

Marina Zurkow | Crossing the Waters



## Crossing the Waters



Images of apocalypse, like dreams, are repositories of latent meaning. Because we project our fears, hopes, and prejudices into them, such visions tell us as much about our past and present as they do about what shall come to pass in the future.

Among all possible apocalyptic futures, the flood stands out as particularly laden with symbolic content. While writing this essay, I dreamed frequently of rising waters. In the words of J.G. Ballard, the flood exerts an "amniotic pull": it confounds, it purifies, it overwhelms and overtakes us.

The evocative image of the flood has been pressed into allegorical, literary, and cinematic service many times throughout history, as in Rimbaud's poem "Après le Déluge" ("After the Flood"):

*As soon as the idea of the Deluge was abated,  
A hare stopped in the clover and swaying flower-bells, and said a prayer to the rainbow,  
through the spider's web.*

Here the deluge is purely symbolic. It is an idea that restores the world's purity, and returns it to an Eden-like innocence until, by degrees, civilization encroaches:

*Madame ---- set up a piano in the Alps. Mass and first communions were  
celebrated at the hundred thousand altars of the cathedral.*

In time, society's institutions re-emerge from this state of nature and the Rimbaud goes on to summon forth the Deluge once more: "waters and sorrows rise and launch the floods again." The flood is a revolt against civilization itself, or even against the universe itself, but in any case it is a revolt that the poet celebrates and welcomes. His vision of apocalypse reflects a present-day desire for revolution, for catharsis, for a new start.

Marina Zurkow's recent works in video problematize our relationship with images of apocalypse. Each work takes place in a flooded world, a watery field of blue and gray in which animated characters behave strangely. By no means straightforward depictions of reality, Zurkow has drawn humans with animal heads and toddlers who drift on icebergs aimlessly firing weapons. But Zurkow's floods, unlike most apocalyptic imagery, are not purely dreams, allegories, or devices; they are based on natural science research, on the calculations of supercomputers that project present ocean temperatures into an uncertain future. They refer not only to the future, but to the recent past of extreme weather events in Guangdong or New Orleans. Unlike that of Rimbaud, this deluge is not merely an idea.

There is no apocalypse, no singular moment of transformation. The future is latent in the present. In Zurkow's work, we confront this latent present in the form of vividly colored animations, made strange in the rising waters.

# Scroll

In Zurkow's 2009 work *Slurb*, a colorful cast of characters inhabits a drowned world that scrolls slowly across the screen from left to right. Man with fish head, surrounded by flies, drifts languidly. Woman in pink dress clutches umbrella in stiff wind. Wolf-headed figure with red baseball cap stands, nonplussed, in bowl-shaped boat. Alligators lurk. Mermaids lounge.

With its scrolling image, *Slurb* bears some formal resemblance to Chinese horizontal handscrolls, which were traditionally unrolled section by section, taking the viewer on a journey through a single continuous space. While the handscroll progresses in a line from start to finish, *Slurb* has a looping structure with no beginning or end. This looping structure is mirrored in the endlessly repeating actions of each of the characters in the piece. One, a young boy with a large bald head who stands on top of a submerged camper van, makes an earnest gesture of entreaty to nobody, over and over again. His pleas are unheard; like all of the characters in the piece, he is stuck.

In literature, narrative is characterized by action that produces change—precisely what the characters in *Slurb* are unable to produce. Nevertheless, the piece appears to have an implied narrative. We infer a sequence of events something like this: At some unknown point in the future, the waters will rise, the jellyfish will take over, class hierarchies will be overturned. The scene depicted in *Slurb* takes place after this implied cataclysm, sometime in the future.

In fact, all of the characters in the piece—like the bald-headed preaching boy—are drawn from present day video footage. To create the piece, Zurkow used live video clips drawn from a range of sources:

Tourist and documentary footage of people practicing traditional aquaculture on now-polluted waterways in Myanmar + Cambodia; YouTube preacher competitions in the US; people found in online stock footage archives under the keyword “sad”...

These are not images of the future, but of the very recent past.

The piece also problematizes the revolutionary charge often associated with the deluge. In *Slurb*, social roles are clearly demarcated, although the hierarchy among the characters is not clear. Boat people paddle about and harvest the fruits of this new sea; ghostlike jellyfish are visible beneath the surface; a woman with a net hauls them up into her boat. In the piece's ethereal soundtrack, we hear voices intoning—“...man o war, upside down moon, cannonball fire”—the names of jellyfish species. It is a song to a new food source. Meanwhile, once-proud homes and automobiles have been reduced to sunken monuments by the floodwaters, leaving their owners to pace the roofs aimlessly—still dressed in all their finery.

The boat people work industriously to adapt and survive while the privileged classes are confused and bewildered. In other words, *Slurb* shows us a world not so different from our own. Just as the characters do not produce change in their environment, the flood did not produce change in the characters—but it did re-frame their behavior. Zurkow's flood heightens the sense of desperation about the preaching boy, and throws into sharp relief the humble practicality of the boat people.

Scientists tell us that the seas are already full of jellyfish. Waves are getting bigger in the Pacific Northwest. Extreme weather is on the rise. There is no before and after the flood; it is now, all around us. When we project it into the future or the realm of allegory, we avoid looking at it directly, and we become—like Zurkow's looping characters—unable to effect change.



## Political Cartoon

In Zurkow's 2007 work *The Poster Children*, polar bears and kids with automatic pistols are stranded on floating icebergs in a horizonless cyan sea dotted with piles of used VCRs and computer monitors. The aesthetic is lighthearted—the children's bodies have an awkward pathos, the bears are bearishly goofy—but this only heightens the desperate sadness of it.

With subjects that seem ripped from the headlines of stories about wayward children and despoiled nature, *The Poster Children* has a strong affinity with the political cartoon. The effectiveness of a political cartoon relies on its ability to tap into a shared vocabulary of stories and images, our collective consciousness. The political cartoonist uses this shared vocabulary to create caricatures—exaggerated versions of iconic images—and allegories, which function on a symbolic level. In either case, the political cartoonist only offers a fragment of a story, but our shared experience of media imagery has already given us enough information to fill in the gaps.

This shared, mediated experience allows us to recognize the bears, pollution, and children in *The Poster Children* as symbols of lost innocence. The polar bear stranded on a tiny iceberg is particularly recognizable as the defining image of global warming. The water, too, calls to mind images from the news, of rising floods and collapsing ice shelves.

Rimbaud's deluge (like Noah's) heralded a fresh start, returning the world to a state of primal innocence. In *The Poster Children*, the flood has been stripped of allegory. Pollution, endangered animals, lost children: Rather than purifying or cleansing, the floodwaters actually highlight the world's defilement. The water is a glassy surface in which a corrupt world is reflected, and this unfamiliar world is indeed our own.

## Slumberland

In *Weights & Measures* (2007), the screen is a field of aquamarine overlaid with blocky bubbles and foam. Translucent airplanes and elephants—heavy, big, brutal, noisy things—move silently through the water with lightness and grace. These are overlaid with single-celled organisms in white and green. Microscopic, weightless, noiseless things co-exist alongside the very large and very loud. We have left the surface world behind. We imagine that there must be tumultuous events to have made airplanes fall from the sky and elephants take to the seas, but the scene before our eyes seems somehow peaceful despite its cold finality.

Unlike *The Poster Children*, which taps into a collective library of conscious imagery from news media, *Weights & Measures* has the quality of a dream, of delving into the unconscious. It taps into another strain of newspaper cartooning that harkens back to the great Winsor McCay.

McCay's *Little Nemo in Slumberland* first appeared in William Randolph Hearst's newspapers in 1905. It told the story

of a young boy, Nemo, who is summoned in his dreams each night to meet King Morpheus in Slumberland. On his journey, he encounters bizarre sights and perils. He is pecked by love birds, he is transformed into a monkey, he crosses a bridge held up by slaves. More than a century after its first publication, the strip still speaks with a vivid oneiric power. Slumberland is filled with delightful fantasy, but it is also a place of unspeakable danger.

If *Weights & Measures*, like *Little Nemo*, takes us to a kind of dreamland, then the images we see there perhaps should be seen as symbols with layers of latent, unconscious meaning.

1. The airplane is a triumph of engineering over the physical world, but it also does damage to the environment. It is an extension of the human body, and when it fails, the body inside fails also.
2. The elephant is a wild animal that can be tamed and made to perform in circus and war. Its strength is sapped by the encroachment of civilization. Unlike the plane, which sinks to its doom in Zurkow's piece, the elephant swims with purpose towards some unknown destination.
3. The single-celled organism is the one element that actually belongs underwater. Is it plankton? If so, it has a terrible hold over us, playing an essential role in photosynthesis and the food chain. Or is it blue-green algae or some other threatening blight? If so, it is a symptom of human intervention in the natural world, able to disrupt the ecosystem. These organisms are more alien to us and more closely bound to our survival than either the elephant or airplane.

In the 20th century, humankind won many victories over natural laws that were thought to be unbreakable. We were able to live longer and travel faster than ever before. For those who enjoyed the boons of this technology, climate change can be seen in psychoanalytic terms as the return of the repressed—the return of nature as the defining force in our lives.

In the dream of *Weights & Measures*, the return of nature hinges on this image of the single-celled organism. The symbols of humankind's dominion—the elephant and the airplane—are rendered impotent in this underwater world. Our sense of power over the physical world is an empty fantasy. Meanwhile, the real force of life resides in mysterious and hidden processes that we cannot see, understand, nor control.

## Sublime

A crystal decanter spins slowly in place on a churning gray sea as clouds race by overhead. The sea and sky verge on pure abstraction, transforming the video screen into a liquid surface interrupted by the clean hard lines of the decanter. Inside the decanter, strange weather patterns swirl and a human figure paddles a small craft. The human figure looks like a preparatory sketch in an otherwise finished canvas: black strokes form the outline of a head, an

arm, a boat and the handle of a paddle. This image was rotoscoped from live video footage, and in the process most of the character's features were omitted, leaving only a generalized outline.

This image is from Marina Zurkow's *Elixir I*, part of a series of four single channel videos. Each of the works in the series features a crystal decanter with a generalized figure inside performing a specific activity (rowing, balancing, diving, attempting to fly). The title of the series suggests some kind of magical cure-all, but as in *Slurb*, the characters' actions appear futile, looping endlessly, effecting no change on their surroundings. *Elixir I-IV* call to mind 19th century paintings of tiny figures lost in raging seas, images that conjure the insignificance of the human subject in the face of nature's incomprehensible magnitude. Zurkow cites as a point of reference Ivan Aivazovsky, a Russian artist who made luminous paintings of ships lost in stormy seas. Many of Aivazovsky's works could be seen as examples of the Romantic Sublime, an aesthetic experience that inspires awe and even fear. Romantic painters often heightened this sense of humanity's insignificance by including in their landscapes a solitary figure struggling against the overwhelming natural world. As viewers, we project ourselves into these human subjects, and through them we experience the brutality of the surrounding scene.

The figures in *Elixir I-IV* have a much more uncertain relationship with their surroundings, and perform their activities unaware of the boiling seas. The decanter itself, a physical barrier between subject and landscape that is rendered with perfect geometric precision, is the site of this disconnect. It contains its own weather system: inside, gale winds blow, rain pelts, sun breaks through clouds, while the weather outside remains fairly constant. It seems not to matter that this barrier is transparent, like a window. The figures inside are perfectly capable of seeing the tumult without, but they choose not to notice. They are oblivious to the Sublime.

## Après Moi, le Déluge

In 1757, the French army suffered a major defeat, leaving Louis XV distraught. His mistress, Madame de Pompadour, purportedly reassured the king by saying, "Après nous, le déluge" ("After us, the flood"). Madame de Pompadour used the symbol of deluge to represent an unwelcome threat, not a catharsis; it is a prophesy of upheaval yet to come, foreshadowing the French Revolution. As in Rimbaud, the deluge is an allegory of revolt, but it is a revolt to be feared (by the privileged) rather than welcomed (by the revolutionary). Through her words, Madame de Pompadour offered a strange kind of reassurance. She predicted forthcoming upheaval, but deferred its consequences into an unknown future, a time they would not live to see.

Today, apocalyptic thinking still offers reassurance to the privileged. It allows us to think of disaster as a spectre that haunts the future, allowing us to overlook disasters of the present day, such as disease, starvation, pollution, and war. The idea of a shared, cataclysmic fate renders this present day injustice irrelevant: we're all screwed in the end



anyway. Disaster and misery are all around us. As William Gibson says, "the future is already here, it's just not evenly distributed."

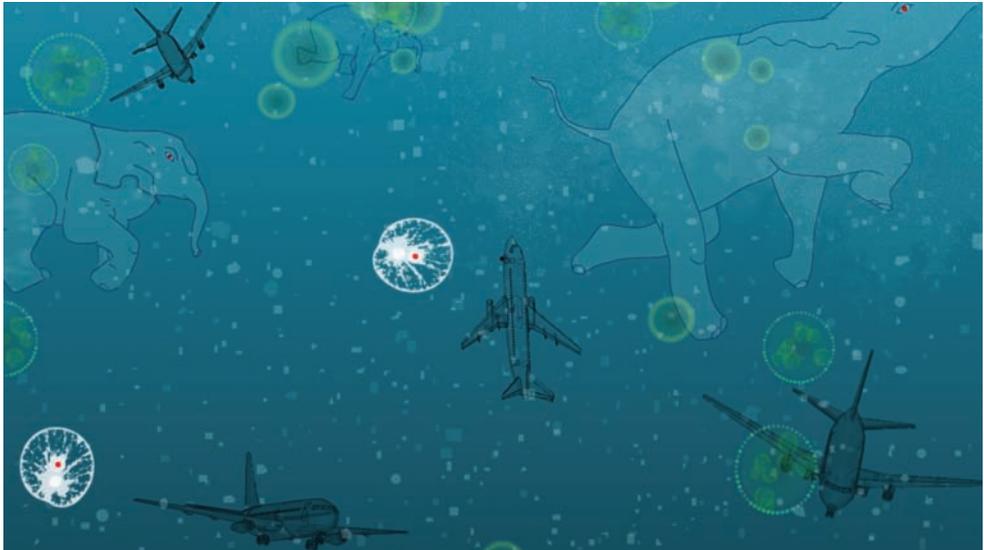
Marina Zurkow's recent works complicate the impulse to think of the deluge as a different place or different time. They use the image of the flood as a foundation upon which to examine images drawn from news media, online video-sharing websites, natural sciences, and from imagination. Rendered in lush, colorful animation, the works have the look of fantasy about them. Despite their fantastical appearance, we find in them a disconcerting familiarity.

Zurkow's deluges are not glimpses of exotic planets or distant futures. This is our own world, and our own flood.

– Michael Connor

<sup>1</sup>Andrews, Robert. *Famous Lines: A Columbia dictionary of familiar quotations*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

<sup>2</sup>Smith, Larry. "Tech '54, Where Are You?" *Popular Science* 264.6 (2004): 126.



## **EXHIBITION CHECKLIST**

*Slurb, 2009*

*17'42" loop, color, animation, music by Lem Jay Ignacio*

*Elixir I - IV, 2009*

*5' loops, color, animation, silent*

*The Poster Children, 2007*

*9' loop, color, animation, silent*

*Weights + Measures, 2007*

*3' loop, color, animation, silent*

**Marina Zurkow** makes psychological, animated narratives about humans and their relationship to animals, plants and the weather. These have taken the form of multi-channel videos, customized multi-screen computer pieces, cartoons, and interactive mobile works.

Since 2000, Zurkow has exhibited at The Sundance Film Festival, The Rotterdam Film Festival, The Seoul Media City Biennial, Ars Electronica, Creative Time, The Kitchen, The Walker Art Center, The National Museum for Women in the Arts, and Eyebeam, and other venues. She has been a NYFA Fellow, a Rockefeller New Media Fellow, and a Creative Capital grantee. She is on faculty at NYU's Interactive Technology Program (ITP), is represented by Bryce Wolkowitz Gallery in New York, and lives in Brooklyn, New York. [www.o-matic.com](http://www.o-matic.com)

**Michael Connor** is a writer and curator based in New York. In fall 2009, he founded Marian Spore ([www.marianspore.com](http://www.marianspore.com)), an accumulative museum of contemporary art in Brooklyn. He co-curated 'Screen Worlds', a permanent exhibition about the moving image in all its forms that opened at ACMI in Melbourne, Australia in September of 2009. A Massachusetts native, Connor lived in the UK from 2002 to 2007, where he worked as curator at FACT in Liverpool and later as Head of Exhibitions at BFI Southbank in London.

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