Water

How have contemporary lens-based artists used water to develop the depiction of this elementary force, within the context of the Western / European art tradition ?

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Contents

This dissertation examines the work of contemporary lens-based artists, examining how they have used water to develop the depiction of this elementary force, within the context of the Western / European art tradition.

The investigation considers how specific artists have used the symbology of water, how they have approached water as a subject, and how they have used water as a medium in which art can be created.

Introduction

Water - one of the four classical elements - poses us a number of intriguing paradoxes.

It is the very stuff of creation - the medium which gave birth to life, and one of the first attributes for which astronomers search when seeking habitable planets. Yet it has - as with the *Tsunami* - the potential for destruction on an almost inconceivable scale.

It can be comforting - perhaps reminding us of the primal security of the womb - and enticing. Yet its hidden currents and undertows can threaten our ability to breathe in our adapted, air-breathing form.

In this essay, I will explore how and why the theme of water is a fundamental driving force in the work of contemporary photography and video artists such as Sugimoto, Critchley, Stemmer, Viola and other practitioners, within the context of the Western / European art tradition.

Water has impacted art in a number of ways, and I will be addressing those treatments within the contexts of :

- Symbology - the metaphors and connotations relating to Water
- Water as a Subject - where water is the primary (or only) subject of the artwork, as opposed to a context
- Water as a Medium - where the water itself may not be visible, but its properties and effects are an essential component of the image.

Some artists (and, indeed, individual images) may fall into more than one of these categories.

It is only relatively recently (in terms of art history) that we have actually been able to experience the underwater world, and - in any case - its very nature makes the environment unsuitable for many more traditional art forms (painting, for example).

My own interest in the sea dates back to my childhood; between the ages of six and thirteen, my family lived in Bridlington, in a house (Fig. (a) arrowed) which was literally a stone's throw from the promenade.

FIGURE (a) Drew Kirkland *Bridlington Bay*

In 2003 I certified as a SCUBA diver, and started to use a housed camera to document my dives.

At last, I felt, I had something I needed to photograph, and underwater photography gave a purpose to my diving trips to Cuba, Indonesia, the Red Sea, the Great Barrier Reef and the Mediterranean, as well as native British waters.

For the most part, these photographs have been published on my website at http://muttznutz.net/muttzblog/.

Ultimately, this interest was to be the reason I decided to study photography, and it was my underwater photography that led to my acceptance on the HNC course at Sandwell College.

My first underwater model shoot was in 2011, an entry for the Fujifilm Student Awards, which was entitled *Senses* (Fig. (b)). This was shot on 35mm film.

I was intrigued by the way that our senses are stripped away when underwater - our sight is blurred, and our hearing distorted; taste is limited and smell is impossible. Only our sense of touch is uncompromised - every part of us is touched by the water.

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FIGURE (b) Drew Kirkland *Senses*

At around the same time, I was tasked with creating a self portrait, and I decided to create this 'hydromorph'.

The effect of the surface ripples result in an organic, unpredictable and unreproducible image.

FIGURE (c) Drew Kirkland *Self Portrait*

The Symbology of Water in Art

> *"There's more than just the surface of life, ... the real thing is under the surface"*
>
> Bill Viola (Louisiana Channel, 2013)

The medium of water brings with it many symbolic meanings, and in this chapter I will concentrate on their origins, and some of the the ways in which contemporary artists have extended those connotations.

Mythology

Much of our legacy of western art is based in classical mythology, so it is perhaps worth examining this, at least in outline.

Water - and the sea in particular - has always held a fascination for those who use it, so it is no surprise that, for the ancient sea-going nations (such as Mycenean Greece), the sea god - Poseidon/Neptune (Fig 1.1) - was one of the most important in the pantheon, essential to placate and dangerous to offend (Sakoulas, 2016).

FIGURE 1.1 *Poseidon*

These deities almost all had powerful destructive capacity, and it is perhaps relevant that Poseidon/Neptune was attributed power over earthquakes, another random, unpredictable force of nature.

 The connection between the two would have been clear, as the tsunami that destroyed the Cretan island of Santorini followed directly after an earthquake (Hughes, 2010).

However, in Greco-Roman myths, Poseidon's character is (unlike his siblings, Zeus and Hades) relatively undefined and unpredictable.

His capricious (also - egotistical and vengeful) nature is, however, central to the Odyssey; the hero offended him - not surprisingly - by killing his Cyclops son.

The feminine counterpart of the destructive, predominantly masculine, deities is represented by sirens, mermaids and naiads (Fig. 1.2). Beguiling, seductive, fickle and enticing, these creatures typically lured mariners - not always with malicious intent - to a watery doom.

FIGURE 1.2 J.W. Waterhouse *Siren*

In more tranquil waters, the surface can be enticing and beguiling, as in the cautionary tale of Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (Fig 1.3), which deals with an invitation to a mirror world, literally intangible; to disturb the surface is to distort and destroy the illusion.

FIGURE 1.3 Caravaggio *Narcissus*

Another massively influential image is Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* (Fig. 1.4). In this image, the goddess of love is depicted as rising from the cleansing waters.
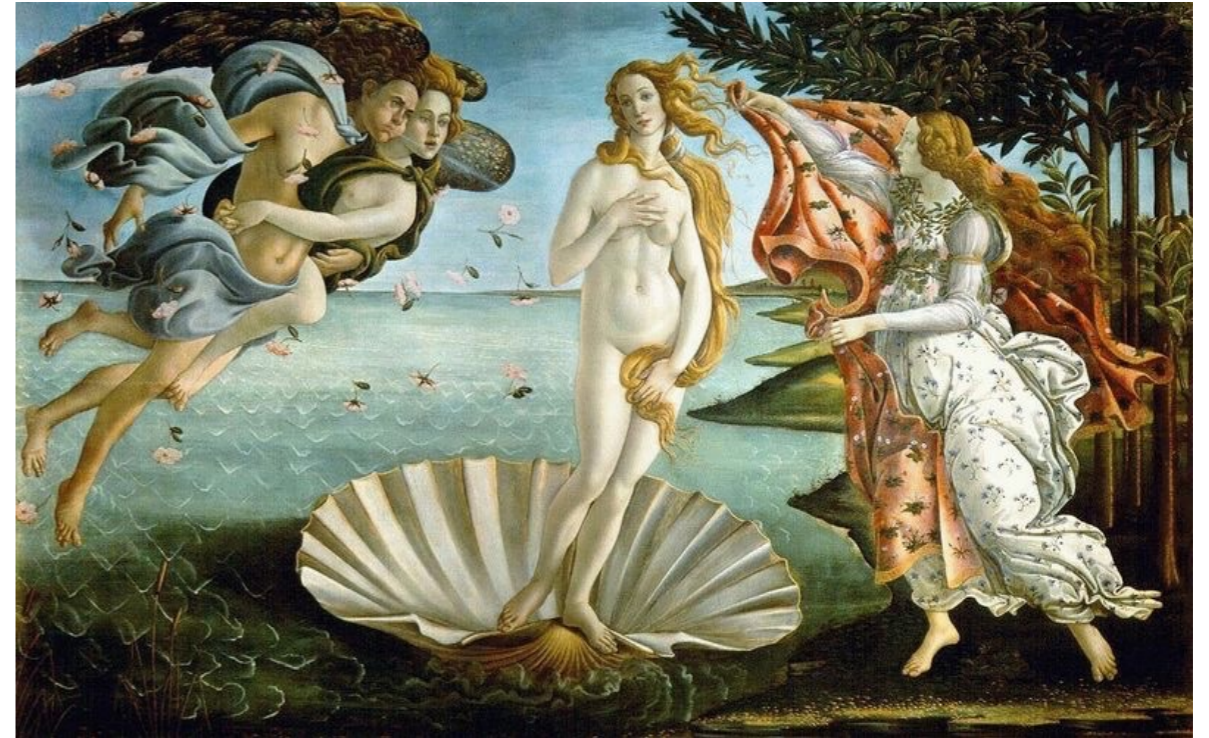

FIGURE 1.4 Botticelli *Birth of Venus*

Religious tradition

Even without referencing Christian sacred art, the symbology of water is crucial to this tradition - particularly in terms of the ritual of baptism - an initiation initially performed by John the Baptist on Christ at the start of his ministry, and a tradition which applies to all believers.

Ritual cleansing is not confined to the Christian tradition, however; it is also present in Judaism and Islam.

It perhaps features most notable in the Hindu religion, where the Kumbh Mela festival (in the River Ganges) is one of the largest pilgrimages in the world (Fig 1.5).

FIGURE 1.5 Sheeraz Rizvi *Kumbh Mela*

The other great archetypal water myth is that of the Great Flood, present not only in the Old Testament, but (among many others) in the Sumerian epic of Gilgamesh.

The Romantics and The Sublime

The sea holds a particular fascination, not surprisingly, for artists from island nations. The Royal Navy was at the very heart of the British Empire.

The zenith of this Empire coincided with the emergence of the Romantic movement.

Edmund Burke's Philosophical Enquiry (1757) connected the sublime with experiences of awe, terror and danger. Burke saw nature as the most sublime object, capable of generating the strongest sensations in its beholders. This Romantic conception of the sublime proved influential for several generations of artists. (*The Romantic Sublime*)

It is no wonder that seascapes formed such important subject matter for artists such as J.M.W. Turner (Fig 1.6).

FIGURE 1.6 J.M.W. Turner *Snow Storm - Steam-Boat off a Harbour's Mouth*

The influential critic, John Ruskin reported a conversation in which Turner claimed that he "got the sailors to lash me to the mast to observe it; I was lashed for four hours and I did not expect to escape but I felt bound to record if I did" (Turner, 1860)

This experiential, elemental process yielded a result that engages the viewer in the maelstrom.

As photography has replaced painting, however, this function has largely been taken by documentary, rather than creative, photography.

A particularly powerful example is Andrew Lee's *Edge of Creation* (Fig 1.7), which featured in the Wildlife Photographer of the Year awards in 2014. (This also continues in the experiential vein - Lee's lens melted as he captured the image).

FIGURE 1.7 Andrew Lee, *Edge of Creation*

The Influence of Literature on Art

The visual arts have also, of course, been influenced by literature.

Possibly the best-known example is Millais' interpretation of Shakespeare's *Ophelia* (shown on the cover page).

Although the character plays a relatively small part in *Hamlet*, this tragic/romantic image (which - in the play - takes place off-stage) has become iconic, and has been frequently referenced within photography - notably by Tom Hunter [1](Fig. 1.8) and Gregory Crewdson.

FIGURE 1.8 Tom Hunter. *The Way Home*

[1] Hunter's *The Way Home* is part of his series *Life and Death in Hackney*. It was inspired by a story of the accidental drowning of a young girl on her way home after a night out.

Clarke (2010 :48-57) notes that the late 19th century saw a fascination with paintings of young (often 'fallen') women who had committed suicide by drowning - a theme that would have satisfied the Victorian obsessions with death and morality.

However, it could be argued that these images bring with them the resonances of the iconic original painting, rather than offering additional insight to the underlying nature of water.

Another favourite of the Pre-Raphaelites (PRB), *The Lady of Shalott*, (Fig. 1.9) was inspired by Tennyson's poem about a woman who abandons her duties for the sake of an unrequited infatuation, despite the knowledge that it must result her doom.

FIGURE 1.9 JW Waterhouse, *The Lady of Shalott*

There is no apparent means of propulsion, and the river - a frequently used metaphor for life - is not turbulent, but, one feels, it is inexorable.

She shows no wish to escape her fate; on the contrary, she appears resigned and accepting.

Art in Other Cultures

In Japan - at about the same time as Turner - the terrifying nature of the sea was also depicted in Katsushika Hokusai's (1760-1849) *The Great Wave of Kanagawa* (Fig 1.10), in which the (almost central - and itself iconic) Mount Fuji (the nominal subject of the series of images) is totally dwarfed by the wave.

FIGURE 1.10 Katsushika Hokusai, *Under the Wave off Kanagawa*

Contemporary photography

Another connotation of a large body of water can be to suggest an ordeal or passage.

This may be a physical journey, but is more frequently used to indicate a spiritual change, or a transition in life.

This is, actually, another archetypal metaphor; such journeys - following death - are clearly referenced in the ships found in Egyptian tombs, and in the mythological Charon, the Ferryman (Witcombe, 2016).

It is also, of course, implicit in The Lady Of Shalott (Fig 1.9).

In the next image (Fig 1.11), shot for *Vogue Japan*, for example, Yelena Yemchuk implies an arduous - but probably necessary - voyage ahead.

The tranquility of the surface is contrasted with the apparent exhaustion of the subjects.

The low-contrast half-light - the series is entitled *Nordic Light* - adds to the expectation of a transition, and to the need for a completion.

FIGURE 1.11 Yelena Yemchuk *Nordic Light*

Rineke Dijkstra

Dijkstra is only one of a number of photographers who have referenced *The Birth of Venus* - in this case, with this image from her *Beach Portraits* series (Fig. 1.12).

The image offers a dramatic contrast between the awkward self-consciousness of the adolescent subject, and the "joyful celebration of female sexuality" (Roddick, 2016) apparent in Botticelli's original.

FIGURE 1.12 Rineke Dijkstra,. *Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26 1992*

The sea, in this case, is functioning as a backdrop.

However, as Manchester (2005) notes, 'she stands at the place where dry sand meets damp sand' - suggesting, perhaps, an emergence - a 'becoming'; the image reflecting the transition in her life.

Bill Viola

Viola is a moving image artist, who makes extensive use of water (as well as fire, another primal element) in his work.

This work is highly conceived, planned and constructed, and the use of the elements is almost entirely symbolic.

The same elements can have different connotations in different pieces.

Viola shoots most of his work at a high frame-rate, which is then replayed to create an extreme slow-motion effect. The resulting works typically last between 5 and 10 minutes.

I will address four of the pieces currently (as I write) being exhibited at the Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

Viola has acknowledged that a childhood incident has been a key influence on his work.

> At the age of six he fell into a lake and, before being saved from drowning experienced "this completely magical extraordinary world of colour, blues and greens. I was so fascinated and captivated and felt so comfortable"
>
> (Louisiana Channel, 2013)

Far from being frightened, Viola reflects on this as a transcendental catharsis :

> I see it constantly, almost, in my mind and my minds eye ... it was a kind of paradise.
>
> (Viola, speaking in Louisiana Channel, 2013)

Transfigurations

There are three works from this series shown in the YSP exhibition.

In each, the subjects are initially grainy, out-of-focus, and in the distance. They approach the camera, and as they do so, they pass through a curtain of water - at which point, we realise that this was the main reason for the indistinct images.

As they pass through the curtain, the gloom is broken by bright splashes of water, as they are (literally) enlightened; on 'this' side of the curtain, the performers are rendered in full detail and colour.

After a time, they turn and recede through the curtain, sometimes with a backwards glance.

> The decision that the people make when they come through the water: should I go in there? Should I pass through or not? It became focused on this moment of individual decision,
>
> (Viola, quoted in Korea Times, 2016)

> [what] Transfiguration represents is the most important capacity of human beings to completely transform their inner selves, not just the outside. All revolutions or ideas start in the human heart inside and then they move out. That's what you see happening in there with the people in these works,
>
> (Ibid.)

The Innocents (2007) is a diptych, featuring a boy and and a girl, both teenagers, in adjacent video channels (Fig. 1.13) . They are not, apparently, aware of each other, but the two screens run in broadly coincident timeframes. We can read from this that the subjects are experiencing a commonly shared experience, probably a transition through adolescence.

Their return represents the completion of the transition.

The Return (2007) features a mature woman; we could speculate that Viola is dealing with either the physical results of the menopause, or the traumatic crisis of function and as her children 'leave the nest' and her motherhood role ends.

The subjects of **Three Women** (2008) are one, older woman, and two adolescent girls.

FIGURE 1.13 Bill Viola *The innocents* (still)

The mother passes though the curtain first, then helps the two girls through. She returns first; shortly after, they follow. We can infer that these are mother and daughters, and that the mother figure is helping the girls through the transition, then letting go, allowing their independence.

The Dreamers (2013)

This work is different from the other works in that Viola uses water for effect, rather than as a metaphor.

It is also different in that the subjects are in a constant state, rather than undergoing a metamorphosis; reflecting this, water is itself relatively static - it envelopes the subjects, rather than engulfing them.

FIGURE 1.14 Bill Viola *The Dreamers* (still)

The seven subjects (diverse in age, gender and race) - each on a separate screen - are almost motionless, eyes closed as if in sleep, yet they are submerged in shallow water on a bed of pebbles (Fig. 1.14).

The gentle ripples in the water both distort the images, and play light upon their forms.

For me, this piece reflects the slightly shifted reality we experience when drifting in-and-out of sleep.

Intriguingly, it also, perhaps, is the closest to Viola's childhood experience, with the transcendental state of calm he encountered under the surface.

The Trial (2015)

(*This is Viola's most recent work, and is premiering at the YSP exhibition*)

As with *The Innocents*, this features male and female subjects, apparently unaware of each other, but sharing a common ordeal (Fig. 1.15).

FIGURE 1.15 Bill Viola *The Trial* (Still)

They are drenched in four liquids; The first, a black, apparently oily liquid, then a blood-red. They are comforted by a milky-white liquid, before the relief of cleansing, clear water. Finally, the water becomes a fine mist.

As with *The Innocents,* the changes in liquid are synchronised between the two channels, and the performers exhibit similar (although not identical) emotional reactions.

> Viola calls this 'five stages of awakening through a series of violent transformations'. (.... he revealed that neither 'actor' was told what they were in for during the shoot. Their shock and eventual relief when the deluge ends is real.)
>
> (Compton, 2015)

Like the preceding pieces of Viola's work, this strikes me as a comment on our humanity; we have, in common, experiences, emotions and trials, and although we must pass through them alone, these represent shared traumas.

I found this to be an incredibly powerful piece, all the more so, in retrospect, with the knowledge that the performances were unprompted and unrehearsed.

Tristan's Ascension (2005)

This piece, together with it's companion, *The Fire Woman*, were exhibited separately (at YSP) from the others, in The Chapel gallery. Both are shown sequentially on a large, vertical-format screen. This piece was filmed in extreme slow-motion, then reversed.

From the description at the gallery, these pieces, developed as part of a collaboration based on the legend of Tristan and Isolde, shows the power of attraction of these lovers - a force that could not be contained in earthly terms (Fig. 1.16).

Small drops of rain appear to fall around the slab, but then - as the volume of water increases, we realise that the deluge is being dragged upwards, rather than falling.

The man ascends from the slab and is slowly dragged towards the top of the screen.

In this case, Viola is using the water to show the power of the spiritual attraction between the lovers, overcoming even gravity, to draw their souls together - even in death.

The subject, a bearded man, is lying on a slab. He may be dead.

Viola's work combines several of the themes identified earlier.

He deals extensively with spiritual and emotional transitions, of course, and many pieces represent the cleansing / purification of a baptismal.

There is a clear resonance - in common with pieces such as *Transfigurations* and *The Trial* - with the visceral, experiential action Turner undertook in his encounter with the storm.

FIGURE 1.16 Bill Viola *Tristan's Ascension* (still)

Emma Critchley

Critchley is a visual artist and academic, who has worked extensively underwater. Her *Fear of Falling* series (Fig. 1.17) was shortlisted for the AOP Assistant Awards in 2008.

FIGURE 1.17 Emma Critchley *Fear of Falling*

The main themes in her work involve the interaction of time, our bodies in water, and the process and function of breathing.

Her early underwater work was posed - and is lit - using techniques which simulate surface portraiture (as opposed to 'normal' underwater lighting).

Initially, we are unable to place the subtle differences - in the subjects' hair and skin tone, and in the altered buoyancy of body fat and clothing - which render the images slightly dreamlike and unsettling.

> I'm interested in the way water changes the relationship we have with our bodies, the way we see and hear things, and the difference in gravity.
>
> (Critchley, quoted in Phillips, 2011)

However, it is probably the medium of moving image that has given her the means to explore her chosen themes.

Metamorphosis (2012) and *Reflection* (2011) both feature performers - (female and male respectively) in shallow water. They are motionless throughout the two-minute loop, but their reflections on the surface shimmer and flicker.

> My work ... deals with the underwater world: the threshold state that the body enters between breathing in and breathing out, and when you hold your breath.
>
> (Critchley, quoted in Phillips, 2011)

Critchley frequently uses freedivers as her performers; their skills mean that they are able to breath-hold for extended periods, and still look composed - particularly essential when dealing with the automatic reflex of breathing.

Two Breathe (Fig. 1.18) features two backlit torsos in close proximity, moving together and apart as they breathe.

FIGURE 1.18 Emma Critchley *Two Breathe* (still)

> I am interested in the breath being a link between two worlds or spaces: above and below the water's surface and also the link between our internal body and the external world.
>
> (Critchley, quoted in Wallace-Thompson, 2015)

Her photographic series *One Breath* deals with this, the exposure of the camera being limited to the duration of the subject's single breath.

However, this theme is perhaps best explored in her short film, *Single Shared Breath* (Critchley, 2011), in which a couple kiss for 2mins 30 secs (Fig. 1.19).

The tension, the need to breathe - particularly in the male subject, whose neck muscles are pumping by the end of the shot - is palpable. [2]

FIGURE 1.19 Emma Critchley *Single Shared Breath* (still)

The breath, an exchange, an invisible circulation, an ebb and flow that allows for the continuation of life. Its path provides a link between internal and external. Like a silken thread it elegantly weaves its way, stitching body to environment, reminding us of our dependence on that which surrounds us. External enters internal. Internal reaches to external. It is like a free spirit, an embodiment of life, freely flowing, rhythmically playing between worlds.

(Critchley, *The Breath*)

Given Critchley's perspective (our lungs converting air into the oxygen that fuels our bodies), the kiss becomes even more intimate; the lovers, with their breath, are exchanging (metaphorically) their inner selves, and (in literal terms) their very lifeblood.

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[2] The experiential tension in *Single Shared Breath* is even more pronounced in the film *Lydia* (Pier Pictures, 2015), in which freediver Marina Kazankova is bound (underwater) to a chair for almost the full duration of this one-shot, four minute short. As the shot develops, the suspense we feel increases to become almost physical.

Also worthy of mention is Critchley's installation work.

Passage (2015), which was installed at the NARS Foundation in Brooklyn, features a constructed, distressed passage, proportioned to match a video of an underwater passage, recorded as a 10 minute loop with sound.

The illusion (Fig.1.20) is that that the corridor continues into the underwater space; that we can walk along the distressed, darkly lit passage, directly into this world of water, beyond which the light beckons.

FIGURE 1.20 Emma Critchley *Passage* (installation view)

The title of the piece can be taken in both senses; as physical passage, and as a life transition - the same metaphor used by Viola.

The environment to which we are directed is alien - to enter it, we will need to adapt - but welcoming and attractive. Ultimately, however, it will be our only choice.

Water as Subject Matter

> *'These landscapes of water and reflections have become an obsession'*
>
> (Monet, C. 1908)
>
> *'You could not step twice into the same river'*
>
> (Heraclitus)

In this chapter, I intend to address the portrayal of the visible aspects of the water itself - either its presence, or its absence.

History

Although the surface of water was addressed in Classical painting, the constraints of the studio[3] meant that it was first really addressed in the 19th Century.

Claude Monet, in particular, was fascinated by the surface of water, and it was this painting - *Impression - Soleil Levant* (Fig 2.1) that gave the movement its name.

FIGURE 2.1 Claude Monet *Impression - Soleil Levant*

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[3] Both the PRB and the Impressionists were liberated from the studio by two technologies - the development of railway networks, and the production of oil paint in pre-mixed tin tubes.

(Januszczak, 2011; Winsor & Newton)

It could also be argued that the growing use of photography liberated painters from the expectation of mimetic reproduction.

Monet was intrigued by the (literally, of course) fluid nature of water surfaces.

Clarke notes that 'one can see ... how novel it was for Monet to concern himself ... with the subject of water surfaces' (2010 : 79)

We can see Monet's fascination with reflections, for example, in *Regattas at Argenteuil* (1872) (Fig 2.3) - in perceptual terms, so much more realistic than Caravaggio's *Narcissus* (Fig1.3).

Clarke also notes that it was, perhaps, the inability of photography to accurately capture this subjective appearance (together with the inadequacy of existing painterly conventions) that made it so attractive to the painter. (2010 : 83-85)

FIGURE 2.3 Claude Monet *Regattas at Argenteuil*

Water Lilies

FIGURE 2.2 Claude Monet *Water Lilies*

We cannot consider Monet, of course without considering his *Water Lilies* (Fig.2.2).

The massive three-canvas oil painting at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), for example, really needs to be experienced at full scale, and in three dimensions, as the creamy-white of the lilies is laid on top of the swirling water surface.

Leonardo da Vinci

da Vinci did address the movement and surface of water, specifically with his *Deluge* sketches (Fig. 2.4), which prefigure Turner by some centuries

Clarke (2010: 25) maintains that these studies had a scientific or documentary intent, and has excluded them from his analysis on this basis, and in that these studies had 'no major significance with respect to his paintings'.
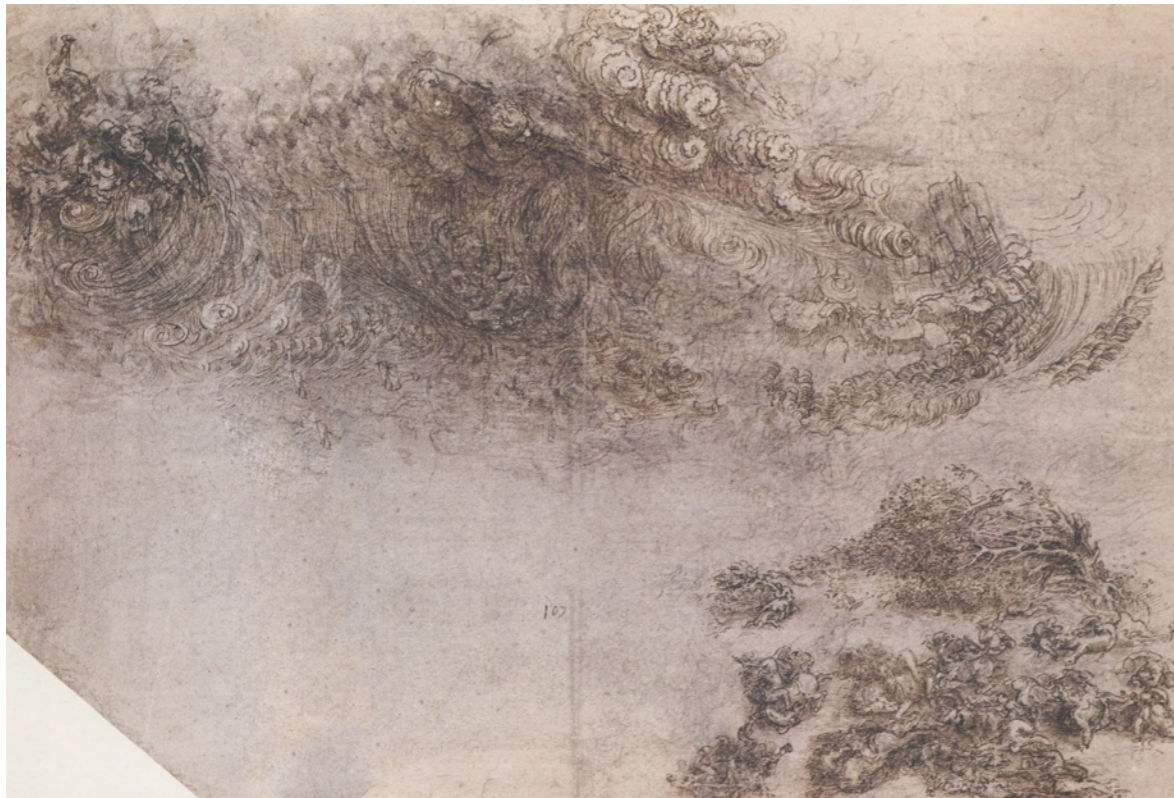
FIGURE 2.4 Leonardo da Vinci *A Tempest*

However Clayton (2004) notes that 'These were in principle studies towards his never-completed Treatise on Painting'.

Januczak (2016) claims these are an 'intense & pessimistic religious vision, disguised as science', on the basis that

- He has evidence that they record a historical event - which has been repeated in recent years (CSFReiti 2012)
- da Vinci's sketches include a representation of God, trumpeting his wrath - therefore they do not count as 'science'

I think that Janusczak is overstating the case here. These were sketches, rather than finished works, so we cannot really gauge da Vinci's intent.

Most importantly, I think we also have to consider the context of the times, in which God and the Angels were perceived - even by a man of science - as being every bit as as real as the law of gravity, rather than being an optional matter of belief.

Photography

Whilst the tradition of the sublime has been assumed by documentary photographers, landscape techniques have also been used to create images which view the water surface as part of the tonal palette.

By adopting a long exposure the surface is rendered as a flat - often ethereal - plane. This technique has been used (or even enforced, by the constraints of the recording medium) since the very start of landscape photography, as *Pyramid Lake* (Fig 2.5) by Timothy O'Sullivan (from 1867) demonstrates.

This style has been widely adopted (and sought after) by landscape photographers seeking to produce a more tranquil, ethereal quality to the water (Fig. 2.6) - in contrast to capturing the destructive awe of the Sublime.

FIGURE 2.5 Timothy O'Sullivan *Pyramid and domes, Pyramid Lake, Nev.*

FIGURE 2.6 Çukur, A. *Never*

Hiroshi Sugimoto

Interestingly, it was again Japan, that probably produced the most influential exponent of minimalist surfaces; Sugimoto in his *Seascapes* series, was one of the first photographers to deliberately reduce the image to just the sea and the sky, the horizon evenly bisecting the image between these two primal elements.

Initially, as Wittman (2009:182) notes, our attention is drawn by the differences between the images. The tonality of *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica 1980* (Fig. 2.7) , for example, is completely inverted in *Bay of Sagami, Atami 1997* (Fig. 2.8), while the fog (itself, of course, composed of water) in *Tyrrhenian Sea, Scilla 1993* (Fig. 2.9) all but completely obscures the horizon, rendering the image into a single gradient.

However, much of Sugimoto's work is rooted in his belief that we are constituted of the sum total of human experience; that we carry within us the memories of previous generations.

As with Viola, this stems from a childhood experience :

> My first view of the ocean came as an awakening. Of course I must of seen the ocean before, but this is my earliest and most vivid recollection of it.
> The horizon line where the azure sea met the brilliant sky was razor-sharp the samurai sword's blade. Captivated by this startling yet oddly familiar scene, I felt I was gazing on primordial landscape the experience,
> The experience left an indelible mark on me. (Sugimoto, 2005:14)

FIGURE 2.7 Hiroshi Sugimoto *Caribbean Sea, Jamaica 1980*

FIGURE 2.8 Hiroshi Sugimoto *Bay of Sagami, Atami 1997*

Within this context, Wittman (2009) suggests, the *Seascapes* series attempts to depict the eternal essence of the bodies of water in a way that transcends a specific time. The surface exists outside time, as it has always existed, confounding our perception of time as a modal progression.

> Although a photograph captures a single moment of time and fixes it on paper, Sugimoto reinforces time as duration and and makes you feel as if time stands still and moves on at the same time. (Wittman, 2009:186)

A wider perspective is taken in the narration of *Memories of Origin* :

> Sugimoto has been searching for the universality of human beings. Through him we might meet the recollection of the beginning. (Sugimoto, 2012)

Sugimoto's work has, interestingly, been exhibited with Mark Rothko's monochrome abstract expressionist painting.

The image below (Fig. 2.10), from the exhibition at the PACE Gallery, shows how the respective forms work together in terms of the exhibition design, although the two artists are approaching from completely different conceptual directions.

Indeed, Moore, N. (2012) points out that encouraging the viewer to perceive a horizon line 'flies in the face' of Rothko's abstract expressionist 'rejection of three-dimensionality, illusionism, narrative and the representation of the object'.

FIGURE 2.9 Hiroshi Sugimoto *Tyrrhenian Sea, Scilla 1993*

FIGURE 2.10 Pace Gallery *Installation View*

The Absence of Water

For photographs taken underwater, the water itself is more difficult to portray. Many photographers actively try to eliminate the presence of the element itself from their images.

However, we can infer the presence of water by its displacement - in the form of bubbles.

FIGURE 2.11 Emma Critchley *Figures of Speech*

Emma Critchley (*see Chapter1*) use bubbles to show the (literal) form of words as her subjects articulated in her series *Figures of Speech* (Fig. 2.11).

Susanne Stemmer

Stemmer combines her personal work with distinctive commercial fashion and beauty photography.

Her *Under Water* exhibition (Fig 2.12, Fig. 2.13) gives an impression of the blurred vision and distortion of time - and excitement - we can encounter when immersed.

In contrast to most underwater photography (including much of her own commercial work), where the intent is to freeze a moment, these are intentionally dynamic.

FIGURE 2.12 Susanne Stemmer *Grace*

The confusion of light - refracted from the surface, from backlighting, and bouncing off the swirls of particles and bubbles - is integral to the images.

These are pure celebration, expressing the joy of 'the life aquatic', the sense of living outside of time.

Her artist statement notes:

> The characters illustrated in her works are free and boundless as soon as they immerse. A physical freedom with the imaginary loss of gravity as well as mental freedom. (Stemmer, 2013)

FIGURE 2.13 Susanne Stemmer *Perception*

Again, there is a sense of a transition here - albeit a temporary one - wherein our concerns with the day-to-day world shift into insignificance.

Again, this is reflected in her artist statement:

> abandoning their image they have in society, having the feeling nobody is watching them – finally being able to release themselves from all conventions and drop the mask they are wearing in society.
>
> (Stemmer, 2013)

In the image in Fig. 2.14 - for the *Pearls* catalogue, Stemmer again uses bubbles to give a dynamic sense of immediacy. Far from trying to eliminate bubbles, she has developed her own 'bubble machines' to fix the context of her shots (Lifestyle Magazine, 2015).

FIGURE 2.14 Susanne Stemmer *Pearls*

However, she is also able to deliver the more conventional art-fashion underwater image. Fig. 2.15 is from a shoot for *Austria's Next Top Model*.

FIGURE 2.15 Susanne Stemmer *ANTM*

Maya Almeida

London-based Maya Almeida has used uses large-scale bubbles (probably composited) to confuse our sense of scale in her *Water Babes* series (Fig 2.16).

FIGURE 2.16 Maya Almeida *Water Babes*

Almeida has also produced a series of images entitled *Water Sculptures*) based on silks underwater (shot in natural light) (Fig. 2.17).

These combine soft, fluid forms with the gorgeous natural textures and colours.

FIGURE 2.17 Maya Almeida *Water Sculptures*

By inverting the image (and, thereby, displacing our reference to the water), the fabric takes on the appearance of a solid form, defying gravity as it hovers above the surface.

For Almeida, the daughter of an artist, this awareness of form is not coincidental:

> In my early years, I was influenced by sculpture and architecture, being drawn to dimensionality, structures and hard light, and artists such as Alberto Giacometti and Constantin Brâncuși.
>
> (Wilson, 2014)

Almeida normally shoots on breath-hold (as opposed to SCUBA). In common with Stemmer, she feels a sense of calmness when underwater:

> We've all felt it at some stage – the harmonising effects on mind and body. Be it in the open ocean or in a quiet moment somewhere alone. Many freedivers describe being underwater as a return to self… Where one calmly looks inside and becomes much less conscious of what is happening around.
> Associated with both sea and sky, it can represent freedom, loyalty, intuition, inspiration, and spirit.
>
> (Almeida, 2015)

Water as a Medium

> *"I'm finding moments in a dream"*
>
> *Howard Schatz* (2007 : 14)

A number of photographers have used the effect of water in order to create a surreal, disturbing - and organically unreproducible - effect within their images.

This may take the form of the distorted reflections created by the surface - either from above or below - or simply by using the unique qualities of light produced within the medium.

The most obvious effect, however, is probably that of the suspension of gravity.

History

Clarke's book deals with the use of water in recording media (inks, watercolours, and the like) (2010), but for the sake of brevity I will limit this analysis to the use of water as a component of the composition.

There were limited attempts to depict the underwater world in painting - notably by the PRB - in particular, Burne-Jones (Fig. 3.1) and Waterhouse.
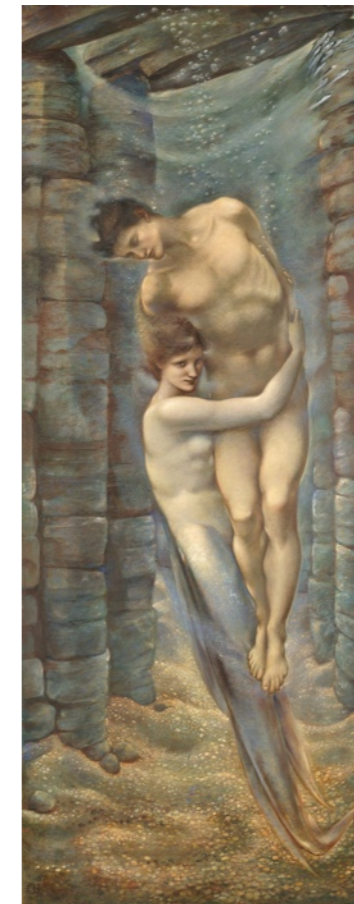
FIGURE 3.1 Burne-Jones *The Depths of the Sea*

And - although we think of underwater photography as a relatively recent innovation, this field also saw some interesting pioneers, as early as the 1930s.

Toni Frissell

Frissell was a noted fashion photographer for Vogue, who set up a series of images for the magazine in a dolphin tank (Fig 3.2).

This was shot in 1939, and Frissell went on to become a documentary photographer in WWII.

FIGURE 3.2 Toni Frissell *Fashion Model Underwater*

Bruce Mozert

Mozert started taking underwater photographs to promote the Silver Springs resort, starting in 1938. This shot (Fig. 3.3) - of actress Ginger Stanley - was taken in 1958.

FIGURE 3.3 Bruce Mozert

He continued to shoot underwater at the resort until the 1970s.
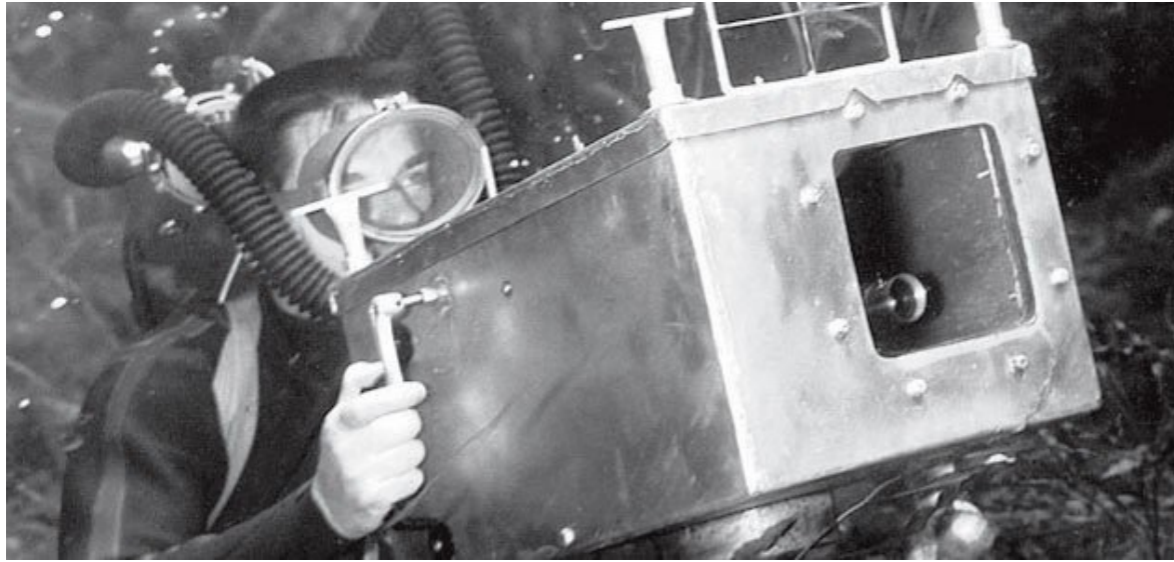
FIGURE 3.4 *Bruce Mozert with underwater housing*

André Kertész

In 1917, a young Kertész, recovering from his WWI wounds, took this image (Fig. 3.5) of a swimmer; Clarke (2010 :68) notes that this was probably the first to depict the effect of refraction in terms of the distortion of the subject's body, and the play of light created by the rippling surface (the same effect used in Viola's *Dreamers* piece).

This subsequently inspired Kertész to create his *Distortions* series of photographs, often using fairground mirrors.

FIGURE 3.5 André Kertész *Underwater Swimmer, 1917*

In the same way that Muybridge defined the movement of people and animals, above the surface, this image defined the transient complexity of these ripples, in practical terms something incapable of capture by the human eye and hand.

The influence of Kertész' image can clearly be seen in David Hockney's *Swimming Pool* (Fig. 3.6) series (Hockney, of course, has often used photography as both a source, and as an artistic medium).

FIGURE 3.6 David Hockney, Portrait of an Artist (*Pool with 2 Figures*)

Brian Griffin

Griffin was engaged by Reykjavic Energy to produce work for their corporate report. Part of the project involved a series of portraits of *The Water People*.

For these images, Griffin introduced a sheet of glass between the camera and the subject (Fig.3.7). This was 'hosed' with water (at different flow rates) in order to create distorted effects, creating a reflective, yet distorted invitation to a mirror world.

FIGURE 3.7 Brian Griffin *The Water People*

Howard Schatz

One of the first artists to experiment with underwater photography, Schatz explored the qualities of water, and in particular the qualities of surface reflections from below.

Unlike many of those addressed in this document - who came to photography as divers - Schatz was already an established photographer when he decided to shoot in-water.

Consequently, although underwater photography was not new (and the commercial technology was freely available), Schatz was probably the first to master the techniques of using the water as a photographic studio.

He published his first book of underwater photography - *Water Dance* - in 1995, long before the advent of digital photography (although he already had a substantial body of work by this point).

In order to do this, he needed to learn about the properties of light in water, and the physical production techniques - including the ideal chemical constitution of the pool, and the suitability of various fabrics - necessary for successful shooting.

Schatz typically uses synchronised swimmers or dancers as his models, and shoots in pool environments.

His early work explored the possibilities of working in this new realm, working with his models to celebrate the freedom from 'the killjoy realities of Mr. Newton's immutable laws' (Edwards, in Schatz 2007 :8).

Study #1335 (Fig. 3.8) is of model Shawnee Free Jones; 'When she came to our pool for a casting, I thought I was seeing a creature from another world'.

(Schatz [online])

FIGURE 3.8 Howard Schatz, *Underwater Study #1335 Shawnee Free Jones*

Since then, Schatz has, in effect, defined the visual language for underwater art-fashion photography, from the use of the surface reflections (Fig 3.9) - here further confused by the use of twins as his models.

FIGURE 3.9 Howard Schatz *twins Elizabeth and Jenifer Wymore*

> Whereas others have used water as part of their pictures, he has, more often than not, taken water out of the picture, rendering it invisible while keeping it in his artistic equation and making it the unseen partner to his subjects. It is the quality of water, not the water itself, that Schatz finds so alluring
>
> (Edwards, in Schatz 2007: 7-8)

Schatz also pioneered the use of the surface reflection alone (from below the surface), to create abstract, biomorphic forms (Fig. 3.10).

FIGURE 3.10 Howard Schatz *Underwater Study #2870, Dasniya Sommer*

The distortion of the lighting on the subject gives it an exaggerated three-dimensionality.

This image has the curved forms of a Henry Moore sculpture (Fig. 3.11), although (by definition) with a much less solid, more fluid result.

Like Moore's work, the figure has recognisable aspects of humanity - in this case, primarily the legs and feet. However, the 'hard edges' are softened to abstract the figure.

Interestingly, one of Moore's own primary inspirations was, indirectly, the product of water - the smoothing effect of erosion on the permanence (at least, within the context of a human lifespan) of rock and bronze.

> I have found the principles of form and rhythm from the study of natural objects…pebbles and rocks show nature's way of working stone
>
> (Moore, H., 1934)

FIGURE 3.11 Henry Moore *Large Two Forms*

That Moore intended these works to be shown out-of-doors, rather protected in a gallery, indicates he meant the weathering process to continue after installation; the work will evolve organically.

Perhaps Schatz's most significant production - and arguably the most impressive constructed (albeit composited) underwater image ever - is his *The Last Supper* (Fig. 3.12).

Schatz created the image specifically for his book, *H20*, and selected a palette of black, white and red (to represent betrayal). This is emphasised by the central figure's hair and gloves - and by the 'blood spatter' on her chest.

(Schatz, 2007: 149).

FIGURE 3.12 Howard Schatz *The Last Supper*

Christy Lee Rogers

Rogers, an artist working in Hawaii, makes photographs by shooting submerged subjects through the surface of the water.

Much of Rogers' process relies on serendipity; as she shoots moving subjects through the surface of the water, the images - shot in an outdoor pool - are far more dependent on randomising factors, such as the wind, or ripples created by the movement of the underwater performers.

Her early work was based on some of the mythic themes, and were entitled *Siren* and *Odyssey*.

> The beauty and tranquility of water led to my first experimentations with it as an artistic source. Metaphorically, water resembled purity; and a body immersed in it, free from gravity but trapped by many inabilities, was a huge dichotomy that was intriguing. Pain and suffering all mixed up with freedom and purity.
>
> (Harper's Bazaar Art China, 2012)

As with Viola's *The Dreamers*, the images are distorted by the movement on the surface, but Rogers looks for a far more extreme effect, and the quality of lighting in water renders rich, saturated colours redolent (as many have noted) of Caravaggio (Fig. 3.13, Fig. 3.14).

FIGURE 3.13 Christy Lee Rogers *Fountain of Life*

By lighting from below the surface, it becomes apparent through refraction; the result is to render her subjects in an organic biomorphism - Francis Bacon, without the despair.

Characters in her most successful collection - *Of Smoke and Gold* are dressed in costume from the *Commedia dell'arte*.

Commercially, she was commissioned to create images for palmer // harding's 2013 fashion collection (Fig. 3.15).

FIGURE 3.14 Christy Lee Rogers from *Of Smoke and Gold*

FIGURE 3.15 Christy Lee Rogers *Panthera Orca*

Conclusion

Symbolism and Metaphor

The use of lens-based technologies within the visual arts has undoubtably allowed artists to extend their range of metaphors.

In particular, the awareness that the viewer's experience becomes part of the work allows far more abstract concepts to be addressed than the mere placement of an object within a composition. This is not, of course, unique to the qualities of water, but the fluidity of the subject has facilitated a much more visceral experience.

This is probably most apparent within the field of moving image, where Viola, for example, has used the connotations related to water to address his spiritual subject matter at a primal level.

Critchley has also used this medium to create experiential work, exploring our most involuntary of reflexes - breathing.

The subject of 'Time' is a recurring theme, with Sugimoto's search for an ancestral perspective the most noted exponent; the only real constant with the oceans is their state of change.

It is interesting to note that those photographers who are also divers (Stemmer, Critchley, Almeida) reflect on the almost spiritual freedom they experience when they are below the surface - something I have identified in myself - identifying an almost physiological change in mental state.

However, the one recurring metaphor related to water - addressed in different ways by different artists - would seem to be a spiritual transition.

Subject Matter

Although I have already mentioned Sugimoto within the thematic context, the use of long exposures has had a dramatic effect on landscape depiction, with the surface rendered in an essential form, rather than as a texture.

Underwater, Stemmer has used bubbles, light and confusion to create an ethereal dynamic, in complete contrast to the typical underwater images.

Water as a Medium

The ability to understand how subjects look and behave within water has been an innovation.

The most significant application has probably been the apparent suspension of gravity; this has given the photographer the ability to capture the elegance of the human form in motion (as has Schatz), or - as in Critchley's early work - to create an unsettling effect.

However, the biomorphic reflections from - or through - the surface can create beautiful effects.

'Time' is also relevant in this context (although as a device, rather than a concept), particularly in moving image. Viola's use of slow motion and time-reversal - making water behave in unexpected ways - are central to the depiction of his concepts.

In conclusion, I would suggest that photography has profoundly affected the ways in which art has depicted water.

Although the issues are, perhaps, confused by the changing nature of 'Art' since the invention of photography (and, arguably, because of its invention), I believe the answer has to be 'yes'.

In fact, it may well be that the capacity of photography for mimetic reproduction has influenced - not least in terms of providing a reference - the ways in which artists in more traditional disciplines have approached the subject of water.

LIST OF FIGURES

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