

The Debutante

Issue 02



Feminist-Surrealist
Odysseys

WORKING THROUGH SURREALIST SCORE

by Josephine Mead

In 2019 I made my way across oceans—bound for the countryside of Arraiolos, Portugal—to produce photographs. Staying in an XVIII century manor house to undertake the Córtez Frontal Residency program. For the majority of my stay there, I was alone—thinking through story, place, possibility and time. In a dry landscape, overseen by the brazen sun that drew lines aside my eyes, I was thinking through modes of water—before and after, quiet yearnings and ancestral ties. Cinematic tropes seemed like the appropriate mode of expression for this surreal new reality. Water is defined as ‘a colourless, transparent, odourless liquid that forms the seas, lakes, rivers, and rain and is the basis of the fluids of living organisms.’ I slightly disagree with this statement. It may be transparent, but it is full of colour in myriad ways. I wouldn’t call it odourless, as it cascades with sensorial possibility. It is diaphanous and welcoming and dangerous and becoming and everything and nothing. Even while alone within the arid summer, I was swept up in fluvial possibility. My company lay within thoughts of the ocean. Opportunity was found through the power of settling—as a young, yet ageing woman, **I was seeking out ways to be alone.** There is great difference between the words “alone” and “lonely.” There is strength to be found with the focus that comes from acts of deep listening and solitary silence—this allows one to fall into their own tides, rhythms and values. I was sinking into my abysses and soaring through sky and possibility. Water is with us and in us and around us. We exist within the oceans of those who swam before us, buoyed by their potential and power. My gestures of making were attempts to define myself within the salty waters of my own becoming. I was listening intently to the sounds of the waves. Women are fluvial, fluid, flowing, fluctuating, feeling, fostering, falling, fissuring, flickering, flourishing, flooding and fascinating beings. I was and am flowering and floundering simultaneously—there is magic to be found within both of these states—I am both solid and empty, unwavering in gait.

Water surrounded me at this time, but was also barely present. I was in an arid landscape in the high-summer. Dry heat warming my bones and bearing down on the white-washed houses of Arraiolos, carrying years of memory in their stones. Despite the dryness, I was swept up in oceanic thought, perhaps because I had just spent several weeks allowing the sea to soothe me in Istanbul. In the mornings, near the castle overlooking the town, glistening beads of dew caught onto lace spider webs. I took photographs of the sun-rays kissing them. I spent the middle of each day sitting in the main square—**alone**—drinking coffee and listening to the sounds of the water from the strange fountain that had been erected in its centre. It covered the old dyeing vats that were a formative factor in the history of Arraiolos’ rug making trade. How odd that water can be used to cover such an important point of time. The pillory column at the other end of the square remains in vision—acts of pain are often more visually prevalent than acts of making within our collective historical thinking. Nevertheless, the water of the fountain soothed me and acted as my main point of company during those long days. I spent a few hours swimming in a pool with the woman who founded the





residency program, Mercedes, and her two small children. Peacocks were roaming the surrounding grounds and I kept wondering what my future would hold as I watched them from the water. The act of aqueous floating left me weightless and the fear started to slowly seep out of me. Was I bound for gestational possibility? I was here and I was making and I was accomplishing it **by myself**. There were not many other moments of liquid to be found in the hot Portuguese countryside, but the bulk of my body consists of water. I was bringing oceans to the landscape. I am fluvial and I was settling and opening and fluctuating and sinking and floating simultaneously in the sun. We are held in water in our gestational origins. I am still carried gestationally by my mother—still buoyed within her waters. The gestated body never leaves the one that brings it to life. We are forever floating, anchored. The water of the feminine body is ‘a challenge to phallogocentrism’ (Neimanis, 3). I was finding strength and solace within the tributaries of my mind. Women’s bodies are fluid in their gravitational pull. Our menstrual cycles have a draw between the ocean tides and the cycle of the moon. We are liquid and we are leaking. Even when weeping, we are in full bloom. We can be built upon the choral voices of a thousand souls before us. Lift me up to the pulpit and cast me over with brazen confidence. I am in modes of diaphanous singing, serenading the women that came before me. As Virginia Woolf reminds us, ‘there are tides [with]in the body.’

This series of photographs are a departure from my past work. I began to turn my face towards the camera. I created still-life images with local flowers, which were just as much self-portraits. Modes of theatrically, making and heartbreak had pushed me to this point and I was ready to face the world and enter into new modes of experience and exchange (albeit tentatively). Was I attempting to cast myself in the place of muse/siren—at once subject and photographer—in an act towards attaining self-confidence? Within this volume Rachel Ashenden remarks, ‘If the siren is not listened to, she will perish’ (see page 40). These photographs capture times of making and acts of preparation, readying me for future sonorous offerings—I **am collecting words and preparing to be heard**. I am building myself into memories of my own making, to be shared. We are often not afforded the opportunity to truly be alone—to have the time and space to sink in and not turn away, to really settle—especially as women. There are moments of pain within this solitary state, but it is an opportunity that can bind, build, beatify and buoy us. I came out of the residency with (almost) resolute edges and tender eyes. These images capture at once a loneliness and an awakening to the strength of being with/by/in myself. They stand as visual reference to the women who have rallied and pushed and sung their own songs and stories—remaining unique, embracing loneliness, moving towards the edges. Standing in front of the shutter and moving through cinematic score, I trudged through frameworks of theatricality, pulling myself to shore. Solace can always be found within acts of making. The siren is deemed an intoxicating, seductive woman—pulling yearning beings from the ocean. The word also describes an acoustic instrument that produces musical tones, often to signal danger. I am happy to exist within this potentially volatile place of peril and pleasure. In a statement of self conviction and strength, Laura Carthew pronounced, ‘I make stock from salt.’ I too am making stock from my own salt—building myself through the brine of lamentation. I am not afraid to try—mixing tears and sea water to bring myself to



life. I am creating an archive of new sounds. They can be muffled or made louder under the depths of the water. It all depends on how deep I dive. Jen McSweeney notes that, ‘depth is thus a relational phenomenon that becomes visible whenever a body is put into contact with a world’ (147). We can constantly be re-made and revitalized. To do this, we need to welcome new surroundings.

My mouth is cautious, recalibrating the space around new syllables, making sounds. But articulation comes in rapid motion and I am building my vocabulary quickly under water—I am listening and **I am learning**. Lacking translation, I may slip from foundation, meeting oceanic floor. Preparation is key. I am building monuments before me. Continuing to stand up again. The worn marble tiles in the manor house looked and felt like waves. The floor, cold. When I laid down on it I had the feeling of being encased in the ocean—the initial submerge that catches your breath—a touching, just me and the waves. **It is brave to be alone**. I re-drew myself through camera shutter. Walls of water cast us towards the running of different clocks. Time can move in more harmonious distance when you truly listen to yourself. We are not always in time with one another. I am deciphering and disturbing and coming up with new temporalities to suit my feelings and accommodate my desires and wishes. This is an oceanic experience of time—big and expansive and mysterious. I can carve the space I need and fill it with possibility. How can I drift, dissolve, float, swim, wade and wander forever? I am both young and ageing—my body is changing. I am learning how to remain afloat, anchored and adrift—all at once. The key is to forever follow curiosity—I learnt this from my mother. I am deciphering what I need to hold onto. Carl Safina muses, ‘we are, in a sense, soft vessels of seawater. Seventy percent of our bodies is water, the same percentage that covers Earth’s surface. We are wrapped around an ocean within. You can test this simply enough: **Taste your tears**’ (Safina, 435). I am sea, mist, flower, air and wave—both ocean and earth, from initial breath to grave.



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Fin!