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## Esther Teichmann's "Heavy the Sea" show at Transformer Station takes you to paradise



A skeletal kayak-cum-sailboat appears ready to sweep viewers away to an imaginary paradise in Esther Teichmann's "Heavy the Sea" exhibit at the Transformer Station gallery.

Steven Litt, The Plain Dealer - on March 11, 2017 at 8:34 AM

CLEVELAND, Ohio - Call it Eden, Arcadia or the Golden Age. However you imagine such a realm, the multiplatform German-born photographer and installation artist Esther Teichmann wants to take you there in her captivating exhibition, "Heavy the Sea," at the Transformer Station gallery in Ohio City.

Individual pieces in the show, on view through April 30, have been exhibited previously, but Transformer Station co-founder Fred Bidwell described it Thursday as a global debut for a body of work never shown elsewhere before in its entirety.

The images originate from several discrete groups of images that Teichmann considers a single, unified project, Bidwell said. Collectively, they portray a vision of paradise characterized by flowing water, dense foliage, clumps of seaweed, and jungle landscapes populated by nude men, women and children of various ages.

### **Images of a watery Eden**

In one black-and-white image, a young, nude white woman reclines with her body draped in glistening strips of seaweed that accentuate the curves of her back, thighs and buttocks.

Another portrays a Swiss Family Robinson group of three nude women of various ages and a young boy strolling up a stream bank in a jungle as if it were their natural home.

A hypnotic video depicts Ecuadorian canoeist-guide Carlos Tapuy as he gracefully paddles through a stream in the Amazon rain forest.

The upshot of this mix is a semi-surreal and romantic fantasy of languor and physical liberation.

Teichmann envisions sensuous encounters with wet, humid landscapes in which people wade, walk or float without fear of piranhas, mosquitoes or alligators. It's nature without stings, bites or poison ivy.

### **Deep, rich color**

An Impressionist, Claude Monet palette of blue, mauve, purple and green dominates the photographs and photomurals in the show, which are set off against walls painted in burnished shades of red, blue and yellow - the primaries on the color wheel.

The idea of liquidity and flow is enhanced by Teichmann's use of inks and acrylic paint to create transparent glazes and drippy rivulets of color on her black-and-white prints in ways that blur the line between painting and photography.

It could also be that Teichmann's use of liquid color is meant to emphasize the nature of the photographic print as something that magically emerges from baths of developer and fixer.

### **Fresh perspective**

The show presents a softer and more poetic side of gallery co-founders Fred and Laura Bidwell, who invited the artist to create her installation at Transformer Station.

The exhibition is unlike other Bidwell projects with a lurid film noir flavor, such as Todd Hido's bleak, wintry portrayal of rural Northeast Ohio, or "Redheaded Peckerwood," in which Christian Patterson retraced the Starkweather killing spree in 1957-58 in Nebraska and Wyoming.

Teichmann, 36, who is based in London, roamed the world to collect the images for her exhibition. However, a gallery guide and a zine that accompany the show (with poetry by American-born, UK-based writer Carol Mavor) draw no attention to specific locales.

## **Globetrotter with lenses**

Instead, you're supposed to imagine that everything comes from a mystical place beyond longitude and latitude.

The idea of cruising off to a distant realm of pleasure is underscored by a skeletal kayak-cum-sailboat resting on the gallery floor as it tilts rightward on a port tack to who knows where.

When queried, Bidwell and Teichmann, who responded via email Thursday, said that many of the people who posed for Teichmann are friends or family members.

As for locations, a color shot of a couple lazily paddling a rubber dinghy through a marsh depicts a spot on the lower Danube in Europe.

Teichmann captured a stunning black-and-white photo of a nude woman with Rapunzel-length hair posing in a bizarre architectural grotto in southern England made of seashells and rounded river stones.

And she photographed a Swedish-Japanese former champion Thai boxer in the nude and draped in seaweed after meeting her on a beach in Australia.

Such information, however, is irrelevant to the mood Teichmann is trying to create, which involves being liberated from place and time.

Yet even though the show is chronologically vague, it is packed with art-historical references.

## **In touch with art history**

A wall of pinned-up cyanotype images of clumps of seaweed on a wall at the show's entry echoes not only 19<sup>th</sup>-century botanical cyanotypes, but also Henri Matisse's 1950s cutout images of coral reefs.

A color photograph of a seated male nude looks like a direct quotation of "Nude Youth Sitting by the Sea," a famous 1835-36 painting by French artist Hippolyte Flandrin, owned by the Louvre.

An image of an elderly nude woman wading in a jungle stream evokes 19<sup>th</sup>-century paintings by French artist Gustave Courbet of nude women cavorting in forest streams.

And a video in the show that depicts Bay Area dancer Sophia Wang in the nude as she moves slowly through intricate poses on a draped four-poster bed recalls Renaissance and Baroque-era bed scenes of the myth of Danae, a childless woman impregnated by Zeus, who appears as a shower of gold coins. (One such painting, by Orazio Gentileschi, is owned by the Cleveland Museum of Art.)

The beauty of Teichmann's show is that such layers of meaning - and their rich historical associations - are available but not necessary to full enjoyment of her show.

Overall, the exhibition offers a deeply gratifying dive into visual pleasures of all kinds. It's a leap art lovers across the region definitely ought to take.