

A Whimsical World Bubbles Up From Under the Sea

By Neil Chiragdin — October 6, 2016



The exhibition appeals to young visitors, enchanted by the whimsy of Cosima von Bonin's sculptures, such as "Total Produce (Morality)," above.

Itsy bitsy, teenie weenie, this bikini is not — no yellow polka dots either. Each piece about 6 feet tall, and spanning about 20 wide, the ensemble hangs between two steel beams at the **SculptureCenter**. The crisscross of the top and bottom form an outline more closely resembling a topsail than a two-piece.

The piece is part of "**Who's Exploiting Who in the Deep Sea?**," an exhibition by German native **Cosima von Bonin**, for whom this is the first solo museum exhibit in New York. The show is co-curated by **SculptureCenter** curator **Ruba Katrib** and **Sarah McCrory**, the director at Glasgow International, a biennial festival where it opened in Glasgow's Gallery of Modern Art last spring. After its stint in Queens the display will continue its world tour in Ontario.

The show includes work dating back to 2000, lending it a somewhat retrospective air. Although maritime themes commonly surface in von Bonin's work, this is the first time they have been the explicit focus of one of her exhibitions. Aquatic creatures abound throughout the main floor of the SculptureCenter in the form of large textile sculptures.

A hermit crab, rendered in teal mohair velour, slumps atop a lifeguard's chair. Its orange counterpart droops on a kind of jack-like platform across the room. Seated at a child's desk is a shark who seems to have been made of old stuffed pillowcases. Paunchy and limp in places, his pectoral fins rest on the desk's surface, as if waiting to take notes. His cloth teeth form a grimace so profound one can just about hear him sigh. Precisely why these aquafauna exist in such seemingly dejected states is unclear, but their disposition is not shared by all of the pieces. A multicolored octopus sprawls out decadently on a platform lit with neon lights. Both the cephalopod and its platform are patchworks of brilliantly colored cloths, and measuring 8 feet across, commands the attention of the floor. Elsewhere, two pairs of mollusks with massive googly eyes peeking out from within their shells sit on swings. And at the entrance, a pod of inflatable dolphin pool toys gaze longingly at visitors as they arrive.

The exhibit holds strong appeal for young children, and indeed at its opening on September 18, security had to intervene as several waves of kids attacked the dolphins upon entry. The bright colors, the softness of the sculptures — it all helps to build an oddball world that is difficult not to become enchanted by, even for adults. And older guests might better appreciate the small details von Bonin drives into the show — ceramic tchotchkes like one might find in a shoreside souvenir shop, a changing booth, a washed-out "cocktail bar." The artist's wry wit comes through in every piece.

The opening was celebrated with the assistance of several performance artists with whom von Bonin has collaborated for years. **Drag performers producentin and Mary Messhausen** sang epic romantic ballads while stalking around the exhibition in eccentric ponchos of pink and lavender. Atop their heads they wore hats fashioned after von Bonin's mollusks. **Simone Junker and Oliver Husain** gave a spoken-word poetry performance as they pretended to tread water. Later on, the group brought out a dozen helium balloons in the shape of the character Olaf, of Disney's "Frozen," a snowman who comes to life and dreams of visiting the beach in summer.

Truly, von Bonin's imagination seems like a fun place to spend some time, and the SculptureCenter offers a window into her seaside world.

Through Jan. 2 at SculptureCenter, 44-19 Purves St., Long Island City, (718) 361-1750, sculpture-center.org