



Front: Nirveda Alleck, *Balancing Act*, 2016 • Back: Diana Heisie, *SEEDED, Performance*, 6 archival pigment prints, 2016

MAURITIUS 2016

# Edge Effects

An Ephemeral Coast Exhibition



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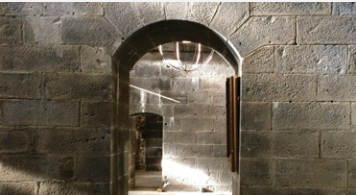
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# Edge Effects

*Ephemeral Coast* links international coasts, including South Wales, Mauritius, Australia, the USA and the east coast of Canada through a series of exhibitions of contemporary art. Working with an array of artists, climate change experts and writers from the humanities, *Ephemeral Coast* seeks to develop an exchange of ideas between art, empathy and the degradation of the ocean as witnessed through coastal visibility. The project as a whole builds interconnections between the global ocean crises and coastal identities which acknowledge regional details and concerns. As a result, the exhibition draws from a series of aesthetic connections between globally disseminated subjects and coastal places that are not just about seeing connections but actively re-connecting.<sup>i</sup>

The ‘edge effect’ describes an interface between sea and land that have historically been an example of vibrant eco-systems but in the present sense speak of scarcity, risk and peril. If the *effect of the edge* is now that of separation, how do we ‘get back to the sea’, as Rachel Carson suggests and ‘mentally and imaginatively’ re-engage with the idea that humans are part of a vast ocean ecology?<sup>ii</sup> The exhibition, *Edge Effects* engages with ideas of coastal interdependence; namely the constant overlapping histories and co-dependence of humans and non-humans residing on the edges of the ocean,



but through the contemporary lens of oceanic climate change. Situated in La Citadelle, a military fort located in Port Louis and overlooking the city and harbor, the exhibition proposes connections with the histories of colonialism that effectively ‘created’ Mauritius and which continues to shape its environmental challenges. In turn, *Edge Effects* follows on from the first *Ephemeral Coast* exhibition held in South Wales and as such,

the work of Gemma Copp and Alex Duncan create a bridge between these two exhibitions and locations. Peculiarly, it was Charles Darwin who described the ‘Welsh character of the scenery’ in Mauritius and who acts as a conceptual link between the two regions.<sup>iii</sup>

Originally from Mauritius, Shiraz Bayjoo is an artist who engages with the complex legacies of colonialism within the Indian Ocean and the critical potential of authoring post-colonial narratives. As a result, histories of coastal ‘encounters’ feature as a dominant site and motif within his work and often as a premise to discussions of colonial occupation. In turn, the vivid luminosity of the Indian Ocean acts as an important visual marker of place, territory and belonging within Bayjoo’s work. For *Edge Effects*, Bayjoo has produced a series of stunningly luminous paintings of coral reefs based upon illustrations from the colonial era including Darwin’s reef drawings of Mauritius. Darwin arrived in Mauritius on April 29th, 1836, and subsequently described it as a ‘harmonious island’... ‘adorned with an air of perfect elegance.’<sup>iv</sup> He was interested in the arrangement of coral environments in the Mascarene region and in 1842 published a series maps of reef habitats, some of which Bayjoo used as the basis of his Ocean Miniature series. Here, details of the morphology of these 5000 year-old reefs around Mauritius and other regions in the West Indian Ocean, sit in a sea of turquoise and create an alternative classificatory system based upon incandescence and luminosity. A second installation comprising of a video installation point to another kind of oceanic cartography - of systems of colonial voyage and domination in Mauritius, further intertwining the narratives of colonialism and coastal degradation.

The coral lagoon reefs, barriers, fringes and atolls in this region were once so abundant that they were considered a pristine natural wonder, but the impact of rapid deforestation combined with the concentration of sugar plantations during the colonial era and the intense anthropogenic impact of the last twenty five years, have now rendered these habitats as severely endangered.<sup>v</sup> In Nirveda Alleck’s *Balancing Act*, vessels of coral hang from a wooden structure located in Flic-en-Flac, gently swaying with the push and pull of the waves until the whole sculpture collapses. *Balancing Act* is recreated within an interior arch in the



Citadel and allows for closer consideration of the hanging coral debris which is situated in plaster and capped in moss. Miraculously, Mauritian reef habitat which covers some 240 km2, escaped the mass bleaching event of 1998, but continues to be threatened due to ongoing ocean acidification.<sup>vi</sup> In this regard, these vessels act like miniature islands that gesture at the extreme loss of reefs in the Indian Ocean and propose the creation of hybrid territories of oceanic debris. A similar kind of balancing act or negotiation takes places in *Arise*, a second site-specific installation situated in the black arches of the fort, whose vantage point to the city of Port Louis and the sea beyond, creates an essential foil to this work. Combining 3d modeling processes, video and sculpture, the work considers the emergence of new terrains in the wake of the environmental crises.

Gemma Copp’s *Soul of the Sea* (2016) is a 4-minute film that involves an inquiry into the transgressive dimensions of anthropocentrism. Copp is a performance and video artist whose work is inspired by the Bay of Swansea, Wales, and subsequently features its Atlantic coast and maritime culture frequently. Her work often creates transactions between herself, as a distinct (female) peripatetic body and this particular coast which is known equally for the pollution stemming from the intensive steel industry at one end of the bay as it is for its magnificent beaches. In the short film, *Soul of the Sea*, a collection of hanging plastic structures that resemble fishing nets are filled with sea salt and suspended from the ceiling. After cutting the plastic, the salt pours onto the artist’s body forming



a new kind of territory, that ‘materializes’ the intermingling of human, plastic and ocean ecology. It echoes a central line of inquiry within Jane Bennett’s *Vital Materialism* (2012), which argues that we can no longer view humankind as residing ‘over’ nature and hence separate from it, but situated within a constantly morphing heterogeneous network



– of organic and synthetic materials constantly interacting.<sup>vii</sup> The performance aims to remove the bifurcation between human and non-human that has governed our conception of ‘nature’ since the Enlightenment and suggests the continuous interactions of human biology, sea water and plastic pollution.

Alex Duncan’s *hold down (off Mauritius)*, (2016) re-frames the fear, exhilaration and disorientation that humans experience by being fully immersed in the ocean through an edited video of found go-pro footage taken by surfers off of the Mauritian coast. Each section of immersion has been edited and slowed down so that it detains the viewer and brings us into the visual flow of the rolling water; at times near the brink of drowning. Here the re-orientation of coastal vision to the disorientation of riding and entering the surf, are an expression of the otherworldly nature of oceanic swimming and perhaps, the threat of its increasing toxicity too. It also questions our particular kind of disconnection with sensory experiences of



oceanic spaces and offers an opportunity to immerse within the thresholds of the water and identify new, non-human peripheries. This kind of reanimation speaks of a desire to experience aquatic immersion and is also at work in the *water drawings* 2009-2014, a group of found photos that have been submersed into water. Here urban environments and landscapes appear to drift, wander and flow as they submerge and merge within the watery overlay, ‘flooding out beyond the confines of the image onto the board, or rushing up into a maelstrom.’<sup>viii</sup>

*Lamer Nou Fer/The Sea We Make*, a video installation by Diana Heise, featuring music by Stefan Gua, also concerns reef habitat but through the wider story of the plight of artisanal fishing communities in Mauritius and Vermont. The work engages with the politics of environmental justice by tracing the sense of belonging and connectivity that is held by artisanal fishermen and conveying the imminent threats being placed upon this important relationship as a result of climate change and over-fishing. The film begins in Mauritius and highlights the historic relationship between emancipation of former slaves and the development of Creole fishing communities. Coastal fishing is well developed in Mauritius and while regulated with some fishing reserves, approximately 2800 fishermen’s

catches exceed the maximum sustainable yields. In contrast to net fishing which causes major marine depletion, artisanal fishing methods offer a more ethical approach. In turn, Mauritius’ biodiverse marine habitats are key to its thriving tourism, but this same tourism and associated development places enormous pressure on its reefs and fishing reserves. Thus the film focuses on the sustainability of the Mauritian lagoon, its reef culture and inevitable decline through an extensive examination of the movement and interaction of the reef within the water, capturing at close range the hybridity and indeed, wonder of the Mauritian lagoon. Heise is a highly participatory artist whose extensive research involves receptive and sensitive methods of working with local communities, while also initiating activist principles. In a second work, the artist planted Mangrove seeds in a remote area of Le Morne, a historic site known as the home of the ‘Maroon republic’ and its subsequent



violent clash between the marooned slaves and the British and French colonizers. Mangroves are an essential stabilizer of coast lines in the Southern Hemisphere, acting as a buffer to storm surges and providing an essential habitat for fish and corals.<sup>ix</sup> Mauritius has experienced expedient coastal development primarily as a result of tourism and subsequently, Mangrove forests have declined dramatically. Heise’s planting of seeds are thus a symbolic act of climate resistance both in Mauritius and in the USA where she plans to continue the project with a letter writing campaign to the US Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works.

The artists in *Edge Effects* reframe coastal climate change not just as a scientific problem but one that is deeply interwoven in the histories of colonialism and the need to transform economies of consumption and exploitation of the natural world. Each artist has engaged with the effects of coastal degradation in particular ways: of artisanal fishing communities that once thrived now negotiating the extinction of fish stocks; of species at the precipice of extinction; of the imminent bleaching of coral due to ocean acidification; and the escalating presence and proliferation of ocean plastic pollution. *Edge Effects* thus examines the collection and re-purposing of oceanic plastic detritus, the investigation of species extinction, and the transaction between marginalized peripatetic bodies and beings within a framing of the coast as disorienting, mutable and contested.

Ultimately, it re-frames the coast as a heterogeneous space of unprecedented risk, uncertainty and contamination, whilst seeking to re-imagine opportunities for belonging, solidarity and connection with the coast.

Celina Jeffery is a curator, writer and educator based in Canada and Wales. She is Associate Professor of Art History and Theory at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Recent publications include *The Artist as Curator*, (Intellect, 2015) and the ‘Junk Ocean’ issue of Drain, *A Journal of Contemporary Art and Culture* (Jan. 2016). She is the curator of *Ephemeral Coast*, [www.ephemeralcoast.com](http://www.ephemeralcoast.com)

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- ii Rachel Carson, *The Sea Around Us*, New York: Open Road Integrated Media, 2011. Location 299, Kindle.
- iii Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle, ‘Mauritius to England’*, with an Introduction by Walter Sullivan, New York: Meridian, 1996, p. 422
- iv Charles Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, with an Introduction by Walter Sullivan, New York: Meridian, 1996, p. 419
- v J. R. Turner and Klaus, R., ‘Coral Reefs of the Mascarenes, Western Indian Ocean. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society Series*, (2005), p 223
- vi J. R. Turner, and Klaus, R. p 237
- vii J. R. Turner, and Klaus, R. p 237
- viii Alex Duncan, Artist Statement, *water drawings*, 2014. Unpublished.
- ix Veronique Greenwood, To Save Coral Reefs, First Save Mangroves, *National Geographic*, Feb. 2015 • <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2015/02/150210-mangrove-protect-coral-bleaching-science/> Date accessed, August 3rd, 2016

- 1 Alex Duncan, Installation of *hold down* and *water drawings*, 2014
- 2 Nirveda Alleck, *Arise*, 2016. Site specific installation
- 3 Gemma Copp, *Soul of the Sea*, 2016. Video, 4.02 mins.
- 4 Installation of Shiraz Bayjoo, *Ocean Miniature series*, 2016
- 5 La Citadelle, Mauritius
- 6 Coral degradation, near Flic-en-Flac, Mauritius
- 7 La Citadelle, Mauritius
- 8 La Citadelle, Mauritius
- 9 Shiraz Bayjoo, No. 7, *Ocean Miniature series*, 2016
- 10 Nirveda Alleck, *Balancing Act*, 2016. Site specific installation
- 11 Gemma Copp, *Soul of the Sea*, 2016. Video, 4.02 mins.
- 12 Alex Duncan, *hold down*, (off Mauritius), 2016. Screenshot from film, digital video (37 edited ‘go-pro’ videos), 1min 56 looped
- 13 Diana Heise, *Lamer Nou Fer/The Sea We Make*, HD video installation, 2016. Featuring music by Stefan Gua