ALMINE RECH

OCEAN

Oct 11, 2024 — Apr 27, 2025 | The Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark

OCEAN is the major exhibition of the autumn at Louisiana Museum of Modern Art. It follows in the footsteps of previous exhibitions such as *Arctic* and *The Moon*, bringing art, cultural history and science together into one grand narrative. This is a diverse story about man and nature, the beauty and horror of the ocean, myths and politics, capitalism and climate realities.

For humanity, the ocean has always been at once tangible and abstract. It covers 71 percent of the globe, in Denmark it is never more than around fifty kilometres away and it is essentially a condition of our very existence – yet it is under threat. But it is also a metaphorical place, an abstract entity as a font of myths, dreams and desires. The ocean is everything at once: a highway for the trade in goods – and people; an escape route, a fate, a source of food and raw materials, a dumping ground. And a lung.

The Ocean amid Art and Science

For millennia, the ocean was chiefly an expanse to be boldly navigated, while its depths were a watery grave. But even early on in the exhibition, we peek beneath the surface of the sea, which teems with strange, ancient life forms. This unknown world is explored in works that sit at the juncture of art and science.

Our fascination with sea creatures is reflected in richly illustrated books and natural history collections from the seventeenth century onwards. Life below the surface was there to be inquisitively charted, classified and conquered, and art had a key role to play here. Invertebrates such as jellyfish and octopuses, for example, were difficult to preserve and study once they had been fished out of the ocean, but the German glassmakers Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka employed incredible craftsmanship to create realistic glass models of creatures from the deep.

Since then, technological and photographic inventions have been crucial in uncovering a new – but primordial – underwater world, juxtaposing surreal images with marine science's studied gaze. From Jacques Cousteau (1910–1997) to Emilija Škarnulytė (b. 1987), we embark on a journey into the secrets of the ocean – one that reveals, for better or worse, modern humanity's relationship with nature.

The Sublime and Mythical Ocean

Throughout history, the violent and deadly forces of the ocean have spurred humans to let their imaginations run free, both by giving spirit to the waves through sea gods and by turning the ocean into an immense mirror of our emotional lives and existential longings. The second part of the exhibition addresses what can occur when we are faced with the unknown.

In the nineteenth century, the sublime grandeur of the ocean became a key motif for artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, Peder Balke, and August Strindberg. They captured the defiant drama of nature in paintings in which sea and sky come together as though in a cosmic conspiracy. As such, romanticism's paintings were an acknowledgement not only of the vastness of the world, but also of art's own power to temper panicked emotions by transforming them into images.

In the West, our mythological relationship with the ocean has been shaped by the imaginary worlds of antiquity, the Renaissance and the Baroque, which abound with sea gods and other creatures. The same is true in other cultures around the world, and the exhibition includes a number of Japanese woodcuts that have fabulous tales to tell.

As a counterpoint to white, Western mythology and its lithe sea gods and mermaids, there are brand new myths and counter-narratives that turn the spotlight on one of the darkest chapters of Western colonialism: the transatlantic slave trade, in which Denmark also played a part. Artists such as Ellen Gallagher (b. 1965) and El Anatsui (b. 1944) work with myths that relate directly to enslaved Africans who live on in – or return from – the ocean.

The Exploitation of the Ocean

Human exploitation of the ocean is a key theme of the exhibition's concluding part. In this age of globalisation, the high seas have become a highway traversed by container and cruise ships the size of small towns, upon which our entire consumer-oriented economies rely. On the seabed, which for centuries was believed to be barren and devoid of life, encroachments are suddenly being made on marine resources. Mining companies and governments are making preparations to extract metals to fuel the green transition. Meanwhile, there is great concern about the implications of such exploitation for the fragile life forms and climate-regulating aspects of the deep sea. We are beginning to realise that even something as vast as the ocean can be thrown out of balance.

The exhibition is rounded off with John Akomfrah's (b. 1957) monumental video work *Vertigo Sea* (2015), a masterpiece in the artist's oeuvre that embodies the fluid diversity of beauty and horror that is the ocean: whales sing, waves roar, seaweed sways, the sun shimmers – it's wonderful. Whales are harpooned, migrants sink, slaves drown, oil rigs burn, seagulls shriek – it's horrifying.

OCEAN features works by John Akomfrah, Anna Atkins, Peder Balke, Nina Beier, Jeanette Ehlers, Caspar David Friedrich, Ellen Gallagher, Susan Hiller, Pierre Huyghe, Kirsten Justesen, Utagawa Kuniyoshi, Niceaunties, Georgia O'Keeffe, Jean Painlevé, Howardena Pindell, Pipilotti Rist, Allan Sekula, Emilija Škarnulytė, August Strindberg, Superflex, Wolfgang Tillmans, Yuyan Wang and Francesca Woodman.

The exhibition has been recognised by the United Nations Decade of Ocean Science for Sustainable Development as an activity in the UN Ocean Decade.