



Julie Oh: Very Big Forces By Simon Fuh September 27, 2023

In my experience, there's a strange thing that happens when you start collecting rocks: relatively quickly, the world becomes fractal. Each rock betrays the enormity of the scene behind it just as much as it reaffirms its uniqueness. The puckered holes, rounded edges, pores and sheen which make the individual unique also infers the many, which in turn infers the water, wind and time.

I met artist Julie Oh in Saskatchewan, which is a very different geography than where she finds herself now. Having relocated this past year to the rocky coastal hamlet of Maberly, Newfoundland.

Oh brings a particularly sensitive, conceptual approach to understanding a radically different world of things – a kind of tender existentialism that locates deep time, and the minutiae of human subjectivity relative to it in the palm of a hand. In that journey, a search for meaning amongst very big forces: the Atlantic Ocean's current, iceberg travel, continental shifts, and Fin Whales. How could one possibly measure the sublime? Oh seems to respond: why not begin by counting?

Amongst the epic grey landscape of the Newfoundland coast, the reddish human-made "brick rocks" that wash on shore stand out. Reminiscent of the industrial waste along Toronto's Leslie Spit, Oh plucked these battered and worn artifacts of human construction from the process of being worn down to dust so that we might be able to wonder about their strangeness. In fact, if it's possible for one's mode of counting to have a particular quality, I'd say that Oh's isn't exactly numerical. Every observation is coloured with her curious gaze, and every object is a character in the theatre of the mind. Once each thing is designated so, it comes to play a role in Oh's search for the self in nature – a project that is always both epic yet banal, consequential yet atomistic, fractal.

The act of gathering the rocks that make up *Tides*, as Oh recounts, came from a drive to simply make something happen in this new place. Amidst her isolation, Oh's distance from city life and material culture engendered an almost desperate need to become grounded in creativity, routine and labour. A daily walk to the beach with her dog Salty, as Oh describes, became "like a contract guarantee between her and the tide" – a vow that every day she arrived, she'd find an object to bring home and make something out of. Her promise to the shoreline, a handshake with a rocky other, where the commitment is to always wax after waning. Of course, a contract is usually signed between two parties. If, in this case, the other is the tide, one wonders what its stipulations are.

Oh has always found unique ways of humanizing the inanimate, both methodologically and sculpturally. Her work *10,000 years every spring* presents melted icebergs measured and contained in large glass aquarium-like vessels, ironically attempting an impossible recontextualization of one of our world's most politicized forms of frozen water. Like her contract with the shoreline, Oh makes tangible a human-non-human relationship that usually feels impossibly large, and abstract. What is a person to make of this body-sized sample of something we know

represents so much more? Somehow, the water seems to look back and ask the same.

Oh's explorations eventually led her to *NL Classifieds*, which playfully demonstrates a relational tension between human technology and interspecies sensory apparatuses. The sculpture bridges the ear bone of a Fin Whale, the earth's second largest mammal, and the so-called greyhound of the sea, to a pressurized life raft, designed to burst open and inflate once it sinks beyond four meters of depth. Around the size of a human fist, this conch-like bone dwarfs our own, which is the smallest in our body and by comparison must be handled with tweezers. What incomprehensible sounds could this enormous ear part possibly be listening to, and might it be able to translate their sonic world to ours through this industrial safety apparatus? I like to imagine that somewhere in that less-than-four-meter ocean safe zone we could play a delicate game of telephone with this mighty creature – as if our lives depended on it.

A hopeful ping into the depths, Oh's sonic communication device has its visual counterpart in *Horizon*, a set of three navigation lights repurposed to orient the artist and the viewer. Typically used by commercial fishermen to help guide one another at night, these recontextualized beacons infer a more poetic search. On a calm, dark night, a boat light or a lighthouse becomes the absent sun. Dewey windows beckon touch, and the world reveals itself anew, before bird chatter and words. I walked in Toronto's West End in the very early morning recently looking carefully at the architecture, geography, and plants. Before long, history fell in on itself, becoming old and then ancient. Objects that were easily read in the day became first unusual, and then evidence of the many lives and stories beyond me. I thought: maybe all aesthetics needs is for the world to be regarded with purpose.

SIMON FUH is an artist and writer based in Toronto, Canada. He has a Master's of Visual Studies from the University of Toronto. His work spans a wide range of media, but coalesces around sound, installation, collaboration, and drawing. He tends to build relationships with friends and community through his work, often incorporating a performative or narrative element that influences the trajectory of projects. This flexible, social-conceptual approach informs how Simon explores recurring themes of place, memory, and microhistory.

JULIE OH works in conceptual sculpture and installation, drawing on both industrial and personal objects to playfully examine notions of labor, mortality, and faith. She holds an MFA from School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a BFA from the University of Saskatchewan. Recent solo exhibitions of her work include *Tides* (2023) YYZ Artists' Outlet, *Sesame, open yourself* (2022) at Kenderdine Art Gallery; *Tunnel, Air, Mother* (2019) at Dunlop Art Gallery; *Your Hog Has Arrived* (2019) at PAVED Arts; and *lines* (2018) at Remai Modern. Her work has been the subject of articles and reviews in Public Parking, Peripheral Review and BlackFlash magazine. She lives in rural Newfoundland.