

Ahoy, an Island!

Jane Boyer ©2011

FRAC Aquitaine

[www.frac-aquitaine.net](http://www.frac-aquitaine.net)

Hangar G2, Bassin a flot no. 1

Quai Armand Lalande

33300 Bordeaux, France

September 30 to December 17, 2011

“The larger the island of knowledge, the longer the shoreline of mystery.”

Mary B. Yates

Do we carry the sense, the very meaning of “island” within us? The current exhibition at FRAC Aquitaine, curated by Marie Canet and Vanessa Desclaux explores the enigma in this question. The curators state, “The island is a geographic reality and an allegory, a position and the abstract representation of an elsewhere. A Romantic motif, it also represents exoticism and dream, the concretion of any insularity. It is another space, a margin an exile.” Their “island” is located in the British art scene wherein the larger scope of British political and cultural heritage resides. Their premise comes as a response to an invitation from FRAC (Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain) Aquitaine, to explore the contemporary British art scene. It is a fascinating proposition from two French curators who have intimate connections with the UK art scene, Canet is part of the curatorial team at Tate Modern and Desclaux is working on a PhD at Goldsmith’s, both have curated numerous exhibitions in London.

They have pulled together an interesting mix of artists, both foreign and native, who have or had a particular view of this “island”. The artists in this exhibition are Louis Benassi, Marcel Broodthaers, Marc Camille Chaimowicz, Ian Hamilton Finlay, Susan Hiller, Bethan Huws, Ian Kiaer, Uriel Orlow, Amalia Pica and Jessica Warboys. Through their choice of artists and works, the curators present a beautifully balanced and thoughtful exhibition on isolation and interaction, aggression and quietude, masculine and feminine, expression and document. Curiously, the masculine/feminine dichotomy presents the biggest mystery in the show because of its unspoken presence, like storm clouds on the horizon.

For me the most striking piece in the show is “Dedicated to Unknown Artists” by Susan Hiller. This conceptual work from 1972-1976 is a collection of postcards of “rough seas” breaking on the British coastline. Hiller systematically organized the postcards into grids classified by location, date and message content. She says, “...my personal conviction [is] that any investigation inevitably changes the nature of that which is investigated.” Her investigation was one of time and place; however my immediate response to the group was to see the clichéd cinematic metaphor of breaking waves as male sexual orgasm, proving the truth of her statement.

The sexual tension was echoed in the juxtaposition of Louis Benassi’s video shot in 2003 edited in 2010, “Midnight-De-Construction”; a performance piece of Benassi violently destroying years of his

accumulated artistic research, and “Sea Painting, Dunwich, Summer 2011”, created for the exhibition by Jessica Warboys. These three colorful yet tranquil large-scale canvas panels, created by immersing the pigmented canvas in the ocean waves cool the heat of Benassi’s destruction going on nearby. Of course, the connection to Bataille’s notion of Expenditure in Benassi’s video, with his gleeful destruction of artwork illustrating Bataille’s contention destruction can be useful and the reactivation of process and trace in Warboys described by the curators is evident too. Interestingly, there is a sexual element in Bataille’s notion of Expenditure and a symbolic surrender in Warboys’ paintings in that she ‘gives over’ creation to the force of the waves.

There are other hints to this sexual sub-text in the selection of printed materials from the Ian Hamilton Finlay collection of FRAC Bretagne which includes a lithograph schematic of a cargo ship with the words, “nude” and “draped nude” underneath. The “draped nude” is a cargo ship with nets fully deployed. In *Dialogue (Paper and Mountain)*, 2010, by Amalia Pica, the artist stands before a mountain peak, which mirrors the form of a wave, holding a large sheet of white paper which could possibly symbolize virginity or surrender, even though her action is described as defying the mountain in the manner of a toreador. The ambiguity of the meaning in this act gives poignancy to the piece. Pica’s opposition is a visual counterpoint to Marc Camille Chaimowicz’s “Man Looking out of a Window, for S.M.”, 2006, which portrays the male artist’s ease and contentment in residing with a wooden wave-shaped sculpture poised to engulf him, furthering the classic notion of the ocean force as male.

There is a tangible feeling of personal isolation in this exhibition which is fundamental to the concept of “island” and the premise of the show. Each piece in the exhibit exudes inner contemplation and a removal from the outside world, from Chaimowicz to Uriel Orlow’s “The Short and the Long of it”, 2010-2011, an arrangement of ephemeral fragments of the 1967 immobilization of fourteen cargo ships in the Suez Canal as a result of the Six-Day War between Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Syria. The ships and their crews were held captive for eight years.

The extremes of exclusion by choice to aggressive captivity within the exhibition leads us to the larger political and social history of Britain and indeed to human psychology in general; our history is full of tales of self-imposed isolation and violent captivity. This movement from the inner to the external and back again gives flow and vitality to this tranquil exhibition. The exhibition travels to Fondation d’entreprise Ricard in Paris, January 9 to February 11.

The FRAC Collection is a cultural institution consisting of 22 regional bodies. Their mission is to preserve and support contemporary art production within each region of France and to engage in the wider spectrum of national and international cultural debate and production. FRAC Aquitaine alone has over 1000 works in its collection, including most of the artists in this exhibition.