

Fugate, Marty. "Art Review: Celebrating the life aquatic at Sarasota Art Museum."
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"Dust Particles," watercolor and pastel on paper is a 2010 painting by Janaina Tschäpe from the Podesta Collection in Washington, D.C., featured in a mid-career retrospective of her work at the Sarasota Art Museum. JASON WYCHE/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM.

"Between the Sky and the Water" is a mid-career retrospective of Brazilian-German artist Janaina Tschäpe, curated by Anne-Marie Russell, the executive director of the Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College.

Tschäpe's art crosses media boundaries, including drawing, installation, painting, photography and performance, sculpture and video. Her disparate body of work shares the same artistic language. An iconography of the sea.

Tschäpe's paintings are fluid and mercurial. No right angles. Just swirls, smears, blots, blobs and other circular forms. They evoke the ocean without being literal.

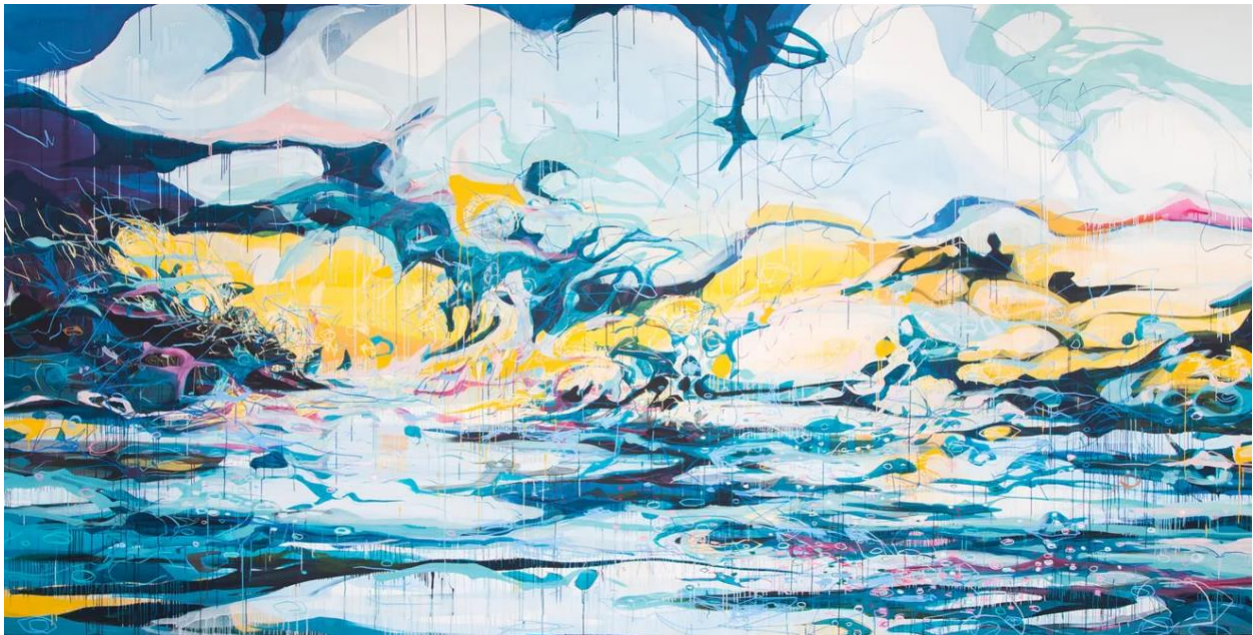
"Gush" (2014) is one of Tschäpe's imaginary seascapes. There's a clear sense of spatial depth. Blue-white blobs shot through with yellow rise up at the top of the painting. Down below: a tangled mesh of waveforms. Vertical lines drip down over all of it. The eye reads sky, storm clouds, sea, and rain.

Tschäpe's "Sea Lovers" (2019) implies a view beneath the waves. A writhing, deep-blue tangle of organic forms. It reminds me of a childhood glimpse of massive jellyfish off a dock in Key West. Weirdly beautiful, but alien and terrifying. It's easy to project the

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forms of entangled lovers into the mass of shapes. Are they there or not? Are the “lovers” in your mind, or in the painting?

“Swamp Eating Moon” (2018) shows a pink disc (the Moon?) behind jagged, dark green forms that seem to clutch like claws. A pale green plane recedes back to it, marked with horizontal lines (ripples on the water?). In the foreground: more jagged forms with bursts of pink (ghost orchids?).



“Gush,” a 2014 casein and watercolor pencil on canvas by Janaina Tschäpe from the Podesta Collection in Washington, D.C., is featured in a retrospective of her work at the Sarasota Art Museum. TERESA LOJACONO/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

After experiencing Tschäpe’s paintings, the mind is left with ambiguity, never certainty. That seems to be the artist’s strategy. Her paintings dance in the boundary state between representation and abstraction. The mind would quickly recognize a conventional seascape and quickly forget it. But Tschäpe’s paintings defy convention. The mind doesn’t know what it’s looking at. And so it keeps looking.

Tschäpe dives into mythological associations with her photographs, sculpture and installations. In the metaphor of myth, the sea speaks of fluidity, mysterious depths and life’s interconnectedness. The ocean especially resonates with feminine associations. Thanks to male myth-makers, the women of the sea are either helpful (mermaids) or hateful (sirens).

Tschäpe appropriates this symbolic language. She turns it around and makes it her own, while taking it a step closer to aquatic reality and her own sense of sacred wonder.

You can see it in Tschäpe’s “Blood, Sea” video installation from 2004. The artist shot this video at Weeki Wachee Springs in Florida and enlisted several “mermaid”

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performers from the waterpark as stars. But her show is a far cry from the conventional underwater ballet performed for tourists. Here, the mermaids are alien and mysterious. Intertwined with inflated, womb-like sacks and tubes, they sway to the hypnotic sounds of bubbles and breathing. They're more like actual sea beings than pretty faces you'd see in a postcard. You recognize them and yet you don't.

The artist also plays with the edge of recognition within chimerical sculptural pieces. Her "Creature (Octopus)" from 2003 is molded from silicone rubber. It has the form of an octopus – but also elements of lobsters and coral. The glass pieces from her "Ein Gefühl von Flut" series (2019) show the same ambiguity. Elements of brain coral, crabs, seaweed and fish are all part of the mix and match assortment.

In other photographs, Tschäpe punctuates the desert sky with multicolored balloons and decorates a beach in Brazil with enormous tubular forms, held in place by helpful beachgoers down below. It's all about rattling cages and jimmying the doors of perception. Like it or not, she'll make you see the world in a new way.

Her "Melantropics" installation (2018) will definitely wake you up. It takes up a whole gallery at the museum, a tangle of crimson tubes, like blood coral from the Land of the Giants. It feels organic, real, and wonderful. Awesome in the literal sense.

Serendipitously, Tschäpe's first name is a variation of Iemanjá, the name of the ruling sea goddess in Brazil's Candomblé religion.



Tschäpe's art is infused with sacred wonder for the living oceans.

Experiencing her art in this exhibit, you can't help but feel it, too.

"Sea Lovers," casein and colored pencil on canvas, is a 2010 work by Janaina Tschäpe on display at Sarasota Art Museum. PROVIDED BY THE ARTIST/SARASTOA ART MUSEUM

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'Between the Sky and the Water'

Featuring the paintings of Janaina Tschäpe. Runs through May 2 at Sarasota Art Museum of Ringling College, 1001 S. Tamiami Trail, Sarasota; sarasotaartmuseum.org.