**Very Well Thus! Sea Journeys in Contemporary Art**

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The sea invaded the landlocked German city of Dortmund this spring. A tide of international art swept Künstlerhaus Dortmund in an exhibition examining how contemporary artists express the notion of travel across the sea.

"Stories of sea journeys have long mesmerized readers, conjuring up images of hardship, survival, surprise discoveries and extreme weather," write the curators of [Voyage: sea journeys, island hopping and trans-oceanic concepts](http://www.kh-do.de/en/exhibitions/exhibitions2013/voyage_en.html), Imi Maufe and Rona Rangsch. The works on show represent both real and conceptual sea journeys; across oceans, between islands, over long distances or short moments; fictional, historical or contemporary. "No two journeys on the sea are the same, each has its own reason for taking place."

No two artists have the same response to the sea. For some, seafaring is as important as their creative practice. Artist and Able Seaman Caroline de la Fe writes: "At sea the world is cramped and vast, limited and free at the same time. ... Still this life is more real and tangible than nearly anything else I know, being so close to the forces of nature." In the book *Sea Through My Eye* De la Fe records this "surreal bubble containing only the sea, the ship and the daily routines" in photographs taken through the porthole of her cabin on the Norwegian ship *Christian Radich*.

A shorter journey is marked in Philippa Wood's *8 Minutes Across*, a concertina book with eight pages that decrease in size to denote the passage of water and time on the Star Ferry between Kowloon and Hong Kong Island. Each letterpress-printed page presents a typographic rendition of the crossing, the frenetic harbours, and the iconic ferry itself.

"The book can be regarded as a bridge: connecting drawing and photography, text and image, today and yesterday, Europe and America." So say Uta Schneider and Ulrike Stoltz of the German collective ‹usus›, whose work *Boundless* considers correspondences between boats and books, both as containers and means of transport. The artists' books in this exhibition carry the reader over many different seas; works include Judith Schalansky's quirky *Atlas of Remote Islands* - a surprise bestseller - and Turner Prize nominee Tacita Dean's *Teighnmouth Electron*.

To anchor notions of movement and change, tides and travel, on a static sheet of paper requires a new cartography. In David Lilburn's *Sailing the South Coast, Smerwick to Youghal*, drypoint lines depict the coast from the sailor's shifting perspective, rather than the landlubber's fixed viewpoint. Reminiscent of delicate records scratched on scrimshaw, this fragmentary map draws not only on Lilburn's memories of fifteen years sailing, but also the histories of the islands, ports and harbours, from the massacre of the Spanish expedition in Smerwick Harbour in 1580 to the cocaine haul off Mizzen Head in 2008.

While Lilburn's chart, albeit chaotic and partisan, could be of use to a fellow sailor, other artists turn the function of mapping on its head, using confusion to convey the volume, mass and isolating power of the ocean. Ding Ren uses existing maps as material for fantasy and collage. Her site-specific installation *One to One* takes maps de-accessioned from the National Geographic collection and subverts them, excising the island territories and placing these fragments in areas of the gallery that correspond to their shape. The artist has left a paper trail across the gallery - and the viewer's steps become those of an Odyssean giant, passing from one island to the next.

Walter Benjamin compared the past to the state of being at sea, writing "Memory does this: lets the things appear small, compresses them. Land of the sailor." In a similar spirit, John Cumming has created versions of sailors' *Ditty Boxes*, the caches of personal possessions allowed on board, "so small as to be manageable in a ship with almost no private space." Here, the seafaring life is represented by miniature mementoes of life on land - eggs, pebbles, shells and lichen, "the bare essentials of identity, self-maintenance and a hoped-for future."

But that future is elusive. Setting out to sea is a traditional metaphor for departure from life - Tennyson's "crossing the bar". The association with death is made in Matthew Herring's punning painting *Wake* and in Sally Waterman's *Translucence*, which records a catamaran ride across the Solent to attend a funeral. For other artists the sea represents modes of existence; in Gunnar Jónsson's film [*Hringsól*](http://vimeo.com/42344345), a fishing boat turns a futile circle in the sea, etching a temporary line on the water's surface. Even more evocative than these human traces are the innate qualities of the world's water, such as those presented in *Sea of Curves* by Jeff Talman. The American sound artist has recorded the "constant sound created by winds that stir up the surface of the oceans to create waves" in three locations: mid-Atlantic; Deer Lake, Newfoundland; and Coney Island, New York. The resulting work captures the "hum of the earth". The depths of the ocean may be far from everyday experience, but they cast significant reflections on our landlocked lives.

[Voyage: sea journeys, island hopping and trans-oceanic concepts](http://www.kh-do.de/en/exhibitions/exhibitions2013/voyage_en.html)

Künstlerhaus Dortmund, Germany

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