

Drawing From and With the Oceanic: Tania Kovats at Parafin, London

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Tania Kovats, 'Oceanic', Parafin, London, 24 September – 20 November 2021



Installation view of Tania Kovats's 'Oceanic' at Parafin, London, 24 September – 20 November 2021, photo by Peter Mallett, courtesy of Parafin

'Oceanic', Tania Kovats's recent exhibition at Parafin, London, had a multifarious way of bringing things 'out there', and 'in there'. It was an ex-hibition of the oceanic, an intimate encounter with the seas, and it chrysalised this 'outside' in interior spaces; the unwieldy watery wide furnished the white space between the gallery walls. The oceanic is the subject, the question and the manner of making these works. This first solo show at Parafin for Kovats displayed pieces that evolve around maritime experience and environmental considerations of the ocean that manifest in her drawing practice. As in many of her earlier works, Kovats shows eloquently what drawing can be, refining and redefining her 'drawerly' vocabulary with every object she

seems to draw. She draws water, but she also draws *with* it, *from* it and *through* it, as a way of taking the oceanic into the process and testing the borderline of human encounters with the ocean, whilst holding a non-human reverberation within. Her work creates an eco-narrative, but not in the sense that she would let water itself make its trace – the human body insists on being present, but is seemingly devoted to the reverberation of nature, or here the ocean, in a way that recalls Michel Serres's question 'How would my words let the world without words speak without me?'¹

A new series of sculptures and body prints, as well as motifs of maps and drawings, which have already occurred in some of her earlier works on the sea from the last decade, formed part of this exhibition that showed Kovats's versatile work on the ocean. Drawing as a way of thinking crystallises here as sculpture, print, protocol, pencil on paper, mixed-media fabricated coral, book or overpainted map. Kovats has explored an expanded approach to drawing in earlier publications, such as *The Drawing Book – A Survey of Drawing: The Primary Means of Expression* (2006),² and in her *Drawing Water: Drawing as a Mechanism for Exploration* (2014).³ She also outlined her continuing attempt to describe her approach in this exhibition as well:

I draw to find my way out. Drawing fills the space when I'm not sure what I'm doing. It's a mechanism for map-making and my search engine, even when I don't know what I'm looking for... Hard to find, difficult to see. Something that gets found in the drawing – explained and measured and put into a language that can communicate beyond the failure of words. Drawing is a mechanism for exploration as much as a tool of representation.⁴

Let's follow some of Kovats's search for and thinking of the oceanic. Her series of water drawings titled *Sea Mark*, consisting of a myriad of individual sheets, have something iconic to them. The marks indicate waves and mirror a rhythmic, calm and humble attempt to catch the ocean's surface. Wave by wave, presented as even marks, gives, in a democratic sense, some idea of the gentle temporality with which all those marks come together as a sea-space. Comparable to Vija Celmins's *Drypoint – Ocean Surface*, it is the gaze focusing on the movements on top of all the worlds underneath it, dedicated to grasping the ocean in a non-symbolic way.⁵ However, there is a generality in Celmins's ocean surface, it is indifferent to its locality; these are not seascape paintings from specific places, but an engagement with the seascape as such. Unlike Celmins's realistic drypoints, the *Sea Mark* drawings use watercolour, and with their simple and rhythmic marks they give the impression of a process that breathes and which could extend itself in endless ways on myriad surfaces. It suggests a practice that could – potentially – be repeated by anyone, and that forms part of its beauty. As in Serres's question of how can one let the world

¹ Michel Serres, *Biogea*, Randolph Burks, trans, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2012, p 118

² Tania Kovats, ed, *The Drawing Book, A Survey of Drawing: The Primary Means of Expression*, Black Dog Publishing, London, 2006

³ Tania Kovats, *Drawing Water: Drawing as A Mechanism for Exploration*, Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, 2014

⁴ Ibid, p 11

⁵ See *ibid*, p 165

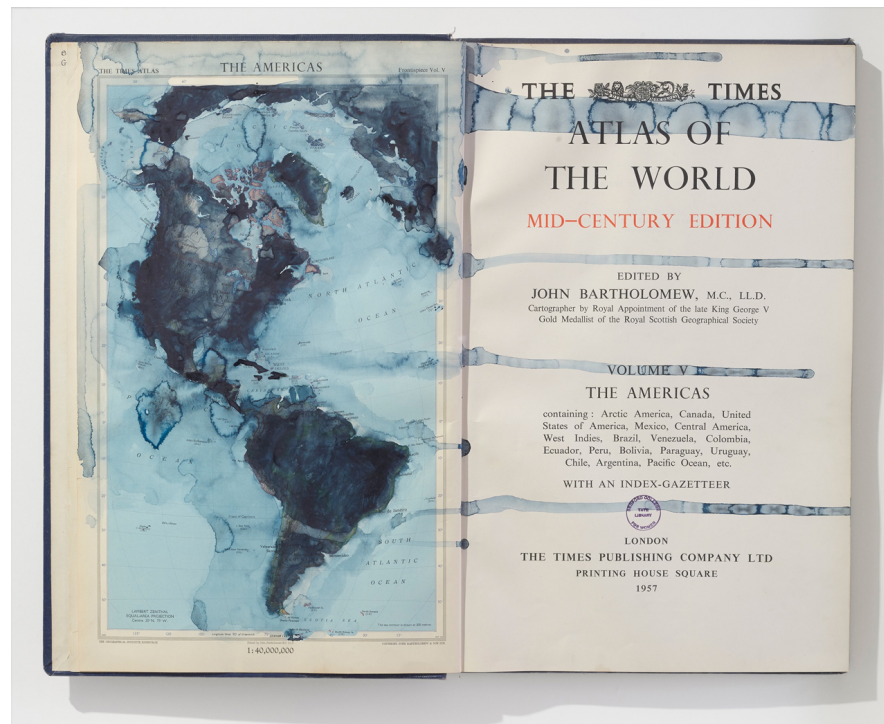
without words speak, without this being bound to a particular voice, this is what makes these drawings so expressive and almost, in the best sense of the word, impersonal.



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Other works that were in the exhibition which chime in with the oceanic investigations were the manifold forms in which Kovats engages with books: either seemingly flooded by water, reinterpreted or blurred with colour, or pencil drawings of books. These works shift the perspective of the drawn ocean in each of the pieces. In a surprising and witty way, the drawing series *The Sea Around Us* (2021) meticulously recreates various versions of the cover of Rachel Carson's eponymous book, and presents drawing as an acquisition of its content in a way that engages with its surface – just as the artist's ocean surface drawings do. *Books from the Flooded Library* (2021) and *Sea Stain* (2018) confront a viewer with a kind of dilutedness, and similarly something miraculous and impervious: the impression of the oceans entering a book or a map. There is a certain wordless power in the way these colours disperse in an open book installed on the wall. Is it the obliteration of speech, of theory, of maps, of the written word? Or, by keeping the framework of the book, is it the 'drawerly' response to the ocean and a self-conscious claim of drawing water that requires its own reading and exegesis? The playfulness with which theory and word are taken up in Kovats's work makes one think of how profound and far her notion of the 'metaphorical' goes here. She draws books, water draws books, books draw water, in an evocative, many-faceted way that is hardly to be captured with only one description. With regard to the so-called 'Blue Humanities', Stefan Helmreich has spoken of the sea as a 'theory machine'.⁶ Tania Kovats, however, shows how the sea can also be a drawing organism, exploring the question of visuality, metaphoricity and materiality in a more than complementary way.

⁶ See Stefan Helmreich, 'Nature/Culture/Seawater', *American Anthropologist*, Vol 113, No 1, March 2011, pp 132–144



Tania Kovats, *Sea Stain (Times Atlas of the World, Mid Century Edition, Vol V, The Americas)*, 2018, watercolour on atlas, 50 x 60 cm, courtesy of the artist and Parafin, London

Something that was also partially present in earlier works, and has now been more explicitly unpacked, is the question of the body in such ‘drawerly’ encounters. It might be due to the COVID-19 pandemic that the body thrusts itself upon our sense of everydayness with a greater urgency because of the lack of corporality. Kovats’s works investigate the many inner coastal lines between the human and the non-human that can be sounded out with drawing as a way to create and to perceive. They speak about the deep connections with the sea in an emotional, intellectual and ecological way. The works resonate with various issues that have been discussed in the ‘blue humanities’ – such as the bodily experiences with the sea and its place in scientific research, the geopolitics and the mapping of oceans, or the research on the possible preservation of the oceans. Theorists such as Stacy Alaimo, Philip Steinberg, Kimberley Peters, Stefan Helmreich, Steve Mentz, et al, have all elaborated on ways of making theory ‘with the sea’ in different contexts. Stacy Alaimo has claimed the significance of taking into account concepts such as ‘marine ecologies and species’, an ‘eerie temporal compression’, ‘abyssal planes’ or ‘ocean acidification’ to gain a perspective on the ‘Anthropocene’ as informed by Ocean Studies.⁷ In the context of the ‘blue humanities’, labels such as a ‘wet’ or ‘more-than-wet’ ontology, ‘wet globalization’,⁸ ‘blue ecocriticism’, ‘salt aesthetics’, ‘shipwreck modernity’,⁹ ‘sea truth’,¹⁰ or, as

⁷ See Stacy Alaimo, ‘The Anthropocene at Sea: Temporality, Paradox, Compression’, in Ursula K Heise, Jon Christensen and Michelle Niemann, eds, *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental*, 1st Companion to the Environmental Humanities, Routledge, London, 2017, pp 153–157

⁸ See Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, ‘Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, Vol 33, No 2, April 2015, pp 247–264; Kimberley Peters and Philip Steinberg, ‘The Ocean in Excess: Towards a More-than-Wet Ontology’, *Dialogues in Human Geography*, Vol 9, No 3, November 2019, pp 293–307

already mentioned, seawater as a ‘theory machine’, have become prominent over the last decade. By pointing to ‘specific toxicities’, Elizabeth A Povinelli has furthermore sharply drawn attention to the important insights ‘emerging from the Black Atlantic to late liberal oceanic feelings’.¹¹ This theoretical landscape surrounding the ‘blue humanities’ is a context that in certain aspects profoundly echoes Kovats’s thinking through drawing the ocean.

Despite her work generally covering an overwhelmingly broad range of oceanic issues, it surely – and fortunately – does not cover all of them. This does not at all read as a *lack*, but the Parafin show presented itself – however broad the connections to the oceanic seem – as a single moment within a continuous practice and one coined by a specific perspective. The engagement with maps shown here, for instance, is not anchored in the geopolitical aspects of oceans, such as migration, transport or the struggle for resources. The interest that presented itself here, rather, aims to blur terrestrial and geopolitical logics, and attempts to bring them into liquidity or even blankness (as in the artist’s earlier work like the *Only Blue* series). Other ‘blue humanities’ topics, however, resonated very clearly in the works presented. *Bleached* (2015) is one of the conceptual works in which fabricated corals tell of ecological issues of coral bleaching. Other work also touches upon how the oceanic enters into emotional and theoretical vocabulary, famously with Freud’s notion of ‘oceanic feelings’, which the *Orgasm Drawings* (2021) allude to in particular. With a conceivably different gesture than the contemplative *Sea Mark* drawings, they give a drawerly protocol of female pleasure that accounts for the oceanic in its metaphorical connection in such a way that draws hydrofeminist lines on paper. ‘As watery’, Astrida Neimanis writes in her text ‘Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water’, ‘we experience ourselves less as isolated entities, and more as oceanic eddies: I am a singular, dynamic whorl dissolving in a complex, fluid circulation. The space between our selves and our others is at once as distant as the primeval sea, yet also closer than our own skin — the traces of those same oceanic beginnings still cycling through us, pausing as this bodily thing we call “mine”.’¹² This whirly ecstatic drawing with one hand, whilst mirroring the movements of the other, connects to the oceanic in a way that brings the existence, liveliness and pleasure of one body to the whorl of a general corporality. Maybe they connect to exactly the ‘feminist’ question posed by Neimanis: even though watery embodiment is a feminist issue, ‘the fluid body is not specific to woman’.¹³ The drawings that were on the lower floor of the exhibition at Parafin can be read as one hydrofeminist way to aspire to become a ‘body of water’.

⁹ See Steve Mentz, ‘Blue Humanities’, in Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, eds, *Posthuman Glossary*, Bloomsbury Academic, London, 2018, pp 69–72

¹⁰ See Susan Reid, ‘Science and Culture: Transitioning currents in times of climate change’, in Mike Brown and Kimberley Peters, eds, *Living with the Sea: Knowledge, Awareness and Action*, Routledge, London, 2020, p 116

¹¹ See Elizabeth A Povinelli, ‘The Ancestral Present of Oceanic Illusions: Connected and Differentiated in Late Toxic Liberalism’, *e-flux Journal*, No 112, October 2020 <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/112/352823/the-ancestral-present-of-oceanic-illusions-connected-and-differentiated-in-late-toxic-liberalism/>

¹² Astrida Neimanis, ‘Hydrofeminism: Or, On Becoming a Body of Water’, in Henriette Gunkel, Chrysanthi Nigianni and Fanny Söderbäck, eds, *Undutiful Daughters: New Directions in Feminist Thought and Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012, p 85

¹³ *Ibid*, p 89



Tania Kovats, *The Divers*, 2018, installation view, Parafin, London, photo by Peter Mallett, courtesy of the artist and Parafin

Kovats describes her artistic practice of encountering the sea as follows: ‘After travelling too far from land, I followed the sea home, up the river to the city, and then inside, swimming in the seas of our liquid selves, the unconscious, the oceanic.’¹⁴ Yet, however far they seem to travel, these works do not lose touch with human bodies and subjectivity. In the series *The Divers* (2018), liquid selves have literally become concrete. Looking at these sculptures, there is an echo of notions such as ‘maritime subjects’ (Steinberg/Peters) or, again, Astrida Neimanis’s idea that ‘We Are All at Sea’. This series of sculptures made with concrete casts of wetsuits is in its drawerly logic compellingly classical, on the one hand, insofar as it thematises bodily contours as a way to delineate them from their surroundings; but on the other, the lines become sculpture, become concrete, and the form-giving and form-skewing boundary between the human body and the sea – the wetsuit – becomes absent. *The Divers* display the negative of a drawing, manifested in sinking, deformed bodies. In their form, they draw the wetsuits’ borderline between the human body and the body of water. The movements encased in concrete imagine these human bodies in their negative form, mostly defined through their enclosure in water. It reads as an example of how Kovats draws from human encounters with the ocean and gives them an exploratory and almost ironic manifestation. There is a certain helplessness and lack of elegance in the way the lumpy body parts dive into and yet stand out from the ground.

Next to the sculptures were two body prints on the wall. With a different, much more centred and directed appearance, the prints, entitled *Freediver* (2020), inevitably invoke Yves Klein’s famous body imprints. What is different in Kovats’s version? The paintings are less shinningly blue, the colour probably less toxic, and, in a notable departure from Klein’s prints, the female

¹⁴ Kovats, *Drawing Water*, op cit, p 11



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figure shows her hands. The hands are, in fact, a very active part of the piece and seem to have carried the body's weight in a print that traces a yoga posture, mirroring a twist in the interpretation of Klein's works. The hand is one of the elements that makes Kovats's work so productively and sincerely connected to the question of human action, creative recreation and responsibility. It is a very grounded echoing of the non-human oceanic, an expression of deep attachment, without losing touch with its anthropogenic framings. Kovats's artistic practice breathes, draws and creates a relation through an abstract and bodily fascination with the sea. In its vulnerability, her work gives an idea of this relation-ship without the shelter of the ship. It cannot be stressed enough how beautiful these encounters end up being, and how they do not appear to be a closed issue. To take up another formulation of Michel Serres, it appears as if Tania Kovats's 'North-West Passage' takes her search further and further – in her case, the exploration of the passage between drawing and the ocean.

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