float idly, or drag their bodies across the beach, unaccustomed to their newly evolved forms. Imagine thirty-foot extensions of your limbs, which radically extend the body, allowing you to annex space, as Tschäpe's costumes allow her character-creatures. And imagine the awkwardness, the simultaneous joy and discomfort of extending the body in this fashion. This is what Tschäpe

conjures for the viewer, a fantasy of bodily transformation.



“Historical events, like astronomical bodies, occur before they appear...”
George Kubler *The Shape of Time*.

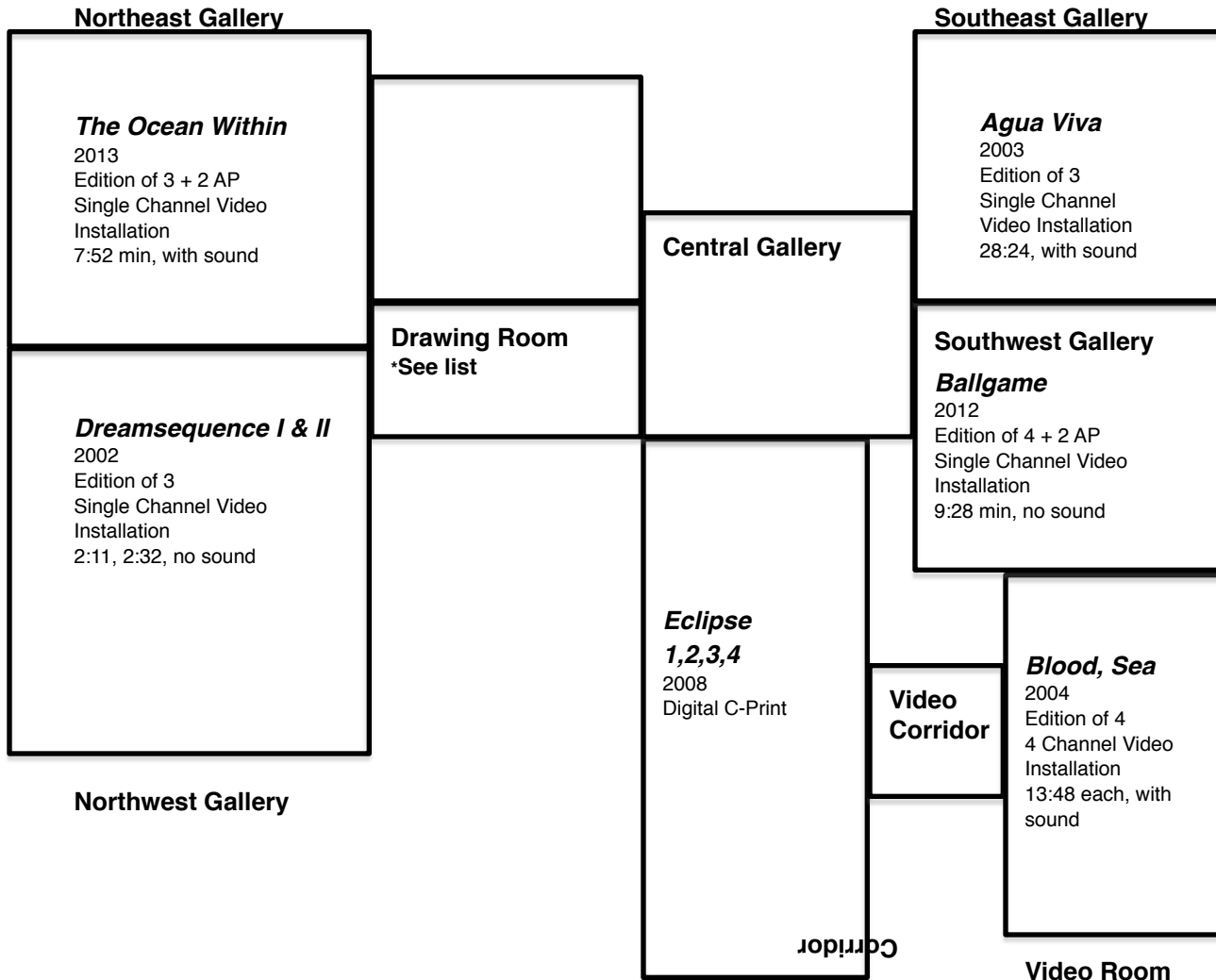
Artists like – the big picture artists – are attuned to the echo, somewhere between the occurrence and the

appearance. Ears to the tracks, or perhaps, fingertips on the Superstrings, sensing the pulses, giving them form and translating the signals for the rest of. This is, of course, what all artists do – construct fantastical parallel worlds, and then seek the lessons and the logic that dictates the shape and actions of that world. Tschäpe’s mutations hint at another universe, speculating an alternate path or branch on the phylogenetic tree. She visually articulates our collective quest to understand. By excavating our vestigial qualities and desires, she implies both past and future – our collective biological urge to carry on, and our collective cultural urge to connect to the past. When asked to share thoughts about Calvino’s *Blood, Sea* passage, an evolutionary biologist responded simply “things change.” Cetaceans left the sea and roamed the earth. And then they went back.

Perhaps we will, too.

Anne-Marie Russell
Executive Director & Chief Curator

Janaina Tschäpe
Floating Worlds
 15 February 2014 – 27 April 2014



Drawing Room

Medusa

2000
Edition of 3
Single Channel Video
Installation
5:08, no sound

Wave

2000
Edition of 3
Single Channel Video
Installation
17:18, no sound

Nightmare

2001
Edition of 4
Single Channel Video
Installation
3:53, with sound

Sala de Espera

2001
Edition of 4
Three Channel Video
Installation
8:00 each, with sound

Exercises 1-8

2002
Edition of 3
Single Channel Video
Installation
20:28, no sound

The Moat & The Moon

2003
Edition of 3
2 Channel Video
Installation

Untitled /Scream

2004
Edition of 4
Single Channel Video
Installation
5:34, no sound

Insomnia 1, 2, 3

2006
Each in edition of 4
Single Channel Video
Installation
11:14, 16:32, 00:11, no sound

Entschüpft (Breathing Woman) and Entschüpft (Breathing Balloon)

2011
Edition of 4 + 2 AP
2 Channel Installation on 2 Monitors
8:28 min, with sound

Lacrimacorporus

2004
Edition of 4
Single Channel Video
Installation
3:36 min, with sound.

Dragoons I - V

2008
Each in edition of 4
Single Channel Video
Installation
00:06, 00:10, 1:39, 1:39, 00:47, no sound

Moss

2000
Edition of 3
Single Channel Video



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ABOUT JANAINA TSCHÄPE

Taking the female body for her muse, Janaina Tschäpe explores themes of the body and landscape, sex, death, renewal and transformation in paintings, drawings, photographs and video installations. To experience Tschäpe's work is to swim through universes of polymorphous landscapes amongst embryonic forms, ambiguous characters and exotic botanical life. She seeks to give form to the trance of art making, portraying not a dream world, but the sensations of being in one.

“Janaina Tschäpe shares her forename with a Brazilian water goddess, and, not coincidentally, her photographs and performances-to-video feature sumptuously organic, watery, distorted female figures,” writes Frieze. Her use of organic lines and ethereal forms in her paintings create a network of relationships, linking the process of artistic practice to lifecycles found in nature. In Brazil, nature is overwhelming. Everything is growing on top of something else – there is always a plant breaking through a wall or a tree shooting out of the ground. When she returns to the city, she paints with these memories. Her paintings exist in a state of their own becoming. They are systems of palimpsests; each brushstroke, a materially emphatic note, partially occludes a previous mark. In this way, forms are built and colors orchestrated through layers of accumulation. Their physically sensuous surfaces give way to topologies of finely calibrated hues. They create the sensation of being underwater or wrapped up in diaphanous cloaks.

Tschäpe was born on 1973 in Munich, Germany and was raised in São Paulo, Brazil. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Hamburg and her Masters in Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts, New York. Tschäpe's work has been shown in numerous exhibitions throughout the world including New York, Tokyo, São Paulo, London, Madrid, Paris, Switzerland and Berlin. Recent projects include Kunsthal Kade, Amersfoort, Netherlands, Ronnebaeksholm, Naestved, Denmark, Tampa Museum of Art, Tampa Florida, USF Contemporary Art Museum/CAM, Tampa, Florida, Palace of the Arts, São Paulo, Brazil, Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art, Kobe, Japan, Galerie les Filles du Calvaire, Paris, France, Park: Platform for Visual Arts, Tilburg, Netherlands, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, D.C., Cultural Centro Banco de Brazil, Belo Horizonte, Brazil, Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Massachusetts, Natalie and James Thompson Art Gallery at San Jose

Sate University, California, Museum of Contemporary Art Taipei, Taiwan, Metropolitan State University of Denver, Colorado, Museu de Arte Moderna, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, Centro de Arte Helio Oiticica, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Manel de Santaren Collection – MAMbo, Villa delle Rose, Bologna, Winnipeg Art Gallery, Canada, Glenbow Museum Calgary, Canada, Frist Center for the Visual Arts, Nashville, Tennessee, Contemporary Art Museum Soracoba, Brazil and Museu Brasileiro da Escultura, São Paulo, Brazil.

Janaina Tschäpe is held in the collections of the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., Harvard Art Museum, Boston, Centre Pompidou, Paris, France, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, Madrid, Spain, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Japan, Coleção Gilberto Chateaubriand, MAM Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Images au Centre Collection, France, Moderna Museet, Sweden, A.M.A.K Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst, Belgium, Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Austria, USF Contemporary Art Museum, Tampa, Florida, Fonds National d'Art Contemporain, Paris, France, Bank Societe Generale, New York, MUDAM Luxembourg, Luxembourg City, Instituto Itau Cultural, São Paulo, Brazil, Inhotim Centro de Arte Contemporanea Minas Gerais, Brazil, Pinacoteca do Estado, São Paulo, Brazil, The Palace of the Arts, São Paulo Brazil and the Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte, North Carolina.

Tschäpe currently lives and works in New York and Rio de Janeiro.