Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary
Thyssen-Bornemisza
Art Contemporary:
The Commissions Book

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Janaina Tschäpe
David Gruber

FICTIONARY OF CORALS AND JELLIES, 2017
BLOOD, SEA, 2017
WATERCOLOR PENCIL ON PAPER
TWO LEPORELLOS, 30.5 × 800 CM EACH


Janaina Tschäpe Born in Munich, Germany
David Gruber Born in Paterson, New Jersey, USA
Both live in New York, USA.
Fictionary of Corals and Jellies and Blood, Sea (both 2017) are leporellos painted and drawn by Janaina Tschäpe as part of a dialogue with marine biologist and ocean explorer David Gruber. Gruber’s research sheds light on a wealth of new insights into an expansive intelligence of shining colors and patterns that help many marine creatures communicate, interact, and avoid enemies. He takes on a recursive methodology that includes developing robots, trying to decipher the language of whales and trying to reconceive the logos of marine animals within the scientific realm in order to understand the perception of aquatic creatures from within their own experience. Tschäpe’s body of work is driven by a unique curiosity about the mysteries of nature, landscape, and seascape. Her work also occupies the psyche and theory that relates to oceans in various mediums, in this case watercolor painting and drawing. Tschäpe’s work is often about water and sometimes watercolors’ aquatic agency to be of water. She deals with the ocean’s fluidity, its imaginaries, and its mythologies as well as its ecological urgency as a habitat for a multitude of living things, from jellyfish to corals and octopi. These two leporellos are the chronicle of a gestural conversation between Tschäpe’s ever-drawing, inquisitive hand and marine biologist Gruber’s curious, mechanically driven, remote-controlled underwater squishy fingers, another set of inquisitive hands. Gruber’s are robotic, designed by himself along with his collaborator engineer and roboticist Robert J. Wood as soft robotic grippers to collect delicate underwater specimens. They browse the seas and sweep ocean floors while Tschäpe’s leporellos, folding and unfolding as in waves, are a direct reference to the oceanic condition that often emanates from her body of work. As a collaborative drawing project, the result is an involvement in each other’s talent through communication based on taxonomical nomenclature and storytelling.

“Nomenclature is an art of transmission that makes a certain kind of science possible” writes Lorraine Daston in an article titled “Type Specimens and Scientific Memory.” This dialogic project is based on a conversation that operates through a scientifically valid epistemological methodology, yet the artist and the scientist sometimes reverse this process or incorporate a subjectively experiential one, exemplifying how scientific nomenclature makes a certain type of art possible. It certainly is not a one-way transmission for the purpose of demystifying science and that defies norms of scientific communication, but what makes this type of communication based on taxonomical classification possible, in this case, is the kind of collaborative artistic practice the two engage in. Although nomenclature plays a central role in Fictionary of Corals and Jellies as it intends to merge an inventory and dictionary of various underwater creatures, the narratives, the notes that Gruber makes on
the leporellos, and the images are not bound by taxonomical boundaries. The second leporello, Blood, Sea, takes its title from a short story by Italo Calvino. The story is based on a discovery, published by physiologist René Quinton in 1904, that blood plasma has an almost identical chemical composition as sea water. This reflects the evolutionary processes, which over the course of ages has seen the primeval habitats of marine life evolving from the marine life to the hollow cavities of blood circulation and to modern human, then to modern art that relates to humans and nature through science.

Both leporellos stand in space, staggered like a wave, a monumental testament to artistic mastery and scientific subjectivity through collaborative process, amplifying the personal experience and engagement with submarine, oceanic cosmology. One could easily claim that such subjectivity resulting in an aesthetic that is cohesive to art and science was possible even when the creative objects were solely conceived for educationally utilitarian purposes as in the work of Orra White Hitchcock, one of America’s first female scientific illustrators who worked in the beginning of the nineteenth century. Over the past century, despite advancement in accuracy of measurement and visualization techniques in the natural sciences, Hitchcock’s drawings and illustrations had their own life outside the scientific and academic realm, surviving to this day and informing an artistic vein in which these leporellos can be explored.

Looking back at the history of the visual arts, what might be perceived as a cross-disciplinary collaboration or interdisciplinary practice today was perhaps only natural alchemy in the works of Jean Painlevé, a photographer and filmmaker who specialized in underwater fauna and managed to scandalize both the scientific and the art worlds with a visual language that entertained and educated viewers by advocating the credo that “Science is Fiction.” Marina McDougall, co-editor of Science Is Fiction, a book on films of Jean Painlevé, writes on his Hybrid Roots: “Still, Painlevé with his other-world observations of underwater fauna, his lyrical and instructive animal behavior films set to avant-garde scores, remains unique among his peers in the fusion of art and science.” Painlevé was a pioneer of “science cinema” and was also active in circles that tried define the genre and encourage the exhibition and promotion of such films. He also claimed, like Guillaume Apollinaire, that “the cinema is a creator of a surreal life.” In 1925, after a communication with l’Academie des Sciences, he submitted a pseudoscientific, nonsensical, and entirely surrealist text, which he titled Neo-Zoological Drama. His report starts with a note: “Mr. Jean Painlevé, who yesterday was honored by the Académie des sciences for a very realistic body of work, reveals himself to be a Surrealist as well.” It then continues for about a page starting with the following lines: “The plasmodium of the Myxomycetes is so sweet; the eyeless Prorhynehus has the dull color of the born blind, and its proboscis
stuffed with zoochlorellae solicits the oxygen of the Frontoniella antipyretica; he carries his pharynx in a rosette, a locomotive requirement, horned, stupid, and not at all calcareous.”

Curator Ralph Rugoff wrote about anthropomorphism in Painlevé’s work, arguing that it is his most fertile playing ground, but he also underlines that Painlevé’s perspective subverts a long literary and mythological tradition of projecting human values and emotions onto cuddly critters that usually results in a narcissistic self-portrait. In *Fictionary of Corals and Jellies* and in *Blood, Sea* one can observe a similar abstinence from such self imposition. Instead, Gruber and Tschäpe propose an experiential mode of thinking and creating knowledge, through a collegial interaction where they move fluidly between scientific taxonomy and artistic expression with no designation to reality or fantasy.

1 Lorraine Daston, “Type Specimens and Scientific Memory,” in *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 31 (September 2004): 153-82.

