

On the Paths to Utopia with a Guidance of Water

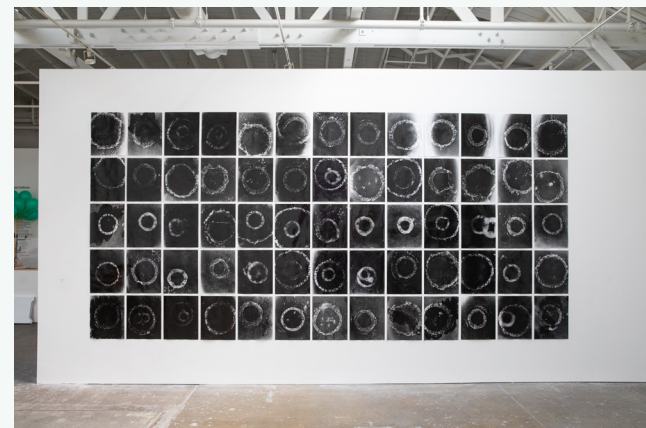
by Gwendolyn Kim



"Unable to perceive the shape of you, I find you all around me, your presence fills my eyes with your love, it humbles my heart, for you are everywhere."
- Hakim Sanai

Water is an omnipresent and quotidian alien that has been patiently living and witnessing the activities of the earth. When I think of water, I visualize the theory of the solar nebula, the hydrogen contained clouds of gas and dust meeting the earth's oxygen. This essay is about the body of works by four artists whose encounters with water open up portals to other ways of seeing. Artists Shao-Feng Hsu, Irene Cai, Danielle Cook, and Bryce LeFort all engage in water's utopian capacity, putting it to use as a means to tell their encrypted stories. In so doing they create abstract sculptures, analog and digital photographs in which their lived experiences with water and their bodies collide. These artists come from an island surrounded by water, grew up near water and sailing, crossed the Pacific ocean, and grew up in the Arizona desert. Their environments inspired them to question the intersectional relationships between nature and self.

Shao-Feng Hsu's photographic methods incorporate the physical limits of breathing. He is particularly attuned to this as he had asthma growing up. Diving into a body of water, he transmutes his exhalations into shapeshifting entities. In Hsu's meticulously repeated underwater bubble rings from *Night Swimming*, the photogram impression of the artist's singular breaths gliding towards the surface, stares back at the viewers as if starting intimate conversations. Whether or not it's the artist's intention, the painstaking repetition of these breath rings are the collision where Thanatos and Eros wrestle amorously as they ascend. Hsu's



Shao-Feng Hsu, *Night Swimming*. Silver gelatin print, 16" x 20" each print. Courtesy of Nicholas Bruno.

bottom-up perspective in darkness broadens the conception of agency for other nonhuman organisms and their relationality, as if his body was not there at all.

Offering a different set of mood is the digitally-edited photography of Danielle Lin Cook. Raised in the desert of Arizona, Cook's digitally modified world lacks water. Hyperreal and ominous air circulates throughout the blue sky that echoes in her uncanny pictures. In *Forest*, Cook's sardonic display of fake palm trees, the sort used to mask wifi signal towers, she invokes the intersection of nature and technology. The artist addresses issues of her own struggle to balance her dependency on engulfing social media, a source of guilt and inspiration, alongside her disdain for the invasive flora of developing desert cities. Cook's work insinuates that the interference of technology in nature is ever-pervasive and unavoidable.



**Danielle Lin Cook, (Clockwise) *Forest*, *Teamwork*, *Pool Party*, *Real Estate*.
Courtesy of Nicholas Bruno.**



Irene Cai, *Machine #1 – Yes, They are Dying*. Woods, soil, plants, paper, water, fertilizer, 60"x60"x10"

In contrast to Hsu's acts of leaving ephemeral impressions in the water, Irene Cai's machines take the form of markings made from the subtle streams of water, filtered through a soil bed where the artist has placed live house plants. *Machine#1 – Yes, They are Dying*, made of oversized wooden frames, rolled paper, plants and soil, fabricates a solemn and visual conversation between recycled water and gravity. With the help of these sculptural 'machines', Cai's work not only discloses secret messages of the hydraulic circulatory system, but also becomes a memento mori - we're slowly witnessing the death of plants that provided oxygen. As droplets meet the surface of paper, the physical traces of soil act as an ink/watercolor. Cai's recurring concern with the relationship between ephemeral living things and their passing is not nihilistic, but rather about looking critically at relational constructions of the marks of emotions.

Bryce LeFort's relationship with water is also primary—he builds boats professionally. In the installation "Let's meet back here" the artist merges the natural movement of wind and water, and his seafaring craftsmanship is visible in his laminated and curved wood work. The way LeFort works is like that of wind and water. His practice evolves like the organic fractal expansion of possibilities, as he enjoys the unexpected characters of the materials to be revealed. He elegantly amalgamates the solid quality of wood and the perpetual flow of water through carefully cutting, laminating and curving the raw materials.

These artists unpack the constituent parts of their relationship with water, which relate to notions of temporality, death, alchemy, and escape. By doing so, they express beyond the limits of the present as a force of resistance and vigilance, and manifest the utopian function of art, the promise of futurity.



Bryce LeFort, "Let's meet back here", 2021. Laminated poplar and neon light, 8' x 5' x 5'

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