

Digital Meditations on Water

Sarah Rothberg and Marina Zurkow reveal water's unearthliness.



Louis Bury March 7, 2020



Marina Zurkow and Sarah Rothberg, "Toilet Joke I" (2020), ceramic toilet, recycled plastic pellets, iPhone, video (color, silent), mirrored plexiglass, pedestal, 51 x 21 x 30 inches (all images courtesy of bitforms gallery, New York, photos by Emile Askey)

From behind bitforms gallery's glass facade, an artistic toilet bowl ("Toilet Joke I," 2020) beckons passers-by into [Wet Logic](#), Sarah Rothberg's and Marina Zurkow's digitized meditation on water's unearthliness. The readymade ceramic toilet's most noticeable feature is its bowl, which brims with blue and brown recycled plastic pellets; nestled in the pellets is an iPhone whose cracked screen plays footage of waves lapping against a sandy shore. The joke, as it were, is on all of us: our species' synthetic waste clogs the septic device we use to dispose of our bodies' natural waste. On the brown-painted wall behind the toilet is a white chalk drawing in

which consumer goods occupy one layer of the planet's sedimentary record — it emphasizes how humans are hoisting ourselves with our own petrochemical petard.

Adding to the intrigue, both artists' solo contributions to the exhibition evince a ruminative tranquility that occupies a different tonal register than the collaborative works of toilet humor (“Toilet Joke I,” 2020; “Study for Toilet Joke II,” 2020) that bookend them. Rothberg's gossamer VR installation, *Water Without Wet* (2020), situates the viewer in a virtual space defined by its 360-degree expanse of horizonless water. As viewers stand on a rectangular ultramarine platform, they are prompted to perform simple tasks with mirage-like virtual objects, for example, to wash their hands in a sink, fill a cup with water, or flush a toilet. With the completion of each task, a choir-like *aah* sound drones as the environment fades to white before transitioning to the next task. The repeating loop of tasks, as well as the otherworldly transitions between them, create the feeling of inhabiting a mysterious digital purgatory.



Marina Zurkow and Sarah Rothberg, “Study for Toilet Joke II” (2020), plastic fish bowl, water, fountain pump, recycled plastic pellets, mirrored plexiglass, 65 x 14 x 14 inches

In the dimly lit main gallery, Zurkow has stacked black milk crates along two walls and installed half a dozen variously sized digital screens atop them. Each screen plays footage from one of three custom software-designed films: *Oceans Like Us: Love Me*; *Oceans Like Us: Milkcrate Plastisphere*; and *Oceans Like Us: Bow Null* (all 2020). The films' pixelated backgrounds all portray shimmering water using variations on a color family: blues, greens, and browns,

respectively. Atop these, with only a sliver of illusionistic depth, drift stylized digital renditions of aquatic entities both expected (mollusks; coral; plankton) and unexpected (milk crates; torpedoes; a house frame dangling from a rope, with a shark jailed inside it). While the films' languid paces and soft neon glows create a dreamy ambiance, their uncanny contents hint at an underlying sense of disturbance.

Aesthetically and conceptually, *Wet Logic* turns on the combination of apparent oppositions: reality blended with artifice; surface with depth; serenity with disquiet. The press release cites, as a key influence, Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters's 2015 article "Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces," which argues that geographical theory has not accorded proper significance to the ocean's slippery, often paradoxical spatio-temporal qualities. But the article, a runny stew of philosophical abstraction, doesn't convey the awful beauty of these aquatic paradoxes with anything near the exhibition's clarity and force. It's not just that academic prose can be unnecessarily opaque but that language as a medium lacks visual art's experiential immediacy.

The irony, fitting and intended, is that *Wet Logic* achieves this immediacy through digital mediation, what Rothberg playfully calls "water without wet." Both installations highlight their own artifice through the incorporation of digital technologies and aesthetics. But neither does so to make simplistic, good-or-evil judgments about technology's environmental impact. Instead, they take ecological hybridity — the interdependence of the human and the non-human, the natural and the synthetic — as a given and allow the viewer to dwell in its uncomfortable tensions. This capacity for negative capability accounts for what might seem a peculiar tonal mix in the exhibition of lyricism and absurdity.



Marina Zurkow, "Accretions" (2016), silkscreen, hand-stamped archival ink 14 x 14 inches, each edition of 3, 1 AP

These modes converge with élan in the analog minimalism of Zurkow's cardboard silkscreen grid, "Accretions" (2016). Each square panel depicts wry amalgams of natural and human-made objects, such as a crystal shard with earmuffs or a geode dangling from a parachute with a cassette tape jutting out from the rock. The fanciful object combinations loosely resemble plastiglomerates, a term coined in 2013 by scientists Patricia L. Corcoran and Charles J. Moore, and artist Kelly Jazvac, to refer to stones comprised of organic materials held together by melted and hardened plastic debris. The difference is that Zurkow's artistic compounds have far more visual appeal than actual plastiglomerates, which look like geochemical hairballs coughed up by an unwell planet.

Such moments of aesthetic appeal leave *Wet Logic's* most abiding impressions, more so than any philosophical point about water. Both Rothberg and Zurkow find surprisingly agreeable, varied ways to convey a sense of ecological discord. Yet neither artist romanticizes or trivializes our planet's climate emergency; their uses of digital screens and virtual spaces are not grandiose or slick. The exhibition's allure instead derives from its comfort with paradox and difficulty, its calm in the face of rising, polluted waters. Climate change is no joke but, in the right hands, the capacity to joke about it can be a serious recognition of its dire reality.

Wet Logic, Sarah Rothberg and Marina Zurkow *continues at bitforms gallery (131 Allen Street, New York) through March 15.*

