

The earth leaked red ochre

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In an image taken on Salter's Island, Maine in 1985, a large, flat, rock formation appears disconnected from its foundation. It seems to levitate like a new stratum ready to be born, but in reality it's merely been disrupted by human intervention. The black-and-white image appears in the pages of artist Cecilia Vicuña's *Unravelling Words and the Weaving of Water* (1992). "The rock recalls a people that buried its dead with red ochre powder," she writes. "The earth leaked red ochre, and a civilization six thousand years old was discovered." In these lines, the literal and the figural intertwine; the earth "leaks," evoking a shift within a landscape—a moment of disruption or disconnection, but also the potential for reckoning.

Examining landscape as a site of memory, imagination, and untranslatable histories, *The earth leaked red ochre* considers the poetic and political dimensions of ecological encounters. With a particular focus on borders, movement, navigation, and language, the artists featured in this exhibition—Lara Atallah, Simon Benjamin, Sara Jimenez, Corinne Jones, and Levani (Levan Mindiashvili)—are connected by their explorations of living through diaspora. Mining spaces of colonial occupation and disrupted ecosystems, each artist takes a unique approach to recalling forgotten memories embedded within the landscape, while expressing their respective and collective connections to space.

In contextualizing the history of their roots, the artists in this exhibition explore metaphysical relationships between identity and the environment. Through disparate geographical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, each artist approaches landscape as a vessel for memory, a way of recalling something that has been lost: a motherland, a familial history, or a native tongue. As an extension of the exhibition, this publication brings together new contributions and iterations by each artist—an essay, a testimony, a conversation, a poetic collaboration, a text intervention, and a transcript. Each section interweaves themes of land, water, sparseness, and language. Grounded in collaborative work and dialogue, each contribu-

tion, in its own way, pushes against notions of finality, fixed states, authority, and objectivity.

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Throughout her practice, Sara Jimenez combines methods of excavation and transformation, delving into notions of transcultural identity, both personal and collective. As a Filipinx Canadian artist, she draws upon familial histories to create visually complex works that gesture toward displacement, loss, and absence. Her series *Ossuary* evokes cultural artifacts and family heirlooms that have been lost to both land and sea—rusted steel, archival photographs, and molds of furniture from her childhood home all become the basis for simultaneous acts of excavation and burial in the creation of an ossuary, a resting place.

The wall works in *Ossuary* feature inkjet prints of American colonial photography of the Philippines buried in plaster, complicating their legibility. In removing these photographs from their original contexts—the pages of history books—Jimenez questions the truth-value of photography as a medium of documentation. The body of photographs from which the artist draws represent the power dynamics on either side of the camera, and how the colonial gaze captures the subject in order to construct a subjective reality that could be mistaken for truth. The metal works in *Ossuary* naturally corrode over time, fluctuating in color and texture, recalling manmade vessels left to drift in oceanic space. The ossuaries are not at rest, but continuously transform and react to their environments. In altering artifacts and refusing fixity, Jimenez establishes a connection, in the artist's words, "between migrating bodies, absent bodies, displaced bodies, and spaces of home that are physically separated."

In "Living Fragments," Jimenez and I build on an ongoing series of conversations around landscape, embodiment, material, and memory. Throughout our exchanges, we have discovered many throughlines in our respective practices as we question how the remnants of colonial

boundaries, and the social stratifications they engender, continue to linger in the postcolonial era. We look to the relationship between colonial spaces and the borders that define them, drawing our focus to both external and internal borderlands that have persisted throughout history and across geographies. Through our latest conversation, in which we exchange texts, images, quotes, and citations, we build a collaborative space for our research, while also finding new connections in our experiences of diaspora through both the material and the ephemeral, the collective and the personal.

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Lara Atallah explores the political dimensions of landscape as she probes both the futility and fluidity of borders as manmade constructs. Her ongoing series *34.5531° N, 18.0480° E* comprises snapshots taken off the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea, a site of geographical unity, leisure, and escape. Drawn to the spontaneity of the technology, Atallah manipulates the Polaroids by hand in their developing stages by exposing them to light and marking them with fingerprints, distorting their legibility, or "traumatizing" the images. According to Atallah: "To photograph the sea with Polaroids means to embrace the unpredictability of the medium, as well as the pictured subject—a large body of water that ebbs and flows beyond the limits of human control."

For Atallah, who was born in Lebanon and has settled in New York, the sea collapses distant and recent histories of colonial expansion, displacement, and escape. That expansion accompanies not only the overtaking of a geographic region, but also the lives, minds, and bodies of those who inhabit it; the colonized body becomes inextricable from the land itself.

Through her artistic and writing practices, Atallah considers the relationship between bodies and borders, both the tangible aspects of crossing borders, and the lived reality

of being subjected to them. The border itself insists upon dichotomy, a division between the self and the other, an in-here and elsewhere, Atallah contends with the ways in which this line, though imaginary, bears incredible amounts of power on the individual body and its ability to move freely, to immigrate, to wander, to take refuge. Which side of the line you are born on can be a matter of chance, and yet the dichotomy is seemingly established.

Her photographs unfold as visual odes to the sea, as the artist's hand disrupts the readability and indexicality of the photographic object, and by extension reveals the subjectivity of a borderland. In her essay "Notes on Loss and Exile," Atallah contends with matters of chance, the fluidity of an in-here and elsewhere, a "boundless" reality. In embracing boundlessness, entropy, and unpredictability, Atallah refuses the colonial mindset of control.

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Levani (Levan Mindiashvili) references disparate sites of memory throughout their work: a family photograph of the artist at age three on the shore of the Black Sea; the pages of an alphabet book used to teach children Georgian scripts; and a lacy baby blanket given to the artist by their mother each signal specific moments in the artist's life, moments that continuously impact their sense of identity, belonging, and home. Through acts of repetition, resurgence, and reimagining, the artist considers these symbols in relation to their subconscious. Levani grew up in Georgia, a country locked in the intersection between Eastern Europe and Western Asia, a former colony of the Soviet Union until 1991. With *what color is the Black Sea?*, the artist recalls a childhood memory of being teased by their family that spending too much time in the Black Sea—which borders the artist's native country Georgia—would turn their skin black. A handwritten note from Levani's mother on the back of the photograph of the three-year-old artist jokes "as you turned me black at the Black Sea, now turn me white at the White Sea." The vast body of water itself reflects

both symbolic and literal fears of darkness, which perhaps ties into the pervasiveness of colorism in many postcolonial countries. For the artist, it also became a site of identity formation, of recognizing difference between their body and another.

In *Patterns of My Consciousness*, the artist uses a children's alphabet book of Georgian scripts to create their own writings, alluding to processes by which languages can be both learned and lost. The grid that separates each script becomes fluid in Levani's appropriation, a space for new encounters as the artist maneuvers the letters, forming word games, visual puns, new sentences, and new entanglements printed on latex, a "skin" that naturally degrades overtime.

english as a second, a collaboration between Levani and poet danilo machado, centers on broken languages, breaking language, and mother tongues. machado responds to Levani's scripts with an abecedarian poem—each word in the first line begins with the first letter of the alphabet, with each subsequent beginning with the successive letter until the final line is reached. In machado and Levani's take on this form of poetry, the corresponding letter from the Georgian alphabet replaces the first letter in each line, creating a new system for learning each script, while playfully disrupting the rigid structures we ascribe to language itself.

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As an artist finding fluid departures and connections between installation, painting, and sculpture, Corinne Jones reflects on histories that have been lost, from the planned obsolescence of analog technologies to the colonial appropriation of land. The title of her ongoing body of work *The Lost Sea* references an immense underground lake in East Tennessee's Craighead Caverns. Little is known about the history of the lake or the caverns that contain it. Nestled in an interwoven network of caves at the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, the caverns were transformed by colonizers over the past two centuries into a space for com-

mercial industry and tourism. The footprints and fossilized remains of Pleistocene jaguars, for instance, have been found in the caverns, while gunpowder residue left by Confederate soldiers, who used the caves to mine saltpeter, chars the ceilings.

The entrance to the sunless lake hidden within the caves has been revealed and obscured over time as the water levels have risen and fallen. The exact nature and significance of the cave is yet to be widely understood; for Jones, it represents “a metaphorical repository for the hidden histories with which our country has yet to reckon.” As an in-between space, exposed and concealed by and over time, the sea reminds us of how deep colonial histories seep into our physical environments.

For its site-specific iteration at Miriam Gallery, the installation consists of moving blankets that can be used as seating by visitors and rearranged throughout the gallery as needed throughout the course of the show, alluding to processes of migration and displacement while offering a site of repose within the exhibition environment. The cascading wall painting that accompanies the installation shares a one-to-one relationship with the quilted lines of the moving blankets while mirroring the scale of the human body, becoming a spatial intervention that welcomes potential connection.

In this publication, Jones alludes to the Lost Sea through a text intervention: “If mainstream culture comes to us as a hyperreal feedback loop, how do we act to initiate the radical possibilities expressed by way of the underground?” The question is intentionally open ended, provoking us to consider the relationship between the mainstream and the underground, the center and periphery, by disrupting the continuous loop of dominant histories retold.

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Simon Benjamin’s practice centers around the potential of encounter within oceanic space. His film *Errantry* evokes the concurrent harmony and dissonance of the relationship between the human body and the sea, a site of both traumatic memory and livelihood for people of the African diaspora. The title draws upon the work of Martinican philosopher Édouard Glissant, whose concept of “errantry” (French: *errance*) describes acts of wandering, encounter, and the multiplicities of identity. The creation of the film itself began with a chance encounter—a small, handmade outrigger pin discovered on the shore of the quiet town of Treasure Beach, Jamaica, where Benjamin traveled for a three-month research trip in October 2020. Benjamin, a native of Kingston, spoke with many locals during his visit, but his discovery of the outrigger pin led him to the object’s creator: local fisherman, Tommy Wong. Over the course of several weeks, Benjamin met regularly with Tommy, eventually asking to record him. Tommy becomes both the narrator and subject, the “Fisherman” character, as he is credited in the film’s transcript, lending a disembodied voice as the film unfolds.

Errantry features a three-channel installation—prolonged shots of crashing waves, sea life along the shoreline, and detritus act as a dusky, atmospheric backdrop for the Fisherman, who moves seamlessly through his work, a routine that seems second nature. Two unseen men pull up a fishing line in one long, continuous shot that nearly spans the length of the film. The third channel presents a loose transcript of Tommy’s candid narration, which appears in this publication. As he relates stories of sabotage by amateur fishermen, loss, and labor in patois, the Fisherman’s words weave in and out of the tidal soundscape, bringing our attention to moments of synchronicity and disconnect between image, sound, and text. He meanders, but lingers on certain phrases, speaking both directly and indirectly to the toll of climate change and the exacerbation of human intervention and indifference that continue to disproportionately affect the Global South. *Errantry* captures the ineffable of the postcolonial experience, its continuously unfolding

aftermaths, while also immersing us into the poetics of oral tradition, weaving words, and chance encounters at sea.

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It is said that writers of the diverse Diasporas around the world live in double exile: away from their native land and away from their mother tongue. Displacement takes on many faces and is our very everyday dwelling.

—Trinh T. Minh-ha

The aesthetics of the chaos-monde (what we were thus calling the aesthetics of the universe but cleared of a priori values) embraces all the elements and forms of expression of this totality within us; it is totality's act and its fluidity, totality's reflection and agent in motion...Relation is that which simultaneously realizes and expresses this motion. It is the chaos-monde relating (to itself). The poetics of Relation (which is, therefore, part of the aesthetics of the chaos-monde) senses, assumes, opens, gathers, scatters, continues, and transforms the thought of these elements, these forms, and this motion.

—Édouard Glissant

In considering notions of movement and displacement, of being at odds with one's environment, I am drawn to the ways in which we carry postcoloniality. Whether individually or collectively, how can we understand this weight as both a burden and a birthright, our own bodies as vessels for generational legacies? With its patterns and hidden undercurrents, *The earth leaked red ochre* is structured around moments of encounter. It is a meditation on perpetual forms of relation—water, land, and language emerge as common threads, signifying ubiquitous connections between bodies, geographies, and time. Bringing these artists together is not an attempt to homogenize the complexities of diasporic existence, but to look for transnational connection

rooted in shared social consciousness, to imagine new modes of diasporic being. Rooting through moments of disruption, movement across borders and boundaries both physical and psychological, the artists in *The earth leaked red ochre* find a new means of articulating their connections to landscape. They rediscover spaces where memories manifest and lie dormant, where earth “leaks,” ochre spills, and histories are re-remembered.