

Sherwin Ovid: Breath Between Ledgers Measured

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A Q&A with the artist conducted by gallery director Claudine Isé



Statement of Retained Rows (4), 2020. Acrylic, latex, gel transfer, chalk, cephalopod ink, 18 x 20 inches.

Claudine Isé: These newest paintings bring in some of the imagery seen in your work *Beast of No Nation*, which is in the Chicago Cultural Center's current exhibition "In Flux: Chicago Artists and Immigration." They're like little tadpole offshoots of the big painting. Can you tell us about the composition, the use of grids and the sea monster imagery?

Sherwin Ovid: The sea monsters are gel transfers from maps in books like Chet Van Duzer's *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*; for the chalk lines I'm using a plumb bob to make them gridded. I'm thinking of them in terms of things like spreadsheet ledgers, accounts and accounting graphs. Then I have the bubbles with the ink that's similar to the corn row design in *Beast of No Nation*; I'm using my own breath to make the bubbles, these iridescent bubbles.

CI: And you're using squid ink for this?

SO: I've been using a lot of squid ink and cephalopod ink, the sea monsters are drawn with it. It's a medium that's been used since around the 19th century for drawing and mark-making.

CI: I learned from Google searching that cephalopod ink is a natural dye that cephalopods such as octopi manufacture in an ink sac; it's made of highly concentrated melanin, the same dark pigment that we humans have, which is responsible for skin and hair color. The octopus uses it as a defense mechanism by squirting a cloud of ink that works as a visual screen and distraction. (It can also irritate the predator's eyes and temporarily paralyze their sense of smell). So, given the fact that the ink is, in fact, melanin, I'm wondering if/how your use of it as a painting material relates conceptually to race and to notions of Blackness and/or Black and Brown identities?

SO: I'm so hesitant to talk about this because the historical baggage in it feels overbearing. It's a substance that carries risk and could be mired by a lot of essentialist trappings since it is a biological material and pseudoscientific biology is where race theory acquired legitimacy as a racist project. There is also an entire industry of mystic melanin purveyors that assign higher celestial powers to melanin in an attempt to over valorize it in an effort to counter civil society's projected scourge on melanin as well. In Anthony Joseph's sci-fi book *The African Origins of UFO's* melanin is traded as contraband by beings that are located too close to their local star to protect them from radiation. There is also a spatial relationship that's specific to cephalopod ink that requires a descent into an aquatic realm under us in order to have access to this blackness.

My use of Blackness in this manner is in its immediate proximity to a history of paintings that include Blackness as a sign of negation in often monastic terms, and in opening up the sociological dimension of it by way of another species. This dimension seems to be where the funk is, but often a place where a lot of European and white American thinkers and artists in the past interested in Blackness had a contentious relationship. I think Black folks have a privileged relationship to Blackness but it is something that we don't have full possession of, and that fact brings up another kind of contention in regards to questions of cultural appropriation or when Blackness is deployed and performed by politicians in the attempt to consolidate power. So there's morphology to Blackness that moves with and through us on a scale that we can't comprehend. Its dazzle is a defense mechanism and can also be weaponised in vital aspects of our survival.



Undercurrents Legion (From Emanje) Nos. 1-16, 2020. Watercolor, dry pigment, and mixed media on paper. Approximately 10 x 8 inches each.

CI: Tell me more about the sea monsters.

SO: The other thing that's important about the sea monster imagery is the mythology. I made a series of paintings called Drexciyan Dishes after the American electronic music group Drexciya, whose mythology involved African women thrown overboard whose children become these kind of sea creatures able to breathe underwater. So that's what that imagery is—it's about being in an uninhabitable space and then me using my own breath and thinking about using my breath, and theorizing breath as a medium for the drawing process. I'm thinking about it also as being measured, and having a certain kind of pressure placed on it based on our current predicament, which has made breath into something really precarious.

CI: Can you say a bit more about the idea of using breath and of theorizing breath?

SO: I was talking with Patricia Nguyen, assistant professor of Asian American Studies at Northwestern, and you know, I had already made this work, but it's only after that conversation that I started to gain a lot more insight into it. Professor Nguyen does a lot of performance work herself, but we were talking about theorizing breath and she then turned me on to some of the work written about breath, including a scholar named Ashen Crawley who wrote a book that I haven't finished reading yet, *Black Pentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility*.

The idea of breathing seems to be really pressing right now. Thinking about it allows me to sink my teeth into my work from a new angle that I really wasn't considering before. How breath functions in our contemporary moment in terms of the pandemic, and how that relates to the way in which I'm also thinking about George Floyd and the protests and Uprising in terms of the phrase 'We can't breathe.' The sea monster motif also came up when I was at UIC and taking a class taught by Sampada Aranke based around the arts of the Black Atlantic. I was thinking about that space of the ocean being a kind of portal, and the way in which it's like a world-making and world-breaking kind of place in terms of the new formations and new subjectivities that emerged and who died in that portal, right? I'm thinking about that, but I'm also trying to see the places where that is still reverberating in the present moment.

CI: How are you using breath as a material?

SO: So the way I'm using it is basically blowing through a straw into a jar where I have a cocktail of ingredients that includes the cuttlefish ink or cephalopod ink -- there's like three different kinds that I use. I use soap and that ink along with rabbit skin glue, which is used for sizing canvas. This recipe is something I've been working on for a while, trying to figure out how to make the bubbles permanent or semi-permanent so that they become like a record. The bubbles are like, creating a packet for the air to then stick to the surface, whatever the substrate is, whether it's the actual canvas or the paper, and getting it to stick on there. I'm thinking about them as being like reserves. The thing is, in most cases, they deflate over time, they remain pretty permanent for the most part but then they deflate slowly and they form a skin or a film that becomes like a record on that surface.



Detail of *Statement of Retained Rows (1)*, 2020. Acrylic, latex, gel transfer, chalk, cephalopod ink. 18 x 20 inches.

There are some cases where I have canvases at my studio that have bubbles on them that are still inflated, but they are bit more wrinkled. There's something about the fact that my breath is literally underneath that, still inside of those bubbles on the paintings. But in terms of the work in this show, what interested me first was the impression that the bubbles made whenever they'd pop, that it would be a record of where this kind of aggregate would be in terms of them finding a place, a kind of, I would say, a resting place where they decide to settle down.

CI: Could you also be kind of enacting the role of a sea monster yourself, taking on that role as an artist, in terms of the process?

SO: That's great that you brought that up because I've been thinking about, you know, the Carnival tradition and Trinidad

and specifically started to do a series of watercolors and works on paper that are in this show, that have the sea monsters with actual human legs coming from below them. It's a series of work that would be a proposal for Carnival masquerades, with the sea monster as the theme.

CI: The five new paintings are titled "Statement of Retained Rows" and numbered 1-5. Can you talk a bit about what rows mean in these works, or what you're thinking about in terms of the title?

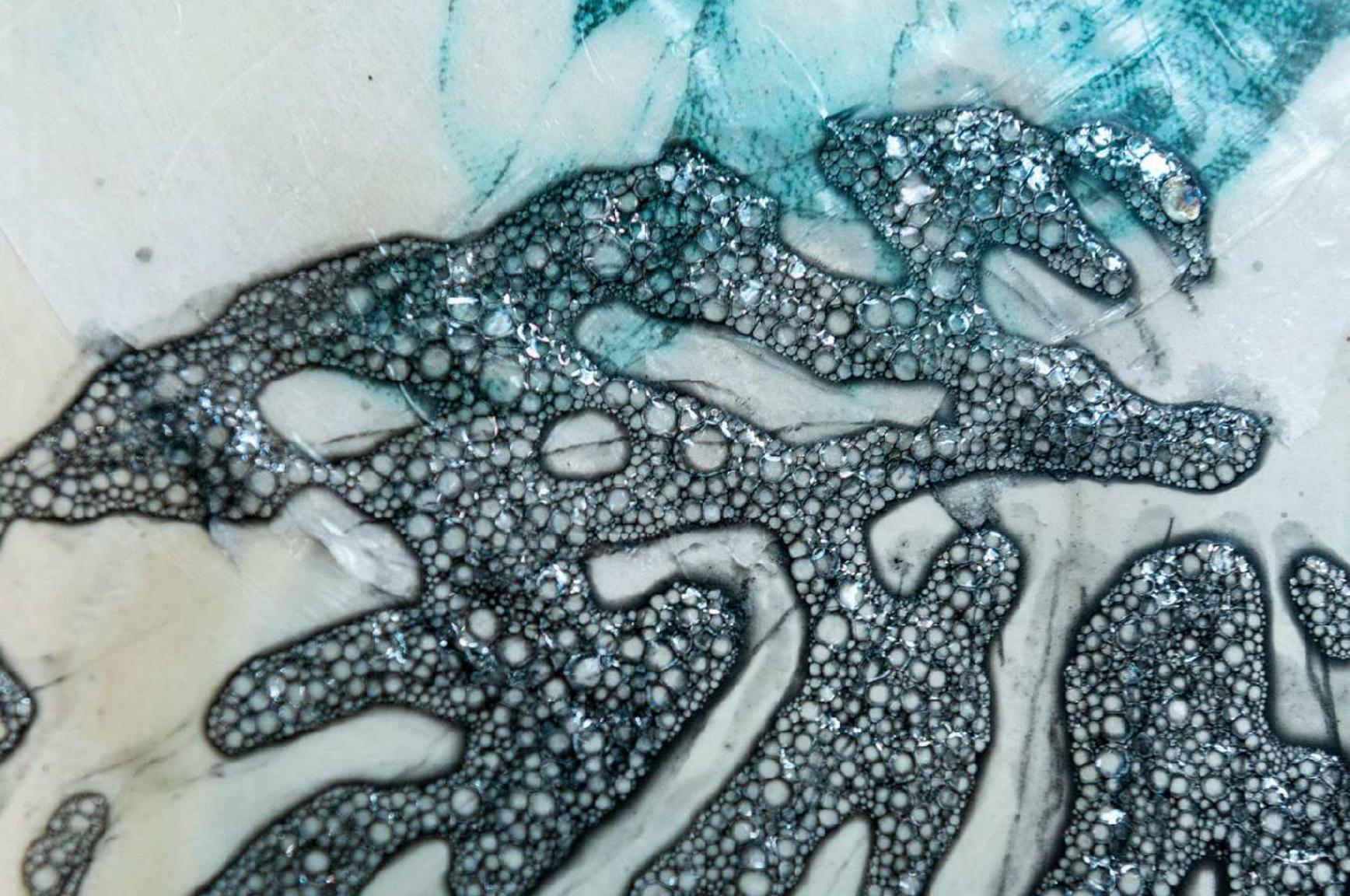
SO: Statements have logical interpretation that pertains to whether an assertion being made is verifiably true or not, and in another sense, they also have to do with expressions of particular viewpoints or facts. Considering the increasing privatization of the Commons, I've been thinking about the way that a bank statement can affect the reach and influence of one's expression. This contemporary backdrop seems to offer a relevant context to the most recent debates about free speech. There have been ongoing debates about expression in art in regard to form and content, its relationship to linguistics, and whether a thought can exist without a form of expression. So the active tension I am after exists in breathing as a baseline that is both voluntary and involuntary, and in certain forms of Black cultural expressivity that would be considered babble according to logic and operates within predetermined structures, but strives to set a new horizon under these constraints.



Installation view. Left: *Proposal to Play Mass with Mercator (2)*, 2020. Oil slick, marble print, Xylene transfer, gold leaf, graphite, 30 x 22 inches. Center: *Not All Waves Are In The Ocean Still*, 2020. Cephalopod ink, bubbles on panel, 12 x 9 inches. Right: *Statement of Retained Rows (5)*, 2020. Acrylic, latex, gel transfer, chalk, cephalopod ink, 18 x 20 inches.



Proposal to Play Mass with Mercator (3), 2020. Oil slick, marble print, Xylene transfer, gold leaf, graphite, 30 x 22 inches.



Detail of *Statement of Retained Rows (4)*, 2020. Acrylic, latex, gel transfer, chalk, cephalopod ink, 18 x 20 inches.

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*Front Cover: Detail of *Not All Waves Are In the Ocean*, 2020.
Cephalopod ink, bubbles on panel, 12 x 9 inches.

Design by Nicole Gardner