"Aquatopia: The imaginary of the ocean deep"

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The ocean makes up 99 per cent of our planet's living space; yet less than 1 per cent of that space has been explored. This vast unknown is the starting point for Aquatopia: The imaginary of the ocean deep, an exhibition conceived and principally curated by Alex Farquharson that currently occupies the whole of Tate St Ives, widely expanded from its inception at Nottingham Contemporary earlier in the year.

The show is revelatory in the range of imaginative responses it presents. It makes the case for a kind of counter-history of the sea, working against all the grandeur and human dominance we commonly associate with the maritime tradition. The works here are too diverse and their presentation is too amorphous to tell a coherent story, but what most share is a reaction against the rational, from the horror of shipwrecks and sea monsters to the enchantment of mermaids and water babies, and it succeeds brilliantly as a show through which to wander freely, being constantly astonished.

There is an inspired use of space, not least in the interplay with the gallery's views across Porthmeor Beach: Christian Holstad's tubular jellyfish forms ("This Is Not a Life Saving Device, nos 1-5"), spread out across the rotunda, seem to have been washed straight in by the Atlantic. In an inner gallery of navy blue walls we sink to the ocean's bed to view a "sea sculpture" of fused porcelain vessels and coral, the product of an eighteenth-century shipwreck; and lookup to see Dorothy Cross's suspended hulk of a shark, "Relic", its hollowed inside lined with gold. These strange forms and textures are reflected eerily in Barbara Hepworth's adjacent "Sea Form (Porthmeor)". In a darkened corridor Odilon Redon's imaginary sea beasts ("Des peuples divers habitent les pays de l'Ocean") rise up from their pitch-black ground to face Rudolf and Leopold Blaschka's exquisite glass models of obscure marine life, produced for nineteenth-century museums, and proving that the ocean's actual inhabitants can be at least as strange as the imaginary ones.

Aquatopia is a model of how to engage creatively with the past; thematic groupings are broad enough to avoid superficial comparison with the present, and we are left to draw our own impressions of likeness and difference. Nonetheless, some of the most powerful contemporary works here "talk back" to the past. Simon Starling's "Infestation Piece (Musselled Moore)" revisits the controversy that surrounded the Art Gallery of Toronto's acquisition of Henry Moore's "Warrior with Shield" in 1954, exploring questions of nationalism and colonization. Starling's project, represented here by a collage and a maquette, involved submerging a model of the Moore sculpture in Lake Ontario, and its transfigurement over a year and a half by thousands of zebra mussels, themselves a recent, non-native introduction to the Great Lakes. The central work to engage with colonial legacy is "Hydra Decapita", a video installation by The Otolith Group, Anjalika Sagar and Kodwo Eshun. The piece grew out of Eshun's study of Drexciya, an "Afrofuturist" techno duo who, through their electronic music, imagined a tribe of mutant amphibians descended from pregnant slave women, thrown overboard during the crossings of the Middle Passage.

There is also a fertile, if broken, dialogue, which is brilliantly developed in the catalogue, between the visual arts and literature: as for example in a sequence of Gustave Dore's wood engraving illustrations for The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. But the most startling translation comes as a response to Hokusai's octopus woodcut from Kinoe no komatsu (1814), known as "The Dream of the Fisherman's Wife": Spartacus Chetwynd brings its visual and verbal eroticism disturbingly to life in "Erotics and Bestiality", an improvised film interaction with a gigantic stuffed octopus model; this model now lurks in a corner, as if pruriently watching its own recorded performance, next to a copy of Hokusai's book. The octopus, which in Victor Hugo's words marks "the transition of our reality into another", becomes a kind of mascot to the show, and a number of other works address its uncanny humanoid features and its intelligence.

In Ernst Haeckel's scientific illustrations, and in vitrines of scrimshaw, engraved shells and netsukes, the free play of works is countered by stricter taxonomies. But the most moving collection is the most ambivalent in its relations: in "Octopus Stone", made this year, the Japanese artist Shimabuku presents pebbles and shells found in the arms of caught cephalopods. The work distils many of the questions this exhibition raises about origins and appropriation, the uneasy relations between man and nature, land and ocean, art and reality, creation and destruction.