

Sea Worthy

by Charles Schultz

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ELIZABETH FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS | JUNE 10 – JULY 29, 2011

Art galleries in the summer tend to have the same breezy feel as high schools during the last week or two of classes. It's still technically time for business, but not exactly as usual. Everything is more casual; curators are invited to be bold; partnerships are forged. This year a trio of nonprofit art organizations (Flux Factory, Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, and the Gowanus Studio Space) have come together to produce *Sea Worthy*, an ambitious three-part project unfolding over the summer—complete with workshops and water-bound excursions—that opened with a group exhibition.

The exhibition is a microcosm of the larger project. The waterways of New York City are the focal point, though much of the work of the roughly two-dozen participating artists engages broader maritime themes. Rachel Bacon, for example, contributes a 1:1 scale model of the wee dinghy used by some hopeful Cuban attempting the sea crossing to Florida. “Looking for a Safe Haven” (2011) may have little to do with the NY harbor, per se, but the idea of one man ready to risk life and/or imprisonment on such a vulnerable little vessel is something New Yorkers can appreciate. It seems like we read about bets gone bad regularly these days.



George Boorujy, “New York Pelagic,” (2011) Glass bottle, one original drawing, one explanation/questionair.

Quite a few artists set out on bona fide expeditions. Ciaran O’Dochartaigh’s video, “Subarctic Expedition” (2010 – 11), documents a two-part fishing voyage in Canada and Ireland for the elusive Arctic Char and its landlocked relative. Like O’Dochartaigh, Michael Arcega’s “Lexical Borrowing: saw horse by the sea shore—understanding Manifest Destiny”(2011) involved building a boat for the artist’s ongoing journey, which loosely follows Lewis and Clark’s route on numerous bodies of water across the United States. These projects share a common desire to

integrate historical and quasi-mythical precedents with contemporary places and practices. They are less pioneering than poetic, since the object of the expedition is, precisely, the expedition.

This is not the case for Reid Stowe who spent roughly three years at sea (two of them alone) continuously. His “Cape Horn Whale Chart” (2009) consists of a map that traces his course (he used GPS to log his location daily) mounted on a piece of sail from his boat. When Stowe noticed he was inadvertently outlining the shape of a whale, he adjusted his tack and completed a performance-based GPS drawing. The work has more than a touch of Romanticism’s mystical nature to it, if only because Stowe’s journey seems so incredible—it is a world record after all.

This character of mysticism comes through in other works that feature more subtle gestures than Stowe’s. Anne Percoco’s “Kilmer Shrines” (2008) and George Boorujy’s “New York Pelagic” (2011) are both projects that cater to serendipity and coincidence while simultaneously drawing attention to our often-overlooked relationship with the ocean. Percoco built shrines at the sites of the drainage system on Rutgers’s campus, which flows into the Raritan River and onward to the Atlantic. Recycling detritus to construct her sparse arrangements, these humble monuments were off any official paths, which meant one often simply stumbled upon them. Boorujy’s project involves sending messages in bottles. He puts one original drawing (of an open ocean bird) and one explanation/questionnaire in each bottle, which is engraved with the title of his project and capped with a good wax seal. It would be a nice thing to find: that’s Boorujy’s hope, if not his expectation. He launches his work into New York’s waterways, an act that simultaneously highlights our nasty habit for polluting and our glorious capacity for sacrifice and gift giving.

The Achilles heel of summer shows with expansive themes is a tendency to lack serious cohesion. So it’s a testament to the curatorial team’s savvy that such an ample spread of work—sculpture, drawing, photography, mixed media, and performance-based video—could be brought together without incurring too much conceptual static. I’ve been to plenty of thematic exhibitions that sprawl and drift like the great Pacific garbage patch. This is not one of them. There may be a lot of boats here, but this is much more than a boat show.