

Gavin, Francesca. "Something in the water – the rise of aquatic art." *Financial Times*, February 28, 2022.

FINANCIAL TIMES

In an age of liquid borders, climate change, plastic pollution and mass immigration, the world is watching its water. It's a theme that has possessed our cultural life also, where aquatic paintings, photography and digital installations are flooding our galleries.

The theme has been an ongoing subject in Alex Katz's paintings for decades. For the 94-year-old American painter, the motif appeals because of its mutability. "Water keeps changing and it's impossible to paint fully, so, you do one part today and try another part tomorrow," Katz explains. "You can never get it right. Your attempts get exhausted, so you try something else." Katz's seascapes, painted over 40 years in Maine, were brought together for a solo exhibition titled *Mondes Flottants/Floating Worlds* at Thaddaeus Ropac's space in Paris last autumn. They were created around three bodies of water near his small cabin – a pond, a brook, and the seashore, with some also painted in Mexico and Belgium. "It is interesting to see how Katz has returned to this theme of seascapes over the decades," says Ropac, "redefining it each time."



People, 2013, by Alex Katz © Alex Katz/DACS, London, 2022/Paul Takeuchi/Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac

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Marine 9, 1999, by Alex Katz © Alex Katz/ADAGP, Paris, 2021/Charles Duprat

There is a strong sense of abstraction in Katz's reflective works, which have shifted from the flatness of his earlier paintings to something more transparent in his later canvases. More than anything Katz offers an incredible approach to colour. "The colour is empirical," the artist notes. "It's just a way of making light." For the show's curator Eric de Chassey, the paintings "show that the deepest thoughts are coming from concentrated moments. It could be called contemplation, but not in a religious sense. It is something very active, and it elicits some kind of activity in the viewer."



Morning with Rocks, 1994, by Alex Katz © Alex Katz/DACS, London, 2022/Paul Takeuchi/Courtesy Thaddaeus Ropac

Water looks very different in the works of young British painter Patrick H Jones, who had a solo show at Frieze Art Fair with The Sunday Painter gallery and has recently shown at Galeriepcp in Paris. The artist's long, rectangular canvases depict fish in what he calls "grumpy and muggy water". The works were inspired by Jones's personal relationship with grief. "I wanted to explore the more difficult,

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repetitive mental cycles that we carry with us,” he explains. “There seemed something appropriate about using water as an analogy to discuss the surface and sub-surface of the human psyche.



Circle I, 2021, by Patrick H Jones © Ollie Hammick/Courtesy of The Sunday Painter

“I feel the more scarce and darker the works are, the more time the viewer has to take to see and feel the work. Water is a bit like that – it reveals more the longer you sit with it.” His wide-format works seem to stretch around and engulf the viewer. Here, water is a slippery topic that echoes the mind.

In the Renaissance, water represented purity: cue Botticelli’s Venus emerging from the sea. In the 19th century, it was the central motif for maritime power or political chaos, as in Gericault’s Raft of the Medusa, or just a mighty example of the power of nature – see Turner’s turbulent seascapes. Today’s artists owe more to the complexity and haunting nature of Roni Horn’s photographs of the Thames, her images accompanied by stories of lost lives. There are those, for instance, whose work has drawn on the relationship to water and the Atlantic slave trade, such as Dominique White’s fishing net-inspired installations or Alberta Whittle’s film works. But LA-based Calida Rawles’ hyper-realistic canvases resist depicting trauma. With her portrayals of figures, often in white dresses, bathing in clear blue water, she claims water as a space in which black people can thrive.

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On the Other Side of Everything, 2021, by Calida Rawles © Courtesy of Calida Rawles and Lehmann Maupin

“I want to go beyond showing us in pain or being a victim of something that happened in history,” she explains. “I think that we are more empowered; we are enlightened; we are informed and we’re moving with that history as a part of our DNA.” Her bathers bring to mind ideas of transcendence or baptism. “It’s almost like cleansing the self of history and what we have gone through, and showing our strength.”



The Lightness of Darkness, 2021, by Calida Rawles © Courtesy of Calida Rawles and Lehmann Maupin

It is not just painters who are drawn to water. The recreation of waves was central to Korean collective A'strict's installation *Starry Beach*, which was shown at LUX at 180 The Strand before Christmas. Their multi-directional installation

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resembled the ebb and flow of the seashore but was made out of lights that surrounded the viewer in a mirrored infinity room. “We wanted to show a wave that is unfamiliar to most people – one that splashes above our heads,” the group explains. “We wanted to express overwhelming emotion when we face great nature.”



Starry Beach, 2021, by Korean collective A'strict, on display at LUX at 180 The Strand © Jack Hems, courtesy of 180 Studios

Taiwanese artist Wu Chi-Tsung didn't originally intend his cyanotypes to be about water. He began the works with mountains in mind, but soon saw that his photographic blue spaces resembled tumultuous waves. As the series grew he began to explore ways the works could be interpreted as traditional Shanshui paintings, ocean views and natural landscapes. He began working with the method in 2012, frustrated with the ease of digital photography. “I was thinking I could try the possibilities of combining earlier techniques and materials, and hoping I could work with Xuan paper.” Chi-Tsung's process is direct and analogue. He works outdoors, using chemicals and UV light – “I'm basically like a farmer,” he laughs. After two hours crumpling and exposing his traditional cyanotype paper – a combination of materials not attempted before – he washes each sheet in water for up to an hour, depending on the effect he wants to achieve. “It's physical. I crumple the paper, I feel the paper. When the humidity is different it affects the paper. If it's drier, it's harder. If it's more humid, it's softer. There are lots of coincidences that I cannot control. That's the best part.”

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Cyano-Collage 117, 2021, by Wu Chi-Tsung © Wu Chi-Tsung/Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York



Cyano-Collage 118, 2021, by Wu Chi-Tsung © Wu Chi-Tsung/Courtesy of Sean Kelly, New York

The results are abstract but appear like seascapes. "I cannot say if [the work] is concrete or abstract," he adds. "Chinese landscapes never really represent specific mountains. An artist draws their own interpretation of the scene." Chi-Tsung's works are growing ever larger: his recent show at Sean Kelly in New

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York included a triptych of pieces reaching up to 9m high. The works also reflect the artist's love of rock climbing in Taipei – “facing a giant wall every day and a sea wave just behind me”. Similarly, his aim is to immerse the viewer in the space.



Tilde, 2021, by Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press © Courtesy of Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press and Frith Street Gallery, London



Simpleton, Simpleton, Simpleton (Ellipsis), 2021, by Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press © Courtesy of Fiona Banner aka The Vanity Press and Frith Street Gallery, London

The sea also became a near-accidental focus for British artist Fiona Banner (aka The Vanity Press) – her recent work is a by-product of working on a sculptural project that later became a collaboration with Greenpeace. “I came across a lot of paintings of big boats, galleons and warships,” explains Banner, who works partly on the south coast, overlooking the English Channel. She began to paint over the ships, creating “existential seascapes”. “I was thinking about what that coast means to me, as a divider, a conduit, a complex waterway. What is so beguiling about the sea is that it’s this invisible culture.” For Banner, the sea began to present an image of possibility, as well as a space of climate catastrophe. Her erased boats, turned into floating punctuation marks, were “a manifestation of a crisis”, but also signalled the potential for “language [to be] a courier for truth or meaning or content”. They also remind us, suitably, that the use of water in art remains gloriously fluid.