

The New York Times

‘Cosima von Bonin,’ Swimming Against the Tide By Jason Farago — September 22, 2016



“Total Produce (Morality),” from 2010, by the German sculptor Cosima von Bonin in her show “Who’s Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?,” at SculptureCenter. Credit Michael Nagle for *The New York Times*

This world, Hamlet tells us, is a sea of troubles; love, every pop star will assure you, is as deep as an ocean. For the versatile, sometimes inscrutable **German sculptor Cosima von Bonin**, too, the sea is a metaphor for our own lives, and she brings to our dry environment visitors from the deep. Hermit crabs and octopuses flounce on furniture, burdened by all too human anxieties. Clams stare out of their shells, their goggle eyes bearing down on you as if they know your secrets.

Ms. von Bonin’s idiosyncratic sculptures and installations, often making use of colorful textiles, have made her a **leading German artist, and now, belatedly, she is receiving her first museum show in New York.** **“Cosima von Bonin: Who’s Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?,” a sardonic banger of an exhibition at SculptureCenter in Queens, slices across more than 15 years of her art to concentrate on her use of marine imagery** — not just fish and aquatic mammals, but beachside food concessions and an absurdly overscaled white bikini. The maritime theme is somewhat arbitrary, but that’s half the point. The assembly of all this wet stuff comes out as caustic and comical by turns, and this is a show that owes as much to “Finding Nemo” as to Manet, Whistler and other artists who turned to the sea.

Ms. von Bonin’s soft sea creatures looks like children’s toys, but their ironic anthropomorphism is very adult: There’s nothing cuddly about them, and many look exhausted by modern — that is, human — life. A drooping shark, made of stuffed beige cotton, sits at an undersized modern desk, fins poised as if it’s typing. The eyes are hastily cut out of checked fabric, and even the teeth are floppy, so that the deskbound shark appears to be singing or screaming. It’s one of several instances in which Ms. von Bonin places soft animals against hard surfaces. A vermilion hermit crab is spread out over an X-shaped table base, its claws and antennas slumping to the floor. Those judgmental scallops are sitting on a wooden swing, like children or showgirls.

Octopuses, famously brainy, are a frequent motif of Ms. von Bonin’s, and the stuffed one here is composed of a dozen fabrics, from floral patterns to neon-printed flags acquired in Japan. (You may be reminded of Paul, the “psychic” octopus, who in 2010, the year Ms. von Bonin made this sculpture, became an international media sensation for successfully predicting the results of Germany’s matches at the World Cup.)



"Hai am Tisch 1" ("Shark at Desk 1"), from 2014, one of Cosima von Bonin's idiosyncratic pieces at SculptureCenter. Credit Michael Nagle for *The New York Times*.



"The Bonin/Oswald Empire's Nothing #05," (2010) on display at Cosima von Bonin's show at SculptureCenter. Credit Michael Nagle for *The New York Times*.

There are also three works with sound, in collaboration with the **techno musician Moritz von Oswald**: speakers, emitting a soft sound somewhere between white noise and crashing waves, stand beside proudly tacky porcelain starfish and coral. The whirring surf background underscores Ms. von Bonin's long interest in music: A recent, smaller show of her work at Petzel gallery was termed an "uptown remix," and the SculptureCenter show's wacky title is borrowed from the chorus of a recent single by the Irish electronica diva Roisin Murphy. It's another funny bit of humanization: Are fish exploitative? Are crustaceans miserly? Might a scallop be as xenophobic as the surging right-wing populists of the Alternative for Germany party?

Humans are especially unknowable, Ms. von Bonin suggests, whereas fish might teach you something if you spent some time with them. The place to do that is the shoreline, and this show also includes sculptures of changing cabins, food trucks and a lifeguard chair, with another hermit crab facing a pair of microphones, as if giving a news conference. The seaside, so important to Manet and others artists of the late 19th century who painted the bourgeoisie at leisure, here becomes a place where aquatic animals can chill out as well. Relaxation and idleness are markers of sophistication in Ms. von Bonin's book, and if her scallops and octopuses look a little bored at times, that should be seen as a sign of their modernity.

"Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?" is the latest bull's-eye for Ruba Katrib, this institution's internationally minded young curator, who over the last two years has presented recent exhibitions of Araya Rasdjarmrearnsook of Thailand, Erika Verzutti of Brazil and Anthea Hamilton of Britain. (This particular show is curated by **Ms. Katrib and Sarah McCrory, director of the festival Glasgow International, where a related show appeared last spring.**)

It's also a fitting counterpart to the Museum of Modern Art's current show of work by Kai Althoff, a friend of and sometime collaborator with Ms. von Bonin. The two artists made their names in the heyday of 1990s Cologne, whose collective ethos and low-rent hedonism have now become as mythical as those of bankrupt 1970s New York. (Deborah Solomon, in a 1992 report for *The New York Times Magazine*, explained that the artists in that "grimy" city were "apt to practice a studied indifference toward money.")

At the start of her career, Ms. von Bonin frequently made the social milieu of Cologne into fuel for her art. She turned her New York debut, at Andrea Rosen Gallery in 1991, into a group show, inviting the painters Jutta Koether and Martin Kippenberger; the writer Isabelle Graw, who'd recently founded the magazine *Texte zur Kunst*; as well as the artist Michael Krebber, whom she later married. That social instinct went hand in hand with an expanded sense of what constituted an exhibition. In 1995, for an exhibition in Stuttgart, Ms. von Bonin and Mr. Althoff simply set up a bar and slung drinks for visitors.

Ms. von Bonin's collegiality, and resulting lack of a signature style, has made her somewhat less of a known quantity than others from her Cologne generation. This brilliant show may change that, though it would be a shame if she became known in New York for only dolphins and mollusks. Not since 2007, when the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles presented a full-scale retrospective, have Americans seen her early work alongside the fabric collages, the musical interventions and the stuffed animals that stand in for us troubled hairless apes. Her art is soft and sociable but dangerous underneath, as strange and as acute as fish out of water.

"Cosima von Bonin" runs through Jan. 2 at SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves Street, Long Island City, Queens; 718-361-1750; sculpture-center.org.

A version of this review appears in print on September 23, 2016, on page C17 of the New York edition with the headline: *Swimming Against the Tide.*