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Kelly Zantingh, *Seascape*
April 5 - May 9, 2017

“Those least responsible for climate change are worst affected by it.”

-Vandana Shiva, *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis*¹

In Kelly Zantingh’s animated video, *Seascape*, plasticine plants grow and chirp, appearing as hungry lips and fingers. In close-ups in hues of pink, purple, green and blue, the vegetation silently waves through stop-motion water. Perennial, ever changing and under-the-radar, underwater communities of shrubs float in unison and individually, happily living their lives. A sense of playfulness, naiveté and sincerity permeates throughout the motion of these florae.

Seconds into the animation, an outbreak infringes on this vegetation. Bright and lively, the florae become diseased, flowering sinister mold-like warts. The plant life closes in on itself and turns to mush, revealing the malleability of its form. The viewer watches the plants die a painful death. Plants are individually stricken, lending a sense of panic for both the underwater community and viewer alike. Vegetation shrivels, fingers twist.

¹ Vandana Shiva. *Soil Not Oil: Environmental Justice in an Age of Climate Crisis* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2015).

The shrubs seem to urgently scream for help, but the viewer hears nothing. The viewer is now implicated in this scene and is made aware of their complicity within the destruction of the earth; the animation's silence points out that humans are observing the mute collapse of nature and, in turn, are unsure how to respond. The artist, in this sense, holds the viewer accountable against their voyeurism and detachment from nature.

Referring to the process of coral bleaching,² the animation features many close-up shots of individual and clustered seaweed. These humanizing images lend a linear narrative to the life cycle of the vegetable kingdom. Using time lapsing, large amounts of time are condensed and paralleled with small areas of the ocean. Here, Zantingh aims to demonstrate the phenomena of time and space. The time lapse also illustrates humans' interactions with nature, specifically how they attempt to control the biological aspect of time.

Zantingh's work explores the popular understanding of nature as a place of refuge. The artist thinks that people see un-cultivated natural areas as locations to romantically separate from the rest of society, as vacation destinations.³ Because holiday vacations are optional, humans' passion for protecting the Earth is all too often fleeting. Their lax sense of responsibility for Mother Nature allows humans to haphazardly protect her. Fetishizing, patronizing and ultimately refusing accountability, a human on the planet must accept responsibility for their maladroitness. The animation is essentially cute but dark, fun but pointed.

² When corals are stressed by changes in conditions such as temperature, light, or nutrients, they expel the symbiotic algae living in their tissues, causing them to turn completely white.

³ Zantingh, Kelly. Interview by Katie Kotler. Skype Interview. Montreal/Toronto, February 2, 2017.

Zantingh originally became involved with environmental activism while completing her BFA at the University of Guelph. Discussing issues of land rewired her beliefs of nature as a pristine sanctuary. Zantingh instead began to interpret the reality of the environment as a site of violence, a location that has been exploited for political gain. For the artist, climate change is one of the most important topics of our time, something that she is constantly thinking about.

For inspiration, the artist looks to the innocence of youth and their curiosity in ways that adults might otherwise take for granted. Zooming in, human fingerprints are visible on the plasticine that forms the video's vegetation. The artist, who likens her work to that of children using Play-Doh, compares her aesthetic to films such as *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* (1964) and *Pingu*. Due to the malleable nature of plasticine, viewers can see how her work was made. Zantingh cites filmmaker Ron Fricke's films *Baraka* and *Samsara*'s time-lapse techniques as inspiration for her editing process. Thematically, the artist looks to the concept of the sublime in landscape painting, the naiveté of children and the contrast between human and nature's relationship with entropy/equilibrium.

Zantingh cites artists Mark Dion and Katie Paterson as encouraging allies. As an environmentalist/artist, Dion's work acknowledges the repercussions of the human impulse to dominate nature, particularly in his 2016 piece, *The Library for the Birds of New York and Other Marvels*.⁴ Katie Paterson's practice acknowledges the

⁴ In this piece, 22 live birds cohabitate with books, ephemera, images and objects related to birds from popular, art historical, scientific, and film sources. Central to the installation is an 11 foot high white oak, referencing a range of important philosophical and scientific constructs: the tree of life, the tree of knowledge, and the evolutionary tree, which serves to illuminate the phylogenetic system created by man to understand the structure of the biological world.

imminence of climate change. Her 2008 exhibition, *Langjokull, Snaefellsjokull, Solheimajokull*, features three records made of glacier ice, played until they melt.⁵ Both of these artists use multimedia installation to deal with the connection between art and science. Zantingh, meanwhile, hopes that if her audience has no prior knowledge of environmental activism, her animations will, at the very least, spark curiosity on the topic, and even provoke a sense of anxiety in the viewer.

Seascape presents the viewer with an unassailable truth: humanity is implicit in the destruction of the Earth. Zantingh has crafted an endearing scenario that relies on the viewer's sense of nostalgia for stop-motion animation. Fundamentally, however, this scenario belays a somber truth of our planetary state. The viewer, as predicted by Zantingh, can close the browser, return home, or distract themselves in other socially acceptable ways in order to forget about wildlife and their responsibility. All the same, hiding, cannot protect humans from the truth: the Earth is being destroyed and we are the only ones who are able to effect enough change to stop this. While no amount of sugarcoating can deny this truth, Zantingh's interpretations offer the viewer an insightful opportunity to take action.

-Katie Kotler

⁵ Paterson, Katie. *Langjokull, Snaefellsjokull, Solheimajokull*. <http://katiepaterson.org/icerecords/> (February 4, 2017).