

The apocalypse will be an indescribably large collection of seashells

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When the beach is a pile of shells and a future apocalypse – How can my feet sink so comfortably into it?

On value, time, and disappearance in the work of Mariella Lehner

The beach is not a place, but a state

The beach is one of those transitional zones that refuses definition. Neither fully land nor fully sea, it represents a condition of in-between. Geologically, sand is a sediment: the result of physical erosion, chemical weathering, and biological deposition. It is made up of crushed rock, quartz and feldspar, shells of mollusks, snails, corals, and microscopic sea organisms – remnants, ground-down traces of past life forms. Its granules range from near-invisible dust to tangible grains. Its color and composition reveal its origins: a handful of sand may be volcanic in nature or formed from tropical marine limestone.¹ It is older than any map that marks its location. And yet, it is constantly shifting. Every beach is an archive. Not a static one, but a memory in motion. It is evidence that nothing lasts, yet everything leaves a trace.

A piece of linen, stretched across fishing lines and hooks, display a painting of lifeless animals. Fish, hanging by their mouths and gills, evoke maritime trophies. In recent months Lehner drew inspiration from old postcard motifs of natural monuments. These images show nature posed: a record-breaking catch, a particularly old tree, a ripe fruit. What was once staged with pride becomes, in their work, a symbol of quiet loss.

Time That’s Never Enough

Lehner’s childhood memories of a holiday in Greece – swimming in a sea full of vibrant life – are not recalled as dramatic events, but as part of a world that once felt completely normal. When they visit these places now, those memories feel like flashbacks to another era.

The sea is warmer, the colors are duller, the movements calmer. Lehner says they can barely travel back to the reality they knew as a child. The gap between the speed of environmental change and one’s own lifetime becomes the core of their work. What’s happening to the climate, ecosystems, and species is not abstract. But it’s happening too fast to be fully felt, understood, or remembered.

The Apocalypse Will Be an Indescribably Large Collection of Sea Shells²

Anna Della Subin, whose essay *Not Dead But Sleeping* inspired the title of Lehner’s series *The Apocalypse Will Be an Indescribably Large Collection of Sea Shells*, develops in her text a poetic reflection on the cultural politics of sleep. At its center is the ancient legend of the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus – a story about people who sleep for centuries and awaken in a changed world – which Subin uses as a central metaphor.

The twelve panels in the series show, hidden behind softly glowing layers of abalone shell veneer, images of extinct and endangered creatures. The artist draws on photographs of mass animal die-offs – from water, sky, and land – as visual references.

In a handmade book, the artist combines drawing, poetry, tattoo art, and bookbinding. The poem at the heart of the work speaks of disappearance:

“*All fish are out of the waters // all birds have left the sky // (...)*”
It’s not a lament, but a sober observation.

Quiet, Almost Ceremonial

The materials Lehner uses invite touch. Salmon skin has been soaking in local Hangzhou green tea (龙井茶) mixtures for five days – stirred up every few hours before being oiled and pulled by hand until fully dry, slowly turning into subtle leather. The book’s pages feel warmly soft, yet not fragile. Nothing urges the viewer to hurry. Between skin, paper, image, and text, a quiet relationship with time unfolds – not one that aims to preserve, but one that accepts change.

What the Apocalypse Might Also Be

Our modern notion of the apocalypse is largely shaped by the Book of Revelation in the New Testament, where the end of the world is depicted as a dramatic spectacle of wrath, fire, and divine judgment. These images still define our collective imagination of the end. But in its original sense, *apocalypse* means not destruction, but *revelation*.³ Understood this way, the apocalypse is a creeping transformation – a transition marked by cracks, quiet shifts, and fading certainties.

Even in science, the language is one of gradual tipping points: slow shifts in ecosystems, incremental global warming, vanishing species. Processes that unfold slowly and are irreversible.⁴

This is exactly where Lehner’s work takes hold. Their artistic response to these developments is not a visual alarm. They don’t respond to ecological crises with activism, nor do they attempt to offer a solution. They quietly take a stance and explore what it means to live within a process of change – slow, but unstoppable. Their work asks what kind of seeing is necessary to recognize that the apocalypse has already begun and is hard to comprehend – especially within a human life that might simply be too short.

“(…) *Not less serene // But somehow more hostile* (…) // *Too much of a good thing will turn to desert* // (...)”

It feels soft, warm, and comforting to dig my feet into the sand. A sand made of memory and long-past life. If this is the apocalypse – who am I not to protect this archive, for as long as I can?

Text (translated from German): V. Ludwig

¹ GEO.de (2021): Warum es Sand am Strand gibt. Online verfügbar unter: <https://www.geo.de/wissen/tuerchen-20-im-geo-adventskalender--wir-erklaren--warum-es-sand-am-strand-gibt--geoplus--30953252.html> (Abgerufen am 8. Juni 2025).

² Subin, Anna Della (2017): *Not Dead But Sleeping*. New York: Triple Canopy, S. 106.

³ wissen.de (o. J.): *Apokalypse – Herkunft und Bedeutung*. Online verfügbar unter: <https://www.wissen.de/wortherkunft/apokalypse> (Abgerufen am 8. Juni 2025).

⁴ pro.earth (2025): Kippunkte im Klimasystem – Wie nah wir dem unumkehrbaren Wandel wirklich sind. Publiziert am 8. Juni 2025. Online verfügbar unter: <https://pro.earth/2025/06/08/kippunkte-im-klimasystem-wie-nah-wir-dem-unumkehrbaren-wandel-wirklich-sind/> (Abgerufen am 8. Juni 2025).