

Lillian O'Neil, *The Lonely Isle*

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text by Kit Wise

How do we see the ocean?

Lillian O'Neil's latest work, her largest collage to date, submerges us in this problem. In fact two: the complexity of seeing (and consequently thinking); and, the conundrum of the sea, arguably the most profound image in human culture. The Bible opens and closes with references to the ocean and immersion in water is found as a mystical process in most major religions. Lacan's famous theory of the gaze perhaps best unites these concerns: his motif of a sardine floating in the sea casts the ocean as all that lies beyond the image, the unknowable and consequently the unthinkable.

Experiencing O'Neil's triptych is to shift (or flow) between these registers, a rip tide of Analytic Cubism, filmic montage, photographic observation and Romantic sublime. Collage was the defining artistic practice of modernism and the twentieth century – from Schwitters and Höch, to Vertov and Eisenstein. For good reason: the agency involved in cutting and splicing challenged (literally) frames of reference and the coherence of epistemology. The early twenty-first century saw the rise of the re-mix, a problematic term that lost much of the political impetus of collage in favour of the smooth, seamless spaces of the digital. Beginning her career working in digital film, O'Neil consciously returns to the haptic and the analogue: instead of skimming increasingly perfect surfaces, her approach is more akin to free-diving, coming up for air with handfuls of another world.

The Tempest, Shakespeare's last and most mysterious play, has the sea as its stage. The dramatic personae perform against this backdrop, rising and falling against a meniscus of both Prospero's lonely island and language itself, to explore (as Lacan suggested) what lies beyond. The sprite Ariel sings:

"Full fathom five thy father lies,
Of his bones are coral made,
Those are pearls that were his eyes,
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change,
into something rich and strange,
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell,
Ding-dong.

Hark! now I hear them, ding-dong, bell."

O'Neil's latest work similarly shows us something rich and strange - a horizonless field, a faceted liquid, an impermeable formless threshold – legible yet inscrutable, the infinitely pliable surface of the water remains out of reach, opaque and impossible to transit in its image form. The pictorial space is both flat and inflected, tonally and chromatically unified yet dappled like camouflage. (Cubists artists were involved in the development of camouflage patterns for the Allied navies of World War II). With water anticipated to be the most contested commodity of this millennium, coupled with dire predictions of rising sea levels, *The Lonely Isle*, provides a glimpse of this simultaneous absence / surfeit; suggesting that seeing the ocean is always to be looking beyond.