



Figure 1. James Cooper, *Helmet Sculpture #3*, 2010, color photograph, 40 × 30 in. (101.6 × 76.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

Archipelagic Environments

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Bermudian artist James Cooper's underwater photographs take the viewer into a submerged world. It is a strange landscape of cerulean color washes, sandy corrugated seabeds, and rocky reefs that house alien, feathery sea creatures and mossy, multicolored mounds. His images provide us with a glimpse into a "world without us," while simultaneously inviting us into, and enticing us with, a haptic experience of color and light. We imagine ourselves swimming into this mysterious, rarely seen, "subaqueous" landscape.¹

Cooper's photographs visualize the paradoxical unknowing-ness of certain spaces that, in colonial times, included the island, the world of land above the ocean and sea. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has described, the world of nature in all its forms has been understood throughout much of human history as ahistorical—"inaccessible to us personally [through] the exercise of historical understanding."² The oceanic in particular evokes a number of feelings, and meanings, about this natural "world without humans." The oceanic has been imagined as the site for human access to a divine feeling of oneness with the world, an oceanic feeling that allows one to "tap into a subterranean source of energy, which manifests itself in the human psyche through a sense of limitlessness."³ The sea and the ocean have also been imagined as fearsome forces, always in danger of "punch[ing] through to the surface" where vulnerable humans live.⁴ And more recently, Karen Ingersoll has argued that the sea enables a mode of knowing based on the experiential feeling of "mental movement and travel within a constantly fluctuating world."⁵ As she describes the "oceanic literacy" of surfers off the shores of Hawai'i:

Afloat in the same nutrient-rich water that has been circulating on Earth, in various forms, for three billion years ... Kanaka surfers tap into the wisdom of how waves move. *Na Nalu* (waves) have arms, fingers, and legs—many legs—a face, a back, and lips. Waves move with a gut pushed by forces from the universe: the moon's currents, the sun's

reflecting rays, the pull of gravity, and rotation of the earth. ... Na Nalu move in general rhythms with improvised expressions of life, blurring some lines and shapes, and coloring in others, like textured tapestries across the globe.⁶

This is our most idealized notion of the aqueous, the one that holds our most aspirational hopes for how we, as humans, might inhabit and be in a relationship with this dynamic, fluvial world.

In 2019, however, subaqueous sites across the globe hold the residue and detritus of man's profoundly historical relationships with the surfaces and depths of the seas. If "the sea is history," as both Derek Walcott and Hester Blum remind us, much of that history can be seen on the ocean bottom's floor, riding into shore on the



Figure 2. James Cooper, *Helmet Sculpture #1*, 2010, color photograph, 40 × 30 in. (101.6 × 76.2 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

waves.⁷ In the archipelagic environments of the Pacific Ocean and the Sargasso Sea, on the gradient between seabed and island lies human garbage, our detritus and residue, which has become part of a new oceanic ecology.

Contemporary Caribbean environmental ecologies have been captured by artists of those islands, who are attentive to the Caribbean archipelago “as being acted upon in tangled webs of state interests and capitalist, corporatist motives.”⁸ With his “helmet headdresses,” James Cooper moves away from the mysteries of the subaqueous past to bring the larger ecological and environmental forces of the present into view and down to human scale. *Helmet Sculptures #1, #2, and #3* place the human and the natural in sharp and uncanny relation to each other.⁹ With “the ubiquitous (Bermudian) biker’s helmet” as a base, Cooper’s “helmets” both parody and evoke the grandeur of Amerindian headdresses of old, adding a Caribbean twist of hibiscus, pineapples, and palm leaves as adornments alongside gas containers and filled Sunkist orange soda two-liter bottles. For Cooper, neither the island nor the sea is any longer a world without humans.

In her essay on the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, Alice Te Punga Somerville argues that the “vast soup of plastic particles that circulates in the world’s largest ocean” includes objects that tell “stories not only about the cultures that produced them and set them adrift but also about the Indigenous cultures whose ocean they pollute.”¹⁰ Jamilah Sabur, a Miami-based, Jamaican-born artist who is a contemporary of Cooper’s, articulates what she finds fascinating about human residue: “Residue, if you just consider it as a felt experience, invites you into space I can almost feel the traces of history on me as I make my way through life. The shape of today’s world is sort of the residue of millions of past moments The sheer scale of it all, all the residue that is thick on the world, speaks



Figures 3, 4. Jamilah Sabur, *Untitled (Cheryl Annmarie and Simón José Antonio in Kingston)* (installation and detail view), 2017, wood, plaster, burlap, archival inkjet print on cotton rag. Courtesy of the artist.

to a grandeur greater than kings can have.”¹¹ “Residue” connects us to the past and provides Sabur with a tactile pathway back to knowledge of an island home.

The relevant past in Sabur’s solo project, *If Defined, Then Undefine*, is her mother’s childhood in Jamaica, an island nation that hosted, a century and a half ago and well before it became a nation, a hero of South American revolutionary history, Simón Bolívar.¹² One piece, *Untitled (convex struts)*, (2017), consists of structures that look like doorframes made of wood and plaster. One such frame contains a black-and-white photograph of Sabur’s mother alongside a small reproduction of a painting of Simón Bolívar. These “convex struts” or walls are portals to a past that Sabur deploys to deconstruct the rigid nationalistic boundaries of Caribbean space in the present:

I would love to see a united Latin America and Caribbean. We are perpetuating these blockages. With this show *If Defined, Then Undefine*, how do we undefine or redefine, it’s this push and pull and unraveling, rearranging, recreating this new meaning, a new being? Thinking of this architectural structure as door frames. These ripped out door frames ... it’s like how do we just break that?¹³



Figure 5. Jamilah Sabur, *The water is high in salt (almond tree: 11 Mckay Terrace, Kingston 11)*, 2017, archival inkjet print on stand. Courtesy of the artist.

Such a vision of territory, of archipelagic versus national space, brings Sabur back to the suboceanic. In response to an interviewer's question—"Why is 'underneath the water,' a space of significance for you?"—Sabur replies: "This thing I'm standing on, the Florida Platform, a geological feature, continues below: it's more than what I'm seeing, which makes me feel more whole ... it inspired a recent piece called *This is where I was born* (2018). Jamaica is a rock attached to the Nicaraguan Rise, which juts four thousand feet into the water."¹⁴

In another piece, *The water is high in salt (almond tree: 11 McKay Terrace, Kingston 11)*, (2017), the leaves of a lone almond tree are silhouetted by a luminous, twilight-blue sky. The glow from a small moon brushes against the very tip of the tree's leaves, another gesture at both the ephemerality of connection and the need for its visualization in an archipelagic space now imagined as celestial rather than aqueous. Sabur describes: "My mother's house was not up yet during Bolívar's exile in Jamaica in 1815, but I am certain the almond tree in what became her front yard was there, which was about four miles away from where he stayed. The tree and the land were bearing witness, holding memory."¹⁵ Both nutrient- and residue-rich, archipelagic environments hold the historical residues of the human and of the self, for good and ill, as they exist in relation with forms of geological scale such as the ocean and the island.

Notes

¹ James Cooper, *Reef #5*, on the artist's website, <http://jamesjamescooper.com/ew9lceqe13cv2fl4zh6ndhq9bof8gc>. The phrase "the world without us" is taken from the title of Alan Weisman's 2007 work, *The World Without Us* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2007), in which he asks us to "picture a world from which we [humans] all suddenly vanished" (5). The description of the underwater landscape as "subaqueous" appears in Nadia Hall's profile of the artist, "The Artist—James Cooper," on the website *Bermuda.com*, <https://www.bermuda.com/the-artist-james-cooper/>.

² Dipesh Chakrabarty, "The Climate of History: Four Theses," *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 2 (Winter 2009): 198.

³ Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 30.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 9.

⁵ Karen Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing: A Seascape Epistemology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 19.

⁶ Ingersoll, *Waves of Knowing*, 41.

⁷ Derek Walcott, "The Sea is History," in *Selected Poems* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 137–39; Hester Blum, "The Prospect of Oceanic Studies," *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (May 2010): 670–77.

⁸ Tatiana Flores and Michelle A. Stephens, eds., *Relational Undercurrents: Contemporary Art of the Caribbean Archipelago* (Long Beach, CA: Museum of Latin American Art, 2017), 24.

⁹ Cooper, *Helmet Sculpture #1*, <http://jamesjamescooper.com/esrr1mry12dwvjgcsuo7qu1c9ko8g>; *Helmet Sculpture #2*, <http://jamesjamescooper.com/3xwkc75ku235y2e3rrfpammos28zys>; and *Helmet Sculpture #3* <http://jamesjamescooper.com/xalkodmavujpkg646p5oqd34hx7pk5> on *JamesJamesCooper.com*.

¹⁰ Alice Te Punga Somerville, "The Great Pacific Garbage Patch as Metaphor: The (American) Pacific You Can't See," in *Archipelagic American Studies*, ed. Brian Russell Roberts and Michelle Ann Stephens (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 40.

¹¹ Cathy Leff, "Jamilah Sabur Presses Sensations of Space and History into Forms," *Cultured* (March 8, 2018), <https://www.culturedmag.com/jamilah-sabur-presses-sensations-space-history-forms/>.

¹² Jamilah Sabur, *If Defined, Then Undefine*, 2017, installation at Dimensions Variable, <https://www.contemporaryand.com/fr/exhibition/if-defined-then-undefine-jamilah-sabur/>.

¹³ Sabur, *If Defined, Then Undefine*.

¹⁴ Monica Uszerowicz, "Water as Memory and Dreams: Jamilah Sabur Interviewed by Monica Uszerowicz," *Nina Johnson* (November 28, 2018), <http://www.ninajohnson.com/news/water-as-memory-and-dreams-jamilah-sabur-interviewed-by-monica-uszerowicz>; accessed April 13, 2019.

¹⁵ Juan Maristany and Jamilah Sabur, "A Temporary Inhabitation: The Ghosts in Jamila Sabur," *MICE Magazine* 3 (Spring 2016).

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