



Burial, 2020, in progress (p. 238) Sunken City, 2020, in progress (pp. 240-241)

The waves crashed a blue, electric Santa Monica tide. Springtime had delivered an algal bloom, which fluoresced at night, to shores vacant since the equinox for the reason all was vacant this languishing year: our trite and fatal plague. How boring to say it again! Little surprise the Californians crossed the sand, in April and in May, to see the ocean glow. Remember life? They sought it there, in a hoped-for sign of a brighter tomorrow. Emilija Škarnulytė sought life there too, but hers was not a quest for a bioluminescent Rainbow Covenant. She wanted to vibe with the sea.

Extraordinary waters are something of a specialty for Škarnulytė, whose work on the cosmological, ecological, and political implications of deep time has garnered international attention and a plethora of awards. In 2019 alone she represented her home country of Lithuania at the XXII Triennale di Milano, contributed a bespoke commission to the first Toronto Biennial of Art, and won the prestigious Future Generation Art Prize, which comes with a hefty purse and official recognition at the Venice Biennale. A sculptor by training, a filmmaker by trade, Škarnulytė moonlights as a mermaid when the moonlight is right, or whenever the occasion calls for it, by slipping into a prosthetic fishtail that takes no small amount of training to maneuver.

As with all good costumes, especially those of superheroes, the tail transforms its wearer, broadcasts her abilities. *Mermaid mode* expresses Škarnulytė's perspicacious attunement to natural and supranatural planetary rhythms—an attunement gained through a critical study of human achievement tempered by magical thinking. In mermaid mode, she embodies a symbolic state that fuses traditional

mythology with a mythology of her own making; as such, past and current wonderment are distilled into a single unit.

This notion is explicated in her films *Sirenome-lia* (2017) and *t 1/2* (2019). Both films show the artist-as-mermaid swimming around the abandoned docking pits of the Olavsvern Royal Norwegian Naval Base, a Cold War submarine bunker located more than 300 kilometers above the Arctic Circle. Outfitted with a glowing, red eye visor, the mermaid—whom Škarnulytė refers to as “she” and “they” with equal deference—explores the amphibious structure, its incidental flora, and its internal bays so resonant with atomic fear. Their hybrid body recalls the legend of the sirens by virtue of its “mer-hood,” that is, a story of human triumphalism derailed by mad desire, yet it carries as well Škarnulytė's adaptation, a counter-myth that tenders sympathy to the siren over the sailor. Her mermaid, conceived as a character from the future, represents the morphological potential of human evolution, shaped by the consequences of present-day ecological delinquency. Her forlorn vision of the bunker illustrates the aftermath of said delinquency; it portrays the vestiges of a civilization lost to a mad triumphalism, writ large on its ruins.

On many an occasion, Škarnulytė has stated that, through the medium of her lens-based work, she wants to “map our future from the bottom of the ocean as an archaeologist from a mythic perspective of a distant time ahead.” The impetus for her “future alien archaeology”—a thesis applicable to her work in toto—is to posit a point of reference beyond the human, so modern humanity can understand itself, and its self-made hazards, all the better.





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Like her mermaid, Škarnulytė is an intrepid traveler. She passes through international borders the way gamma rays pass through skin. So it comes as little surprise that her films are remarkable catalogues of place. Or, rather, catalogues or remarkable places. In addition to the submarine bunker, *Sirenomelia* contains footage of the antimatter factory and Large Hadron Collider at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN), captured via LIDAR, a laser scanning technique that renders digital models in three-dimensions. The models present a transparent, skeletal version of CERN, conferring upon the site a ghostliness mimicked by Škarnulytė's cinematic gaze, which roves its infrastructural axes with the ease of a helium balloon.

Super-Kamiokande, the neutrino observatory in Hida, Japan, makes an appearance as well, also in digital form. Those unfamiliar with the architecture of Super-K could be excused for thinking it belongs to fantasy: 13,000 reflective photomultiplier domes line the observatory's detector chamber—a silo 41.4 meters tall and 39.3 meters in diameter—lending it a Byzantine opulence not commonly associated with quantum physics. A lake of pure water stands at its base, doubling the chamber's expanse across its surface. The walls of the real Super-K look plated in gold, and the temptation to reproduce such a delicious scrim in pixels must have been acute. But Škarnulytė reimaged the detector long defunct and, therefore, grisaille. Her version of Super-K is a chapel made of Claude glasses, reflecting only their surrounding gloom. Her version of Super-K is super quiescent.

One finds these palaces (or sepulchers, depending on whom you ask) of big science also in *Mirror Matter* (2018) and in *t 1/2*. The latter expands Škarnulytė's obscure destination catalogue to include the Etruscan Tombs at Cerveteri, the Duga-1 OTH radar array in the Chernobyl Exclusion Zone, and the decommissioned Ignalina Nuclear Power Plant in the Visaginas Municipality, Lithuania. Her forthcoming feature-length film, *Burial*—teaser versions of which screened at the 2016 Venice Architecture Biennale as part of the Baltic Pavilion program and most recently in the group exhibition *Splitting the Atom* at the Contemporary Art Center in Vilnius—develops further the thematic meditations on modern *scientia* that *Sirenomelia*, *t 1/2*, and *Mirror Matter* pursue, with an added emphasis on Ignalina.

Škarnulytė does not build her films according to the dictates of linear narrative. Instead, she employs a collage method that permits her trade-

mark juxtaposition of the ancient past to the future ancient. The films unfold with an intuitive cadence that hypnotizes the viewer. Repetition is key to this process, and it is as common to see the same subjects reused within a single film as it is to see them across projects; hence, the iterative quality of the aforementioned films. Recapitulation offers Škarnulytė the opportunity to forge her own myths by tapping into the collective social mind through repetition and variation. We know creation myths, for example, because we have heard them time and again. We will come to recognize Škarnulytė's "anticipation myths" for the very same reason.

Lest one think Škarnulytė is caught, like the ouroboros, in the jaws of her own conceptual circuit, an anomaly in her oeuvre is important to note: another forthcoming feature, known by its working title, *Sounds of the Desert*. The film profiles Abshalom Ben Shlomo, a former Sun Ra Arkestra member, whose life was profoundly impacted by his dedication to Afrofuturism. Set against the backdrop of the Dead Sea Rift, a tectonic fault system, the film explores the alternative destinies generated by the intersection of, to quote the artist, "African American culture with elements of science fiction, historical fiction, fantasy, and... Black Hebrew diaspora cosmologies" indebted to the ancient past. *Sounds of the Desert* breaks from the Eurocentric focus on folklore and Cold War apocalypticism in order to explore a cultural outlook hinged on the promise of a transcendent, extraterrestrial future.

Although the Afrofuturists aspire to travel the spaceways, it cannot be said that Škarnulytė strives for personal access to an interplanetary dimension. She satisfies herself with marvels found among the dunes of the Negev, the fjords of the Arctic, and the sandy aprons of the Pacific Coast—the last being perhaps the perfect combination of surf and turf for when she dons her mermaid fin. She wore the tail that night on the beach, before the neon waves. It glimmered in the nautical twilight. She wanted to vibe with the sea because she was, in a way, saying farewell. She would leave the far West soon to cross the American deserts, the vast American plains, and again the Atlantic, fish tail in tow when not in use. Her adventures called her eastward, and she followed the dawn. She is forever on the move.

