

Understanding New York's Shores in the Brooklyn Arts Council's Sea Drift

By Jacqueline Kuper



In a journey through the ritualistic and spiritual traditions relating to water comes *Sea Drift*, a show curated by Claudia Gerbracht and Kay Turner of the Brooklyn Arts Council. The pieces presented in *Sea Drift* explore the waters of Brooklyn, as well as the relationship between humans and the substance that is most vital to our lives. The themes introduced range from the commoditization of Brooklyn's shores, along with festivals and rituals pertaining to the transformative, cleansing qualities of water. *Sea Drift* about understanding the deep significance water holds in our culture and the spiritual, corporeal relationship we have with it.



Larry Racioppo, *Yemaja*, 2008.
Courtesy: The Brooklyn Arts Council, New York

Larry Racioppo, a prolific New York photographer who is known for his documentation of the transformation of city buildings since the 80's, has contributed several works, all surrounding traditions stemming from the shoreline. This includes a series profiling the annual Williamsburg Giglio Festival, which is a celebration of the feast of the Roman Catholic St. Paulinus, who set out to sea to reclaim young boys captured by pirates. Similarly, he exhibits a Yemaja statue from a Brooklyn-based statue manufacturer. The Yemaja is the mother goddess of the ocean in many African, South American and Caribbean religions, akin to the Christian Virgin Mother. Also documented by Racioppo is Coney Island's annual Mermaid Parade, which is known as the largest art parade in the nation. During this celebration, people

flock to Coney Island to participate in this lively, ocean themed festival. Originating in the early 80's, this parade is in homage to Mardi Gras parades from the early 20th century, and embodies the rich liveliness and free spirit perpetuated by Coney Island's famous amusement park. Captured by Racioppo is the joy of the event, as well as the transience of the seasons- this event marking the start of Brooklyn's summer. The parade seems to end by the water, where participants cool themselves off, clean off any body paint intended for the festival, and join together in solidarity to kick off the beginning of a new season.



Larry Racioppo, *Silver Mermaid*, 2002 C-print, 20" x 24"
Courtesy: The Brooklyn Arts Council, New York

Water was also extremely important in travel; New York's history is based on emigrants coming by boat to start a new life in America. Angela Jimenez's amazing photographs of *Crete*, a shrine by Bay Ridge resident George Kortsolakis to his Mediterranean homeland, show the devotion to keeping his memory of this island alive. His miniature recreation is typical of folk art, with his use of natural materials like shells, rocks and sand to assimilate the culture of the island of Crete. In tradition telling of the darker aspects of emigration, photographer Ocean Morisset captures the memorial ceremony for the African slaves who died in the passageway to America. During the summer, hundreds of Brooklyn residents bathe in the waters of Coney Island, bringing flowers and sending prayers in this ritualistic cleansing. The power of cleansing is also evident in Randy Duchaine's *Polar Bears*, in which the Polar Bear Club of Brooklyn retreats to the waters of Coney Island to uphold the long tradition of healing and rebirth following the New Year.

Sea Drift does not only serve the purpose to aid us in understanding the culture surrounding Brooklyn's waters, but is also a warning of our effect on the ocean's environment. Marie Lorenz interacts with the water by setting out on expeditions in which she collects various objects on the shores of different waterways throughout the city and makes prints of them. Willis Elkins' art is similar with the use of found objects, such as pens found in Jamaica Bay that were sanitized and modified with a new cartridge, restoring the old object into

something new and useable. Elkins also collected nurdles, known as “mermaid tears”, from shores around New York and exhibited them in a way that hauntingly reminds viewers of our impact on society, as these nurdles profoundly effect marine life. The most chilling depiction of our impact in this series, however, is Stephen Mallon’s photographs of the recycling of MTA cars into the ocean to create artificial reefs. These unnerving, almost dystopian stills show the effects of urban development on the environment. Seeing an important mode of transportation to millions of New Yorkers tossed into the dark waters was disorienting, and the artificiality of the practice gives light to the ownership humans place on the land around them, yet reveals that there is so much we don’t know about the environment we so destructively take hold of.



Detail of artist George Kortsolakis's *Crete*, a model of his island homeland he built in his Bay Ridge front yard. Photo: Angela Jimenez, 2005.

Courtesy: The Brooklyn Arts Council, New York

Sea Drift is yet another collection of work created around Brooklyn in the BAC's preservation of art and culture. The Brooklyn Arts Council provides service and support for working artists using a grant program associated with the New York State Council and works throughout the community to promote traditional art, arts education and locally funded art programs. The art in this show reveals an important insight in understanding the sea environment surrounding New Yorkers, the history of the melting pot that is New York City, as well as the connection between water and humanity. In addition to the show *Sea Drift*, the Brooklyn Arts Council will be holding a festival called *Harborlore* from May 10th to June 15th, in which water-based traditions will be explored in greater detail in a variety of free events, which include dance, song, performances and storytelling.

For more information, visit their website: www.brooklynartscouncil.org



Randy Duchaine, *Polar Bears*, 1993, Glicee Print
Courtesy: The Brooklyn Arts Council, New York