

## 2.5D

// Genevieve Felix Reynolds

Like bones, shell and coral, plaster hardens through a process of calcification. As a limestone derivative, it inherits this metamorphic trait from fossilised molluscan fragments and other ancient marine debris. Plaster, one could argue, is transmuted bone.

There is a game called “animal, vegetable, mineral”. Its premise is that all objects in the world can be categorised into one of these three nominal categories. It’s a question and answer game - guess what object I have in mind, only yes or no answers. The game’s system of ever-branching taxonomic classifications and binary responses introduces children to the concept of the scientific method, in which problems are solved through stepped processes of categorisation and specification. Is the fish smaller than my hand? Does the fish have stripes? Yes. Yes.

The categorisations of flora, fauna and geology, owed to the 18th Century, are still fundamental to our comprehension and exploitation of the world, but today, it’s searingly clear that these systems do not adequately describe reality, they abstract it. For the sake of neatness and comprehension, inter-categorical intricacies and hybrid traits are minimised. Some blatant examples: the spotted salamander photosynthesises, plastic was once zooplankton, coal is a rock made of plant-matter. Let’s not get started on tardigrades, anemones or stardust. Don’t let me say stardust.

The dissolution of categories isn’t practical for a scientist. Regimented systems of classification must be respected when one is standing on the shoulders of giants. Scientific innovation must be tested for repeatability, slowly, cautiously. Artistic innovation, on the other hand, can look like brazen declarations of intuition, fuelled by enthusiastic sweeps of research. Ideas are blended with joyful irreverence.

As an artist with a healthy interest in the natural sciences and a penchant for sweeping statements, I’ve learnt that the most interesting approach to take with the game “Animal, Vegetable, Mineral” is to treat these categories like a Venn diagram. Visually and behaviourally speaking, what’s halfway between a dolphin and a volcano? The sea pangolin, perhaps, with its iron shell and 350 degree biome.

This exhibition synthesises dichotomies: the geometric and the organic, the physical and the virtual, the material and the conceptual. Aesthetic histories across time, geography and culture inform visual explorations that fuse distinct cultural references into chimeras of implication: playful, wishy-washy webs of references that loosen the mind and spark new perceptions.

Like painting, relief is characterised by dialectics and the coexistence of opposites. It can be understood as a form in two and a half dimensions, a hybrid of painting and sculpture. Characterised by ambiguity and dualism, relief is an art form well suited to re-examining the past. As an antiquated medium, out of fashion and long associated with the decorative, it firmly engages with the archaic and the physical, making it counterpoint to the current proliferation of disembodied digital images that inform my own paintings. While my work massages the image-world into formal compositions, Bruce’s relief is dogmatically committed to materiality. As faux-stone, it has a direct relationship to the watery grottos of ancient Mediterranean worship, and, later, European folly caves, which were often decorated with shells.

Motifs of watery nature reoccur across this exhibition, often employed as fusions of conceptually distinct categories. Painted crystal dolphins simultaneously represent very recent memetic kitsch and the

atavistic, organic sublime. Crustaceans are animalian but also weed-like, twisting into flourishes, and stone-like, shelled and rendered in plaster. Genetically predating us by millennia, born from the primordial soup, these ambiguous organisms are our origin story. Like crystal dolphins, they, too, can be linked with historical blooms of opulence; Art Nouveau, the late Baroque, Roman antiquity, but they're also insect-like, alien, grotesque. At home in sand and mud, 'flourishing' becomes 'writhing' all too easily.

Referencing the past can seem nostalgic, or worse, self-congratulatory, especially when one's cultural lineage includes the Greco-Roman tradition. But in this exhibition, nods towards the ancient are self-reflective and critical. Historical references draw attention to how our relationships to the natural world have degraded and diminished in recent years. Looking backwards, the question is implied, "how did we get here?"

Historically, water, and things living in the water, have symbolised plenty, and have been synonymous with roaringly successful cultures capitalising on dense resources - in Egypt, New Guinea, Crete and Japan, for example. Now, however, this symbolism has shifted. If one visits the Mediterranean coast, one is hit by the barrenness of the sea - after 3000 years of reaping, very little is left. What remains is empty blue.

As late as the 1950's, conceptions of the future were characterised by optimism verging on swagger. Mid-century design and architecture jutted enthusiastically up and onwards, as in Saarinen's futurist water tower, erected in glittering stainless steel over an artificial lake for General Motors Technical Center. Nature was considered healthy and huge, new technologies would improve our lives, we'd all have flying cars. Last century, water was still symbolic of prosperity. But in the present, these motifs also imply the ever-present threat of environmental decay. It is sobering to remember how quickly such deep optimism about the future has turned into such deep cultural anxiety.

Fusing the past with the present fosters reflection. And while this reflection must acknowledge the shift in our relationship to nature, it's not defined by naysaying, but by curiosity and engagement with the world. These works are explorative and layered. Unscientific but not irrational, they connect distant areas of research through backroads of thought. Categories and dichotomies are impudently shoved into the same conceptual space, and materiality must coexist with virtuality. Anxiety, then, must harmonise with hope.

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