

The Erotics of Immersion

Responses to Floating Life

Gail Jones

Calenture

Art is given to the affirmation of misrecognition. It is the task of the artist to see things awry, to entertain the strange, to cast vision and knowing into foreign zones.

Early sailors, made vulnerable by long sea voyages in which they spent months on the ocean without sighting land, occasionally succumbed to a peculiar form of delusional misrecognition – called calenture – in which they believed the ocean was a kind of green rolling field. They so desired land, stability and the earth-beneath-their-feet, that they would fling themselves overboard in ecstatic delirium. This is a pathology, a confusion of haptic and psychic lives, but it is also an experience of the fabulous, and was often written about in a tone of awe and wonderment, as though what was being enacted was a kind of irresistible return, sometimes to the maternal. William Wordsworth, for example, wrote in 1820 of the ocean as a “breast” and a “couch” in which one sank “enflamed” (since calenture was also linked to heat) into “the depth of limpid floods.” Herman Melville (writing in *Moby Dick* in 1851) described calenture as the product of a “mystic mood” in which “fact and fancy ... interpenetrate, and form a seamless whole.”

The delusion of calenture comes to mind in the viewing of these paintings, not because they are about death or wild-flinging madness, but because they envision the ocean as a congenial, inviting space, one in which imagination is intensified and profoundly lives. Jo Darbyshire’s sea-spaces suggest a wish to inhabit the submarine – artistically, at least – as surely as we do the land, and to find in it forms of arousal, pleasure and aesthetic experience. Gage Roads, Leeuwin Currents, Rottneest Reef: these are all images of submersion that are deeply seductive: there are no horizons here, only dreamlike, drifting and dimensionless apparitions, gorgeous in their palettes and engulfing in their manipulation of planes and spaces. The forms are both familiar and unfamiliar: submarine life is the fantastic other to the terrestrial (as night is to day); so that there are efflorescing blooms, semi-transparent entities, organic flotsam and jetsam streaming away in invisible currents. These have an iconic attraction, but are also mysteriously impalpable, as if we know they are finally a vision and unable to be touched. So the first response is a kind of gratitude at being reminded of the apparitional life – in which one might dissolve, see anew, be taken by the soft vast force of another element, down, deep down, into a new imaginary sensorium.

Ukiyo-e

The term for the genre of figure paintings of the ‘floating world’, Ukiyo-e refers to images from the Edo period (1603-1867) of which Hiroshige and Hokusai are perhaps the best-known practitioners in the West. Centred in the Yoshiwara district of what is now modern Tokyo, the images were often of urban pleasure seeking – teahouses, kabuki, brothels, well-dressed encounters and so on,

nothing at all like the asocial and otherworldly realms Jo Darbyshire paints. Yet what she has derived from Japanese art is the redolence of the phrase floating world as a description not of ephemeral middle class pastimes but as a totalizing experience and point of view. What would it mean to see from the position of floatation, drift and watery sensibility? What would it mean to literalize this metaphor?

The result is images gained by sea-diving and contemplating the allotropic states of water – its capacity to steam and condense, its anamorphic effects, its filtering of light rays, particles and reflections. Particularly captivating for Darbyshire is the special-effects lighting that produces bright illumination against a very dark background, or the repetition of lozenge shapes or peak-shapes, such as occur when light strikes ripples or filters through undulations. In earlier paintings this was signified by bioluminescent sprinklings, or with strings of pearls becoming hoops of light; here parallel wave-lines and chrysanthemum-like patterns, such as figure in the blue and green designs of traditional Japanese body tattooing (irezumi) also occur in a shimmering radiance.

So although these are dark images, over all, they are also sparkling and oddly illuminate, reminding us of elements intersecting – water, light and the material body – and the sumptuousness of marine forms and reef-life, glimpsed in situ. One of the great pleasures of diving is to see the light patterning one's own body, to stretch out an arm and see it lined in fluctuating ropes of light, shifting as the body shifts, in a fleeting photography.

Ama

Among Hokusai's 30,000 extant prints are shunga, erotic images typified by fully clothed couples in the act of sexual congress, with their genitals gigantically oversized and pornographically visible. A special genre of ukiyo-e, much treasured by connoisseurs of erotic art, shunga include images of Ama, female abalone divers, clearly a source of fantasy for male Japanese artists. Depictions of Ama, often figured on the sea-shore or diving in pleated waves, include explicitly lesbian scenes (sometimes with dildos, such as sea-cucumbers), and all celebrate the ocean as a kind of female space. The most famous of Hokusai's shunga is that of an octopus performing cunnilingus on a prone Ama, her head thrown back and her eyes closed in luxurious exhaustion. It is an image directly quoted in one of Darbyshire's largest works and its translation is a homage to the mystery of this image; although bizarre it is not, curiously enough, utterly monstrous or repellent, but suggestive of the license and creativity of dream-work and fantasy. Shunga, though a male form, includes images of female pleasure, both in intercourse and self-pleasuring solitude, and these too form a set of physical references in the collection of Floating Life. Edo women, often sexually transported, are superimposed on the under-waterscapes.

The effect is to heighten the metaphoric connections between women's bodies and sea-life. Suddenly the labial crevices of the images become apparent, the convolulus shapes, the anatomical tendrils; there is a wonderful complication of the boundaries of bodies and sea-visions. In this context the use of abstract pink and orange shapes seems also sexualized: Jo Darbyshire is a truly brilliant colourist and these points of visual pause and captivation betoken the psychaesthetic confusion of bodies and surrounds and the collapse of inner and outer spaces. What is being attempted here is a suggestion of the eroticism of

immersion; the sense that floatation in silken water, painted in glints of light, subject to powerful buoying and blooming and wave-like motion, is a model for both female sexual pleasure and general aesthetic experience. That the images are beautiful to behold – formally intelligent, wisely painterly and gloriously executed – confirms the intuition first announced by Sei Shonagon in her Pillow Book of 996 AD – that sensual pleasure consists in attention to “things that make the heart beat faster.”

Life/Death

When one dives or snorkels one enters an enwreathing paradox: there is a kind of pacific quietness to deep underwater, but also the rhythmic amplification of one's own breathing. So too there is a sense of emancipation, entering a space of caress, released from air-gravity and the impediments of the land, and also of transgression, danger and even death. We are seeing the kingdom of the drowned, as well as of sea-life; we are witnessing the lovely and the creepy, the generative and the derelict. Non-euclidian maths deals with spaces that are curved and boundless, but actually not infinite: in underwater diving there is this sense too, of space made round and enwrapping, an altered physics of the body and the eye.

Jo Darbyshire is above all interested in the flamboyant excess of underwater life, its ardent suggestiveness, what might happen when one sees iridescence, amethyst and silver light cojoining, what hypersensitive states we might enter and enjoy. But the paintings of frozen lakes and glaciers, of icy landscapes and chilled skies, are also very beautiful. The Canadian lake images contain white shapes that seem vaguely menacing and sharp. Water gone hard is a symbol of arrested life and it is also water stratified, serrated, caught streaming by a seasonal seizure in time. The colours of the Banff images have no sexual tones but are seductive as death is – the call of quiet, of stillness of everything settled into final fixed shapes.

The virtuosity of Darbyshire's vision allows her to include these wonderful reversals of the warm sensuality of the Australian waters. Canadians like to compare our nations: here we are reminded that the relationship is a strange one, enchanted, and not simply a mirror. One thinks of Margaret Atwood's Surfacing, in which every dive is into the self or towards cultural myth, or Adrienne Rich's poem, Diving in the Wreck, “I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail”; damage and treasures, the two possibilities of underwater.

In 1987 the Perth Rock band, The Triffids, produced an album called Calenture. There is no song by that name on the album, but it included one called Holy Water:

Blue girl in a summer dress in the greenhouse
Where she overslept dreaming of an ocean
Like a meadow, but wet,
Wet with holy water....

This is a casual, mischievous reference, but it suggests to me a thread of preoccupation (is it Western Australian?) with what submersion might mean, and why it might entrance us. There is a suggestion here too of sexual wetness and the ways in which the moment of entering under-water, seeing our own oxygen made visible in bluish bubbles, watching a vast and extraordinary world unfold,

might be a fundamental encounter that reconnects vision and embodiment. The glorious suite of images of *Floating Life* recalls to us the sublimity of this particular connection.

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