

# Ocean Seeing

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Response to Mary Mattingly, *Triple Island*  
and Humberto Díaz, *Espejismo*

We like to see the sea. The glitter of light scattered by waveswell catches our eyes and diverts our imaginations. It's not just high-end real estate developers whose gazes get captured by a water view. There's something about water and sight. Joseph Conrad's *The Mirror of the Sea* has words for it, as it does for so many watery things: "To see, to see!—this is the craving of the sailor, as of the rest of blind humanity."<sup>1</sup> Like Conrad's sailor, I walk around harboring the desire to see oceans. Sometimes I slake that thirst on coastlines, other times by reading poems or stories, or sometimes through the ocean-focused scholarship that has come to be known as the "blue humanities." Some of my favorite ways to see the sea come from art.

Thinking about two installations, Mary Mattingly's *Triple Island* (2013) and Humberto Díaz's *Espejismo* (2006), recalls the centrality of visual distortion and disorientation in the maritime encounter. Blue humanities scholars constantly rub up against the ocean as a distorting lens, a force and an environment that change how we see and frustrate our capacities to visualize things whole. "It is human nature to stand in the middle of a thing," writes Marianne Moore, "but you cannot stand in the middle of this."<sup>2</sup> We see the world most often through the thin gaseous medium of air, and although air bends the color spectrum to some extent, it's when light passes through or reflects off water that its most spectacular effects strike our eyes. Rainbows, partial reflections, magnifications, prism-bending: The things water does to vision and light comprise a full catalog of aesthetic shifts. A blue humanities poetics of water and the sea begin with what we see as we see light bend and colors separate.

My point isn't only to connect water vision with high modernist and postmodern artistic experimentation, though both Mattingly and Díaz are heirs to and practitioners of conceptual art's experiment and expansion. In seeing and contemplating water as



Figure 1. Mary Mattingly, *Triple Island*, 2013, mixed medium sculpture, 16 × 32 × 32 ft. (4.87 × 9.75 × 9.75 meters). Photo credit Mary Mattingly.

and through art, these artists generate ways to come to grips with a medium that occludes, distorts, and radically shifts terrestrial experience. The ocean is the surface of the world and the preponderance of the biosphere, to a rough degree of approximation—but for land creatures, like humans, encountering the aqueous medium makes things difficult. The encounter produces a sea change, and not only a pleasurable one. The pearls that were the king’s eyes are hard to see underwater.<sup>3</sup>

When I spoke with Mary Mattingly recently about her art practice, one of the things she described was that her installations pay tribute to “conceptual mobility” or to “mobility as conception.”<sup>4</sup> In *Triple Island*, Mattingly assembled three structures on Pier 42 in the Lower East Side of Manhattan, facing the East River and looking out toward industrial Brooklyn. In a space that was flooded by Hurricane Sandy, the three “islands” carve out semi-independent living spaces for human survival. She calls the project a “proposal” or “symbol” for the idea of living inside the physical geography of New York City but outside its political and socioeconomic stratifications. It’s a place of internal migrations, a trio of structures that enable humans to be in but not of the patchwork labyrinth of the twenty-first century urban megalopolis.



Figures 2, 3. Humberto Díaz, *Espejismo*, 2006, sculptural installation, view of the piece in 9th Bienal de La Habana, Academia “San Alejandro,” Cuba. Photos by Humberto Díaz, courtesy of the artist.

I’ve never met Humberto Díaz, but when I look at the images of his site-specific 2006 installation, *Espejismo* (“mirage”), my desire to see gets productively confused. A mirage works through visual deception, and these images deceive intentionally. Is there

a better definition of visual art than a practice of intentional deception? Looking down on the image of a building's courtyard filled with brown water recasts the fantasy-blue vistas of the maritime humanities. We're not sailing the "mysterious, divine" Pacific with Melville or Richard Henry Dana.<sup>5</sup> Instead, Díaz constructs a visual puzzle. The water must have gotten inside the courtyard somehow. Did it seep up from under the earth? Will it continue to rise, threatening human habitations as the sea does in so many coastal communities today?

When artists play tricks, they aren't asking us to solve these riddles so much as change in sympathy with what we see. The mirage-flood of *Espejismo* feels like a gentle intimation of a coming intimacy between water and our built environment that is even now arriving in many places with more discord than in Díaz's carefully framed installation. The images make me think, as so much makes me think, of the construction of a theater: in this case a concrete O roughed out as a rectangular box, focusing attention on brown waters and the things they might conceal. It's an occupational hazard for a Shakespeare professor like me to see stages everywhere, but *Espejismo* would make an extraordinary site location for *The Tempest*. Into something rich and strange!<sup>6</sup>

Díaz's *Espejismo* insists that the blue humanities need more brown water, not to mention more artistic tricks. Distortion emerges not only as a baseline condition of the human encounter with water but also as an emergent language, a means to encounter expansive middles and defer overly final ends. It's an art that reimagines still water as visual motion.

When we talked about *Triple Island*, Mary Mattingly described "conceptual mobility" as motivation. Her installation invites living, not just looking, as the accompanying video narrative of a man who lived on and with the site emphasizes. In carving out space in Manhattan near the East River bridges, Mattingly's art practice included negotiating with the City of New York, the Parks Department, and assorted community groups. Negotiations with these various bureaucracies came to seem to her, in a phrase that may surprise any American who has ever struggled with an urban Division of Motor Vehicles office, as a form of collaboration. Resistance and even hostility become forms of collaboration and shaping. *Triple Island* represents sufficiency but emerges through relationship.

*Triple Island* redirects the living energy of the blue humanities into projects of sustenance and negotiation. More narrative-inciting than the evocative *Espejismo*, Mattingly's installation speaks to ancient visions of undersea castles and modern fantasies of the life at sea. By bringing self-sufficiency and maritime life into contact with twenty-first-century New York, she enables a reconsideration of the social and political nature of the human relationship with rivers and the sea. In its terraqueous enmeshment, *Triple Island* responds obliquely to epoch-defining storms such as Sandy and before that Katrina. The global forces that buffet maritime cities may, perhaps, be touched on a human level.

The blue humanities name several vectors, from reconsiderations of global and environmental history to new ways of reading maritime culture and poetics. The discourse needs the searing visions of experimental art to shape and shift the focus of intellectual labors that sometimes still bear the impression of scholarly archives as well as the taste of salt water. Imagining with *Triple Island* and seeing with *Espejismo* reinforces the primacy of vision in understanding the human relationship with the sea. We see with the artists, and that seeing changes how we think.



Figure 4. Humberto Díaz, *Espejismo*, 2006. Photo by Humberto Díaz, courtesy of the artist.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Conrad, *The Mirror of the Sea* (Marlboro, VT: Marlboro Press, 1988), 78.

<sup>2</sup> Marianne Moore, "A Graveyard," quoted from *The Poetry Foundation*, from *Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems 1907–1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 258, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51566/a-graveyard>.

<sup>3</sup> Paraphrasing Ariel's song in William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 1.2.399.

<sup>4</sup> Personal telephone interview, 1 April 2019.

<sup>5</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, eds. Hershel Parker and Harrison Hayford (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2002), 367. See also Richard Henry Dana, *Two Years Before the Mast* (London: Everyman's Library, 1977) esp. 22–29.

<sup>6</sup> Paraphrasing Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, 1.2.402.

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