



WE ARE OCEAN



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ALISON GRANT + TOKES SHARIF



Text by Gregor Sloss

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One of the most recognisable images of the 20th century, the 'Blue Marble' photograph taken by the crew of Apollo 17 depicts an earth that is lonely, vulnerable, precious, and utterly dominated by its ocean, and it is this earth that is explored in this exhibition from artist Alison Grant and ceramicist Tokes Sharif. Borderless as befits a waterlogged world, Grant's earth in the title piece reaches out beyond itself into the cosmos of which it is a part, to the stars, chiming with the seasons in their solstice alignment, to the sun from which it draws both light and heat, and to the moon which draws its tides. The land is delicately engraved, the sea, as is so often the case with maps, appears at first glance a uniform and featureless blank. The work is fashioned, though, from a reclaimed mirror, and a closer look reveals the face of the viewer gazing back, the viewer all at sea, reflecting the ways in which the oceans are instrumental in shaping who we are and reminding us that the water and oxygen that cycle through the seas are there in every breath we take. Since everything in mirrors is inverted the work reminds us too that the oceans are us, that the oceans in turn are shaped by human doing and human being. Mirrors, though, are freighted with more symbolic baggage than this. In folklore mirrors can capture the souls of the living, detain the souls of the dead and expose the soullessness of the undead; while in Lacanian psychoanalysis it is not the soul that appears, but the ideal ego. The mirror image is sharply defined, with a wholeness, coherence and integrity that contrasts with the uncertain, clumsy and amorphous lived self: for the infant, catching sight of it in an actual glass or in the gaze of others can lead to a sense of lack or, if he identifies with it, perhaps to a sense of mastery. ('He' because, according to Luce Irigaray in her mirror writing of Western philosophy, historically the place assigned to the female has been the place of the mirror, something she shares with nature.) In equating the ideal ego with the shape-shifting sea, *We Are Ocean* mocks that mastery. Grant also specifies that the mirror she is using is reclaimed: the ideal ego is thus not even sovereign in its own space, but must share it with many others who have gone before.

Grant's mapping here is based on a Spilhaus projection centred on the Antarctic in which the seven seas appear as one great ocean: it is thus a partial view, but then all maps are partial, defined as much by what they miss as what they mark. The map, as the saying goes,

is not the territory, and can never be the territory, and the closer it approaches to the territory the less it can function as a map, yet maps we must have, for without maps we can be here but no where. That 'where', we might also note, is itself frequently determined more by the map than the evidence of our senses: the 'Blue Marble' image with which most of us are familiar has been inverted to restore the northern hemisphere to its rightful position at the top – *rightful, at least, according to our maps*. It is worth remembering too that it was a photograph that was never intended to be taken as it served no practical purpose. The 'Blue Marble' added nothing to our scientific knowledge of the earth, though it transformed our cultural conception of the world. Much the same points can be made about Grant's depiction of the cosmos: alignments, asterisms and constellations are not stars, nor even the connections between the stars, but are chance configurations as they appear from the privileged position of our own sun, the one star not confined to a constellation, in which we seem to see meaningful patterns. If we were to shift our position far enough or remain in the same position long enough these patterns would disappear; moreover the patterns we do see are culturally constrained, determined by who is looking, but also by how they are looking, since both ancient Inca and modern Aboriginal astronomers recognise dark cloud constellations that are formed not by stars but by the spaces between them. They are also determined by when they are looking: in the original 48 constellations of Ptolemy's *Almagest* animals and mythological beings predominate whereas European astronomers in the southern hemisphere after the scientific revolution gave the constellations they encountered there names like Telescopium, Microscopium, and Horologium, the clock. Constellations are to stars, we might say, as the map is to the territory, while it was the writer Walter Benjamin who claimed that 'Ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars'. Ideas, constellations and maps are not 'real', not material, but they are indispensable, and it is the interaction between the real and the unreal that gives rise to the intelligible or the apperceptible.

These categories of the map and the territory, object and idea, the natural and the artificial, the human and the non-human, the earth and the world, the made and the given which proliferate throughout *We Are Ocean* might be seen as binaries imposing an either/or choice, but in the context of Grant's work, which treats the planet as a dynamic system in constant motion, they function more like the twin poles of an exchange or the systole, diastole of the oceanic flow, delineating the field within which the works operate. Twinning and mirroring, parallels and echoes and shifting perspectives are everywhere: in the growing

forth and dying back of *If Winter Comes*, for example, or in *Shifting Baseline*, where the contrast between the mediaeval boat graffiti and the modern mining equipment sets up an obvious tension between past and present, while the layering and accretion that are integral to the monotype process mimic the effects of weather, waves and geology to give a sense that the present too is past. *Tides of Time*, which depicts the oceanic elements transformed by processes both natural and industrial, reveals Grant's deep concern with her artistic materials, many of which are themselves derived from the ocean, and beyond that, her concern with the non-human more generally. Grant's approach stresses the giving of her time, which implies both care and attentiveness, and respect, a desire to work with her materials and what they are in themselves rather than to force them to be what they are not. A sense of joy and delight is important to her, and wonder, and also gratitude, since the seaweed and shells that feature in her work have been foraged on beachcombing expeditions, and have thus acquired something of the status of a gift.

Tokes Sharif also makes use of the gifts of the oceans in his ceramics, producing pots that follow the forms of frond and stipe and calcareous growth until, like amphorae salvaged from ancient shipwrecks, they become barnacled over by time, as though they already anticipate their own sea-change. Indeed Sharif and Grant have deposited a cache of his ceramics in the waters of Loch Fyne, an experiment whose results will no doubt influence his future work. In this we can perhaps detect an echo of the aesthetics of Ruinenlust, that 18th century cult of the crumbling and collapsed which was fascinated by the ruins of the past, but also with seeing the present in terms of its future decline and decay, a fascination similar to that which hovers over Grant's *Shifting Baseline*. The Ruinenlust that returns in our present historical moment cannot be the same as its 18th century precursor of course: then it was a meditation on the vanity of human wishes in the face of the terrible sublime. In a time of environmental despoliation, while it still acknowledges individual human transience and finitude, it might better be seen as a declaration of faith in planetary resilience. To look at Grant's *Shifting Baseline* is to see a machine that will inflict terrible harm as it scarifies the ocean floor, but it is also to see that its day shall pass and the earth shall endure.

The ruins that fascinated the period were sometimes those of ancient civilizations, sometimes the result of religious upheaval and sometimes those of villages abandoned with the coming of industry and the drift towards the towns, but their visual signifiers were

always those of weeds in the wheat fields, moss growing over castle walls or branches breaching cottage roofs, always those of nature reclaiming her own. For most of human history our habitations have felt under threat, in danger of being swallowed up again by the encroaching wilderness; now it is the wilderness that is under threat. This loss of wilderness, and loss of the sense of wilderness, is something meditated upon by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques* as he registers the shock of his first encounter with the Amazon, having come from a Europe where even the wild places are already 'written', absorbed and appropriated by the human. The sense of terror that envelops him in South America is also a wilderness of the mind, and the dread and disorientation he experiences compel him to try to make sense, impel him to write. One might say they hurt him into culture, in the sense that Auden intended when he said to Yeats, 'mad Ireland hurt you into poetry', not culture as something to be passively consumed, but as an urgent need, in this case culture as a prophylactic against the panic and bewilderment engendered by the rank profusion of unmediated nature. In 'The Crisis in Culture' Hannah Arendt suggests a different relationship, tracing the word 'culture' back through Cicero to the Latin 'colere', which could mean 'to till the earth' but also 'to nurture' and 'to dwell'. This sense of dwelling implies more than just inhabiting, it implies a sense of comfort and security, of being at ease, of understanding, of fitting in a place that fits us; it implies turning a house into a home and the earth into a world. It was said of Hannah Arendt that she lived on earth but dwelt in the world; she might have replied that this is what we all do, or at least strive to do. The world here is a cultural creation relating to the material earth in the same way that the map, the constellation and the idea do to their material grounds, and it is indispensable as they are, not least because it can help to overcome the primal terror of the encroaching wilderness. At one time we lived in a god-shaped world, a world made by and for the delight of gods, and in which they offered our only hope and protection: 'ein feste Burg is unser Gott', as Luther wrote. The reformation that Luther helped initiate, though, the renaissance, the growth of science and the advent of capitalism all contributed to a greater confidence and sense of control, to the birth of a Man-shaped world, a world in which Man had dominion. 'Man' here was usually biologically and always conceptually male, but did not include all men, and the indigenous peoples of conquered nations were always condemned to be natural. For those who did have dominion the natural world was their birthright to do with as they pleased, to manipulate, exploit and - the eighteenth century watchword - to improve, to increase its yield. 'Yield' itself is an interesting word: while it means 'to pay', it carries agonistic connotations of enforced surrender or wrestling

into submission; yield is also the term applied to the destructive potential of explosives. This is not inappropriate since, as the geographer Fraser MacDonald has noted in writing about British peatlands, devastation often looks like improvement. As the extent of that devastation has become more apparent, the loss of wilderness and wildlife and the incalculable harm of a changing climate, interventions have been proposed to fix or cure the crisis, but such interventions alone surely cannot be enough. What is needed is a change in our understanding, what is needed is for us to recognise and start dwelling in a world-shaped world.

It is thinking about what it is to dwell in a world-shaped world that drives both Grant and Sharif to their fidelity to their materials, materials which they do not see as mere materials, but as being endowed with a degree of agency. 'I ly in the corner, as a clodd of clay,' wrote the poet John Donne, 'attendinge what kinde of vessell yt shall please you to make of me' but neither Grant nor Sharif think of clay, or anything else, like this (and nor in truth did Donne, for he was writing of himself, being strategically obsequious in a begging letter seeking ecclesiastical preferment). Grant wants her materials to play a part, but to play a part as actors do, performing a role that is not of their own devising, but performing it in their own way: Grant's oysters are not representations of oysters, but oysters representing. Sharif meanwhile does more than simply follow the forms of the natural world. He experiments with oystershell and seaweed ash glazes and incorporates the shells directly into the body of his pots, as well as making use of restricted firing techniques which, while they relinquish a degree of control over the finished work and frustrate efforts at flawless execution, do allow for fuller expression of the mineral content of the clay. Like Grant, Sharif respects his materials and wants their full flourishing to contribute to the pots he makes: these are not pots *acheiropoieta*, not made by human hand, but they are pots not only made by human hand. His works are invitingly tactile with a deeply satisfying volume and heft; they are hugely desirable though their particularity resists the standardisation and commodification of that desire. Hannah Arendt makes a distinction between 'art' and 'entertainment' that is not mere snobbery, though it is surely partly that: entertainment, she says, is used up in using up our leftover time, while with art there is always some residuum left behind. We might develop this distinction further by saying that entertainment is smooth-bellied, seamless and shiny: it bears no trace of its coming to be and offers no hint of its ending, nor even of a pause or hiatus, as the algorithm is ready to play the next selection before the last one has ended; and its flawless surface perfectly reflects whatever

world is projected onto it, surrounding us and convincing us that the world is not a world but just the way things are and always have been, always will be. Sharif's pots, by contrast, snag our desire and nag at our attention, they chafe and will not let us alone, their apparent imperfections working away at us like the grit in an oyster. Sharif's pots represent a rejection of the Romantic fantasy of the artist-hero imposing his will on recalcitrant clay; they are a quiet revolt against ideal form.

In *Untitled I&II (For Bob)* Grant looks to pay tribute to an unsung environmentalist she met through her work on this exhibition, one whose work deserves, though it does not seek, such recognition. The instinct to celebrate our individual lives and to make a stand against the 'iniquity of oblivion' and the *damnatio memoriae* that would seek to erase every trace of our ever having been is as old as art itself, dating back to the palm prints found in prehistoric rock art from Lascaux to Sulawesi (though the latter is itself now under threat from the degradation that has resulted since its discovery from its exposure to pollution and the increased humidity of a changing climate) though the raising of memorials may be problematic for an artist, and a subject, whose core belief is to let the wilderness be. The twinned lithographs of *Untitled I&II (For Bob)* play with ideas of absence and presence, each containing the trace of the other: Bob nowhere appears but is everywhere there. As you linger with the works you gradually come to understand that his restraint is more powerful than any action, his absence than any presence, that this landscape is marked by his refusal to mark it. Grant does not give us his full name, and nor has he asked her to, but looking at these works it is as though she had written his name on the water, and the tide had carried it away, but the water had remained as his tribute; *Untitled I&II (For Bob)* is one of the most haunting works in the exhibition. Like the nagging and snagging of Sharif's pots, this haunting quality of Grant's work detains and occupies us, and this is key to how these works function in relation to the environmental disaster that provoked them. Sharif's pots are not 'about' the climate crisis; if they are 'about' anything they are about being pots. Like Grant's work they do not lecture, they advance no thesis, offer no programme of action, make no argument. This is not to say that the arts absolutely cannot do these things: you could use an aria to advance an argument just as you could use a teaspoon to dig a grave, though in neither case do the results seem likely to justify the effort, and, anyway, there are better ways of making an argument and there are other things that art can do better, like building a world. These works were made by artists seeking to imagine a world-shaped world, they dwell in such a world and it dwells in them, and in snagging and haunting us they invite us to

dwell there too. The fact that the work by Grant and Sharif is beautiful, satisfying, desirable, that it feels somehow fitting is not incidental. If it is to be possible to forge a world-shaped world and for it to become a world in which people can dwell, it is not enough for it to attend to the flourishing of the non-human, it must also allow for human needs and desires, for human flourishing. It must be, in the words of John Keats, 'proved upon our pulses'.

The work that dominates the room is Alison Grant's installation *Companion Species*. Overhead are four quadrats, normally used for environmental surveys to delimit the area under investigation, from which depend an array of 270 native oysters, sourced with the assistance of Restoration Forth, and one from the ancient beds of the estuary, long since driven to collapse, this eldest oyster hanging on a length of fishing line, the technology of people used to taking what they needed and only that. The installation forces us to focus on creatures we rarely think about, like so much else connected to the sea, despite their having been instrumental to our survival. The native oyster is considered a keystone species whose reef building can protect against erosion and foster the formation of other aquatic and semi-aquatic habitats, and whose filter feeding helps maintain the health of the oceans. The 270 oysters in the installation relate to the number of other species which, according to recent research, are sustained by the population of native oysters in Loch Ryan. That number, of course, includes ourselves, at least until overexploitation, pollution and habitat loss put the relationship, the companionship, at risk, a relationship which, from the analysis of prehistoric middens in South Africa, dates back at least 164,000 years. Whether it was one of those prehistoric ancestors who was deserving of Jonathan Swift's encomium, 'He was a bold man, that first eat an oyster', is unclear, but the joke – and Swift was not the first to make it – points to the fact that there has always been an otherness about oysters. There is something uncanny about their massing together, building their homes on the bones of their dead; something unfathomable, to the lay mind at least, about their opening and closing in response to the promptings of moon and tide; something in their sedentary lives that threatens the boundaries between the animal and vegetable; something about them that seems to belong to the realms of dream or delirium. When the arch-rationalist Sherlock Holmes feigns mental collapse in 'The Adventure of the Dying Detective' it is oysters he invokes: 'I cannot think that the whole bed of the ocean is not one solid mass of oysters, so prolific the creatures seem'. This apparent fecundity of the oyster suggests something else: their association with fertility, like their association with Venus or Aphrodite and with the tides and the moon, their gestation of pearls, all mean that, despite the fact that they

themselves change sex over the course of their lives, the imaginary assigns to them a distinctly gendered position. Even the word 'oyster' was once a slang term for the vulva, and is but a slip of the tongue away from oestrus. Little wonder that Holmes, an arch-misogynist as well as an arch-rationalist, is so scared: 'shall the world, then, be overrun by oysters? No, no; horrible!'

If we can pick out one thread that ties together Grant's work in this exhibition it is her conviction that we must learn to trust the ocean, and *Companion Species* is a celebration of the sea's power of nurture and renewal, a procreative power, a life-drive that can overcome the ego's destructive fixation on death. This reading is given added credence by the fact that the other threads, those tying this work together, are hairs gifted to the artist by Grant's own daughters, a threading and weaving that speaks of an intimacy of connection between Grant and her own flesh and blood and the oysters and the species they sustain, an intimacy of connection that demands an intimacy of care, now and through the generations. At the same time, the material presence of the hair makes us slightly uneasy, and Grant surely knows this, and asks us to wonder why. We are, after all, a long way from abject art and its gleeful spattering of bodily fluids: *Companion Species* is a moving and joyful piece and in itself it has no queasiness about it, it is only the knowing that makes it so. Human hair has long been preserved in locketts as a token of love or loss, emotions that seem appropriate as we contemplate the depletion of the seas. It has been used as a votive offering: Berenice, Queen of Egypt, famously devoted hers at the Temple of Aphrodite to ensure the safe return of her husband from battle. (It disappeared overnight, or so the story goes, but was discovered in the heavens as a new constellation, Coma Berenices, which still appears in star charts today, and is recognised too in non-western astronomies, though the Boorong people of Victoria see it as a flock of crows drinking rainwater from a puddle. As ever, constellations are in the eye of the beholder). The real reason for our uneasiness is the continuing power that the Man-shaped world exerts and its insistence on human exceptionalism, its insistence that Man, or at least certain privileged men, are a higher order of being than mere materials – and this despite the fact that tanners and dyers, farmers and laundry workers for centuries made use of the harvest of the human body, that powdered mummy migrated from the apothecary's cabinet to the artist's paintbox and that every page of a Shakespeare First Folio bears the taint of printers' piss, and despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that vast fortunes were made on the back of the trade in living human flesh. Grant sees that we must overcome this exceptionalism, not by degrading the human or

making of our children a tasty fricassee or ragout, but by affording the same love, care and respect as we give ourselves to everything else that shares its planet with us.

In the gallery, as Grant well knows, the threads will not hold and the oysters must fall. From the point of view of an oyster, though, this may not represent decay but growth, may represent the moment their free floating larvae abandon their juvenile existence and attain to their sessile maturity. To talk of the point of view of an oyster seems absurd, and probably is, but it is no more absurd than speaking of the mastery and dominion of Man. In *We Are Ocean* Grant and Sharif have sought to move beyond the damaging binary of man and nature, and have sought an understanding of making in which the earth approaches the artist seeking symbolic form and the artist approaches the earth seeking material form, and unless the two happen together the work of art cannot be done; a way of making that might also serve as a way of being, a poetics of reciprocity.

Gregor Sloss, *We Are Ocean*

To contact Gregor Sloss:
thewizedscribe@gmail.com



www.alisongrantstudio.com

www.studiobrae.com



