

# Troubled Waters

by Silvia Bombardini



Ocean Space

From time immemorial, the depths of the Earth's seas have drawn artists and aesthetes in like sailors lured by mermaids' singing. On the seascape canvases of centuries past, the ocean is as mighty and wondrous as it appeared to the painters and their contemporaries. Yet as time went by, our hubris bolstered by knowledge and capital, human deference to the sea has faltered, for something sacrilegious to take its place. The ocean became a resource to exploit at will – a sunken graveyard for single-use plastics and waste chemicals, its salt water now hot as hell. Outraged by these developments, creative minds sensitive to the plight of the seas are feeling the need to do what's in their power to protect them. Contemporary, socially engaged marine art deals not only with the beauty of the ocean but with the consequences of our species' greed that weight upon it: bleached corals, submerged seashores, and more. Below, I spoke with Finnish artists Timo Aho and Pekka Niittyvirta about their work in Lochmaddy, Scotland, on the Sea of the Hebrides, with TBA21–Academy's

**Markus Reymann from their new site in Venice on the Adriatic Sea, and with textile artist Vanessa Barragão, in Porto, Portugal, facing the Atlantic Ocean – about their work and the sea.**

## **Vanessa Barragão**

**In Porto, northwest Portugal, a coastal city on the Atlantic shoreline, textile artworks in the shape of seafloors are latch hooked and hand tufted at Vanessa Barragão's studio. A portrait of and dedicated to the wonderous oceanic ecosystems whose very existence is threatened by human carelessness and greed – the textile industry being no less responsible for it – the artist's tapestries and rugs are handmade with recycled or waste wool, bamboo, lyocell and linen from local factories. In taking a soft but decisive stand for the corals and the seas, and for the planet, Barragão aims to inspire others to do the same. Here's more on her story and craft.**

**S.B.: Waste is a pressing problem for the world's oceans: from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch to the microplastic fibres released into to the sea whenever we machine wash synthetic clothing. When did you start using recycled, upcycled, or wasted yarns in your art, and what are the rewards of doing so?**

V.B.: I started using these kinds of yarns when I realized the enormous quantity of waste produced by the textile industry, and then I realized that there was the opportunity for me to produce something of my own with that material. It opened up not only my eyes to this reality, but also my mind and creativity. Because it became obvious to me that I could produce at once my art, something that I like, that shows who I am and what I think, but at the same time also something that could open the eyes of the world to the issue of waste and pollution and to the state of the Earth. In the end, what the use of this material brings to me, and to those who see and 'listen' to my art, is the perception of our reality, the awakening of consciousness. It is also proof of how it is possible to create something new, fresh, and strong, with waste, remains and debris.

**S.B.: I know you have a background inf fashion design, yet what you're doing now is something very different – immune to the passing of trends. When did you decide that a conventional fashion career wasn't for you, and how did the idea for your studio, and your seascape tapestries first come about?**

V.B.: I realized that I did not want to follow a career in fashion because of the way that it happens, how fashion is consumed in the world and how it works, since I don't feel related to nor identify with the nature and the system of fashion – fast fashion, trends, and everything else. It was during my master degree that I realized this, and what it was that I really liked: the background, the hidden part, the fabrics, the material, the craft techniques and all the production and the creative processes that are at the root of the textile world. The idea

for the studio came to me naturally and grew in the same way. I dedicated myself to the study of wool during my degree and simply followed on with what I liked, and that made me feel happy and fulfilled. That's how I started making tapestries. Thereafter, I combined the work with my personal taste and beliefs, hence the interpretation of the seabed – something that has always fascinated me – and the attempt to convey a message of attention and awareness about the pollution that affects it.

**S.B.: You say that your art aims to raise awareness – the bleached coral pieces in particular, crafted with beige, white and cream threads, are soft but powerful warnings of what's at risk, of the urgent need to protect our sea. But what practical actions do you hope to inspire in those who come to look at your work?**

V.B.: With my work I try to show exactly what global warming and pollution are doing to our planet, and how we can act against it and try to improve this situation. I try to show the importance of recycling and reusing materials, the importance of a creation based on artisanal and handmade techniques.

**S.B.: Why are artisanal techniques important to you, and how do they relate to your subject matter? Could you talk our readers through some of your favourite processes?**

V.B.: It possible to think of being eco-friendly in the textile field, and thus of helping the world, including the oceans and corals, only by considering recycling together with the production/breeding methods one uses. The truth is that there are no favourite processes for me: I love every each one of them. From imagination to line and cut. From the creative process to crochet. From the sea to people and consciences. My art, my artistic voice is the culmination of everything.

### **Timo Aho & Pekka Niittyvirta**

**In a seaward village on a Scottish isle, neon beams of light in parallel lines simultaneously lit up at night, cutting the old stone buildings in half and hovering above the moor. *Lines (57° 59'N, 7° 16'W)* is an installation by Finnish artists Timo Aho and Pekka Niittyvirta: an unmissable warning, however poetic, for raising awareness of the rising seas. Below, Aho and Niittyvirta explain how and why it works.**

**S.B.: Both of you live and work in Helsinki, yet *Lines (57° 59'N, 7° 16'W)* is installed in Lochmaddy, a coastal small town on the island of North Uist, in Scotland's Outer Hebrides. How did the project come about, and how were you and your work received by the locals?**

T.A.&P.N.: The installation needed preferably a remote location, next to an ocean where the phenomenon is already topical. Timo was living in Scotland and we were looking for a place that would suit the project's script. We started the project within a context of the physical positions of seaside communities – the creative process had a lot to do with the connection and co-existence between contemporary society, urban development and oceans.

Then we found the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum & Arts Centre in Lochmaddy, where the installation is situated. We discovered that that the arts centre cannot develop there due to the storm surge heights: the centre is already affected by them and this is a real issue at the location already.

According to the centre's manager Andy McKinnon, the work has been well received. We've had a lot of positive feedback about it.

**S.B.: I've read that the work activated on high tide, by way of floating sensors. Would you tell our readers more about how that works – how tall exactly is the glowing line?**

T.A.&P.N.: The illuminated lines on the buildings are approx. 2.3 m above the sea level. The lights are activated through a float switch and timer. These in combination turn on the system on under specific conditions: it is only lit when dark, and at high tide.

We went through various articles and papers on the topic of the global warming and sea level rise, IPCC being the most relevant perhaps. Since projections vary between the studies, there are no exact height or time that we are referring to. The artwork visualizes the possible highest storm surge levels combined with the high tide – hence the interactivity with the high tide – in not so distant future. But the work can be also viewed on a longer time scale, as the possible sea level rise within the next centuries to come.

**S.B.: As a consequence of global warming, the issue of rising sea levels is a surreptitious catastrophe. Imperceptible by human eyes, perhaps until we'll find ourselves submerged. In illuminating its progress, *Lines* sends a message bright and clear. In your view and practice, what can art do that data can't, to help the fight against climate change?**

T.A.&P.N.: Art has a potential to convey complex ideas, concepts and scientific data in a powerful way that other mediums, like words or graphs, fall short of. Art can help us to assimilate ideas that might be hard to grasp otherwise. Through this installation, people can perhaps better visualize and relate to the reality that might be.

**S.B.: Sadly, this site-specific installation is not quite as site-specific as that. Several coastal villages and cities around the globe await a future as uncertain as that of Lochmaddy. Would you consider bringing Lines elsewhere in the future, to spread the message yet further?**

T.A.&P.N.: The title *Lines (57° 59'N, 7° 16'W)* refers to a possibility for altered locations. So it is absolutely possible, we would love the work taking shape with variations in various locations. It is an important issue the work is dealing with that needs to be addressed.

## Ocean Space

**A new art site in Campo San Lorenzo, dedicated 'to radically reimagine how we see and treat the defining feature of our blue planet', has opened its doors in March. Nestled in an old church that had been shut for a century and some, Ocean Space is a project of TBA21–Academy: the non-profit research organisation launched in 2011 to commission and lead artists and scientists on water-based expeditions aboard its vessel, the *Dardanella*. TBA21–Academy's Director and Co-Founder, Markus Reymann, tells us more about dropping anchor in Venice, their ongoing Joan Jonas exhibition, and future plans.**

**S.B.: Ocean Space is more than metaphorically on the front line, when it comes to the issue of the rising seas. Venice is sinking slowly as the Earth warms – how big a part did the city's perilous position, and the sense of urgency that this entails, play in your decision to choose it as Ocean Space's home base?**

M.R.: All over the globe, communities are now dealing with issues that Venice and its people have lived with for hundreds of years, and therefore Venice seemed like a natural choice for Ocean Space. TBA21–Academy embraces the experience and culture of this city. By creating Ocean Space here, as a platform for collaboration and discovery, the Venetian engagement with the ocean will inform and amplify our global vision for change. We want to apply Venice's tradition of embracing new strategies in art, science, and culture to a new vision for research, programming, and advocacy.

**S.B.: The centre occupies a deconsecrated church, which seems apt: the holiness of the oceans, that humans had worshipped once upon a time, has come to be forgotten in recent centuries in favour of profiting from them. How can socially responsive artworks, in your view, reinstate public awe and respect toward the mighty deep?**

M.R.: The Church of San Lorenzo is a beautiful and enigmatic building that, unfortunately, has been largely closed to the public for more than 120 years, with few exceptions. The opportunity to reanimate this incredible

building and reintegrate it within the cultural fabric of the community was one we could not pass up. The opening in March and the programming since has shown that there is huge potential of rethinking and reclaiming the public space as an arena for discourse and inspiration. But more importantly than creating awe is the aim of reconnecting us to the ocean, of making us aware that it constantly touches every part of our lives wherever we are.

In many ways we have learned to rely on information to make up our mind, to ignite our decision-making processes. And yet, things only change when we feel differently about them. In this sense, art contributes to bringing the experience of the ocean and its ecosystems closer to us. To make the ocean present, art is as important as the facts. Or, better said, art can bring with it an enormous contribution that goes hand in hand with the growth of information. Artists, as well, help us to find words for those new experiences and feelings – to create our own images for them.

**S.B.: *Moving Off the Land II*, your inaugural exhibition, will be on view until the end of September. What can visitors expect, and why was Joan Jonas the perfect choice to christen your new embassy for the oceans, on dry ground?**

M.R.: No other artist could have inaugurated the space but Joan Jonas. Her longtime engagement with forms of life that surpass the control of the human, her sensibility towards all the gestures —like waves—that cannot be reduced to objects, all the images that she creates that motivate the mind. Joan's work confronts the complex relationships that humans have with the natural world. Part poetic musing, part scientific inquiry, the installation brings together the various elements that are at the core of what this new transdisciplinary centre is all about.

*Moving Off the Land II* evolved over the course of three years, following Joan's first performance of the work in 2016 in Kochi coinciding with the biennale. The performance was part of TBA21–Academy's fellowship program, *The Current*, which brings artists and scientists on expeditions of collaborative discovery at sea and disseminates the questions and findings arising from the expeditions in land-based convenings around the world.

The process of working with Jonas is indicative of the way TBA21–Academy connects disciplines, people, geographies, and formats. The Academy's journeys at sea and on land catalyse processes that involve traveling, wandering, researching, and allowing art to happen in an iterative way that is based on process. Jonas's methodology is related: she visited numerous aquariums around the world, experienced and filmed in the ocean, joined the Academy on a residency in Jamaica at the Alligator Head Foundation - our partner for conservation and science. She spent time with local communities, gave a workshop to art students, and engaged in conversations with the scientists, specifically David Gruber, who has been a close collaborator on this journey.

**S.B.: The Venice Biennale is due to begin soon, and I hear you've got a lot in the works. From oceanic music by Sigur Rós' Jónsi and composer Carl Michael von Hausswolff, to a xenofeminist lecture-performance by Laboria Cuboniks. Would you tell our readers more about the upcoming events' programme?**

M.R.: Building on TBA21–Academy's past work, we have programmed the week with interdisciplinary performances, conversations, lectures, poetry readings, concerts and workshops all open to the public and all relating directly to the topics that are embedded in Joan Jonas' work. This is an ongoing program for a new type of institution sheltering art, science and the ocean with the intention of actively contributing to create what we call a 'social curricula for the Ocean'. To produce materials that contribute to education on the subject, to strengthen trust in art and culture as a solid partner for science. To explore methods that positively open up new questions, as well as some answers on how to act differently in the future, to create a nearness to the ocean through art: this is what is at the core of our mission.