

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail

Tau Lewis: I bet this cave has been here for a really long time

Magdalyn Asimakis

18 December 2018



Tau Lewis: I bet this cave has been here for a really long time



Image: Tau Lewis, 'the sighting of the last shadow dweller (original sea kin)', 2018. Hand sewn recycled fabrics and leathers, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artist and Shoot The Lobster, NY.

Water is in the background of each scene in Tau Lewis' film cyphers, tissue, blizzards, exile that she made in collaboration with her mother, Patty Kelly, in 2017. The film is a series of clips from archival family videos shot in Jamaica on a smart phone. In these low-res, ghostlike fragments, water is depicted in the

distance from the street, below the boats that carry them, and above and around the camera as it rains. Water is a context, a realm, and a life support—it is ancient and deep.

As of late, Lewis's focus has increasingly turned to what she calls "water as Black geography," and what water symbolizes in the Black imagination. Through her works she fantasizes about water, and what occurred on and in it. She reassesses it as a place of growth: What if the sea absorbed the people, languages, stories that were lost there? What if they transformed into something intelligible to undersea life? 1

This question is the starting point for Lewis's exhibition at Shoot the Lobster, I bet this cave has been here for a really long time, a titular reference to one of the first sentences in the film, spoken as Kelly enters an ancient cave on a boat. The installation is spare, with two works in the space. The first is the aforementioned film projected into the gallery's window, and the second an incredible twelve-foot-long quilt made of scraps of reclaimed fabric.

The works speak to one other, undulating together in the space—the video flows between the gallery's inside and outside, while the quilt hangs suspended on a loose diagonal. As is common in Lewis's practice, she eschews display fixtures like plinths and television screens to physically support her work, and instead converses with the building structure directly. This move enhances the foregrounding of water as a fluid element and plays with the cavernous nature of this underground gallery: The film reflects through the interior and exterior barrier of the building; and the quilt cuts across the room, each of its several protruding edges attaching to the gallery surfaces in an irregular pattern.



Image: Tau Lewis, 'I bet this cave has been here for a really long time', installation view, Shoot the Lobster, 2018. Courtesy the artist and Shoot The Lobster, NY.

The quilt is titled the sighting of the last shadow dweller (original sea kin) and was made in 2018 for this exhibition. Fragments of leather and fabric collected and donated to Lewis are sewn together asymmetrically and with care. The interconnected blue patches make apparent visual reference to water and aquatic systems. Each fabric fragment does not lose

its potency to Lewis, who is interested in the 'material DNA' of the fabrics in this piece and in her practice at

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Brooklyn Rail

Tau Lewis: I bet this cave has been here for a really long time

Magdalyn Asimakis

18 December 2018

large. To her, recycling is about environmental consciousness but also an engagement with the past, both materially and in its process. In collecting and re-using the media in her works, Lewis is engaging with diasporic histories of resourcefulness and accessibility. And she has recently described this bringing together of reclaimed materials as “up-cycling” both in a physical and spiritual sense²—and the lives of each fragment come together to be stronger than the sum of their parts.

On close inspection, figures emerge from the geometric fragments of the quilt—feet, arms, scales, and skins are woven into the work. Lewis describes the quilt as a portrait of an aquatic being or a mermaid, and, in this sense, materializes the question that the work in this exhibition began with: What if those lost at sea transformed into something intelligible to undersea life? Lewis believes that the mythical, half-human, half-fish mermaids of popular culture are inspired by Black ancestors, while ‘real’ mermaids are spirits or mutable entities. Over the last year, she has shown a number of sculptures of mermaids, including at Jeffrey Stark in New York. In conjunction with this exhibition, Lewis wrote an accompanying text that read, “us the broad communion of the mermaid people / who travel between earthly and aquatic territories / ... walk around on big broad feet and... were made to swim well / because of mermaid blood in our DNA.” Here, Lewis positions mermaids as vessels for genealogical knowledge of the Black diaspora who can transgress physical boundaries between water and earth. In this exhibition at Shoot the Lobster, she expands into material territories that look through the eyes of mermaids, and she imagines them immersing and emerging.

Notes:

Based on conversations with Tau Lewis, 2018.

Tau Lewis interview on Deep Color podcast, November 7, 2018.