

Dek Unu Magazine

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This Is Water

Ann Prochilo

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Artists in all media have a way of tackling the One Great Question — What is reality really like? What is the difference between appearance and reality? Is there a deeper reality somewhere behind / within what we see? Employing tricks of time, focus, scale, color, and transparency, the best photographic artists are particularly adept at revealing the “something else again” that can be captured when vision and Vision combine. Ann Prochilo is one of those artists.

Her single-capture color photographs, taken simultaneously above and below water, show her in two different realities at once, one otherwise normal and the other shifting, convoluted, refocused, and weird. Her people, immersed in water, are distorted, transformed, but no less real. In Prochilo’s formulation, the two halves together become one metaphor for transition and emergence, symbolizing the tension between self-awareness and oblivion, between the known and the unknown, and revealing the tentative foundations upon which we structure our lives. For her, the effort to survive, improve, and self-realize, above water, is analogous to swimming. She explains it succinctly:

I believe our task as human beings is to wake to ourselves and the waters in which we swim so that we may choose right action in the world. For me, that means not foundering in a sea of willful ignorance or being rendered mute by those who would drown my voice. It means swimming along, constantly reminding myself that “this... is water.”

“It is a common fault of men not to reckon on storms in fair weather.”

— Niccolò Machiavelli



"Don't tell me what I'm doing; I don't want to know".

—Federico Fellini



Sleep-deprived, I serpentine, determined to out-manuever the midnight call that lays in wait. When it comes, it will confirm the deployed missiles, the murder of a politician, the annihilation of a beloved city. It will revel in sound and fury — the drum of our collective incompetence. It will come today, or tomorrow, or as an epidemic abates, peace returns, and the world stops laughing. That's when it will happen.

Reach



"Icarus should have waited for nightfall,
the moon would have never let him go."

— Nina Mouawad

After the Fall



Lethe — Goddess of forgetfulness and oblivion. To drink from the river Lethe is to lose all memory of oneself and of truth. In Greek mythology, drinkers from the River of Oblivion couldn't quench their thirst, so they drank more. And more.

"Doubt as sin. — Christianity has done its utmost to close the circle and declared even doubt to be sin. One is supposed to be cast into belief without reason, by a miracle, and from then on to swim in it as in the brightest and least ambiguous of elements: even a glance towards land, even the thought that one perhaps exists for something else as well as swimming, even the slightest impulse of our amphibious nature — is sin! And notice that all this means that the foundation of belief and all reflection on its origin is likewise excluded as sinful. What is wanted are blindness and intoxication and an eternal song over the waves in which reason has drowned."

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Lethe



"I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world, and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too. I am not washed and beautiful, in control of a shining world in which everything fits, but instead am wondering awed about on a splintered wreck I've come to care for, whose gnawed trees breathe a delicate air, whose bloodied and scarred creatures are my dearest companions, and whose beauty bats and shines not in its imperfections but overwhelmingly in spite of them..."

—Annie Dillard



When everyone spins a tale, truth is elusive. I am one more charlatan weaving a yarn.
There is no such thing as an honest witness.

Feet



“All things truly wicked start from innocence.”

—Ernest Hemingway

Horse and Rider



Pursuing a dream, falling in love, having a child, being a patriot — all harbingers of lost love. I honor courageous, grieving lovers wrapped in the tender armor of story and longing. The center holds. The reptilian brain comes through: we breathe, we thirst. The heart beats and hungers for more.

Embrace



"An idle mind is the devil's playground" — stagnant waters that breed boredom, an invasive force blocking flow and will. It overwhelms and founders. It casts blame. It demands satisfaction. Left unattended, it invites easy comfort: intoxicants, gluttony, irritainment, petty dictators — anything to bathe a synapse and postpone accountability.

I say fie to boredom! I am the dredge barge that clears the channels. I am the rising tide of inspiration and creativity. I am the storm off the Hebrides destroying what remained of the Spanish Armada after England's fleet would not be defeated.

Surfacing



“Seems that I have been held, in some dreaming state
A tourist in the waking world, never quite awake
No kiss, no gentle word could wake me from this slumber
Until I realize that it was you who held me under.”

— Florence + the Machine

Blind Seer



Artist Interview - Ann Prochilo

The background of *This Is Water* shows how timing, planning, and an accident work together. Tell the story?

While *This Is Water* is not a pandemic story, it's a product of the pandemic. We were more than a year into Covid. I was spending way too much time online: virtual yoga, Pilates, Zoom meetings, doom scrolling and fretting from afar about the state of our country and the inability as a species to act in our own best interest. While many were seeking to normalize, we were still in lockdown as my fiancé, Kent, is immunocompromised. I was feeling protective and hypervigilant. I was also thinking a lot about isolation and division.



Ann Prochilo

I'd been working on what I did think of as a pandemic project: very long-exposure self-portraits made in the middle of the night. I wanted to convey the sense of suspended animation I was feeling, and of safe haven in the eye of a storm—awaiting resolution or retrenching for the next variant. In the daytime, I made self-portraits in a pool. One day, a stiff breeze sent both the tripod and camera into the pool. I salvaged the camera but lost the lens. It was then that I decided to figure out how to take my camera underwater.

When the weather warmed, we went to the sea for refuge and exercise. Kent (also a photographer), served as model/muse and helped me work out technicalities of my outfit and equipment.

The images in this series are not really typical "underwater" photographs though. You're doing something quite different.

I worked above and below the surface, shifting mediums and bending light. In early forays, I discovered wild refractions and magnification. Most underwater kits are designed to minimize optical distortions caused by light passing through water. I wanted to exaggerate them. I experimented to amplify and wield them to create ambiguous, illusory images. The more refraction, diffusion, reflection, and scattered light I could conjure, the better.

My goal is to make something visually seductive but off-key — a world above the surface projecting one reality and another below, disassembled, and reconfigured — another universe. I use subterfuge to talk about delusion and awakening. The dissonance speaks to me of that uncomfortable, but necessary, place that can challenge complacency, wake you up and move you to act.

Your visual approach marries perfectly with the conceptual through-line of the project. Talk about your theme?

This Is Water explores self-awareness and its nemeses: blind certitude and unconsciousness. It's inspired by a story shared by David Foster Wallace in a commencement speech: "There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, 'What the hell is water?'" I love this parable and its reminder that essential things are all around us, hidden in plain sight.

Although many say that art is not about equipment, underwater shooting definitely requires the right gear. What's in your kit?

I keep the gear simple. I started with a Sony $\alpha 7$ III with a Zeiss Batis 25mm f2 lens in an Outex camera housing (a thick plastic bag with front and rear glass). I wanted to make very large prints, so I moved

to digital medium format. When I experimented with a Hasselblad X1D II 50C in a hard-shell Aquatech Reflex water housing, I felt disconnected from the camera and my subject. I want to feel the camera in my hands and look through a viewfinder. Most of the images in this issue are made with the Fujifilm GFX 50R with GF 30mm f3.5 lens with the Outex housing. I'm now working with the Fujifilm GFX 100s. I edit in Lightroom.

But it's about more than just cameras and lenses, right?

I wear a baseball cap, swim goggles and a full body skin to protect me from sun and jellyfish. I also wear swim fins to stay afloat and protect my feet. For cold water, I have a 2mm wetsuit and neoprene cap. Last time I used the wetsuit (photographing the horse), I was too buoyant and made a note to add a weight belt to make it easier to stay at, or get below, the water line.

What's your origin story? You grew up in a seaport town, Port Jefferson, New York. An early "water" connection?

I was a kid from a raucous family on Long Island. The chronological middle child of six, I'm influenced by birth order, gender, musical theater, and public service. My parents were second-generation Americans. My dad's family came from Reggio Calabria in Southern Italy (likely of Greek descent) and Italian-Croatian hill towns on the Adriatic (reportedly, Croatian mercenaries). My mom's family were Scottish shipbuilders, musicians, and bards, with roots in Ireland.

The Village of Port Jefferson was largely, Greek, Italian, English, Irish, and Jewish with few Black American, Puerto Rican and Asian families. We were a clan of educators, firefighters, and police officers in a town where everybody knew everybody. We grew up in a hundred-year-old house in the shadow of an idyllic cemetery and an EPA Superfund site, whose toxic plume — compliments of the post-WWII defense and aerospace industry — ran behind our house and through the high school on its way to the harbor.

Our playgrounds were woods and open tracks of land not far from potato, dairy, peach, and duck farms that mostly disappeared before

I was out of high school. June through August, we went to summer school/recreation in the mornings and to Cedar Beach at noon where we swam until Golden Hour before heading home to shuck corn for dinner. Sundays, we piled into the station wagon with a cooler of peanut butter and jelly, and bologna sandwiches on Wonder Bread. We drove the hour and a half to West Hampton where we were pounded by undertow and surf. I wanted to be Jacques Cousteau or a shark or the waves.



Twisted

Your early college interests were midwifery and photography. You practiced as a midwife for several years but photography went to the back burner. What happened?

In 1988, I married on a Saturday, moved to Miami on a Sunday, and started a post-baccalaureate pre-med program on a Monday. My then-husband, a newly minted professor of medieval literature, had an adult job and a dissertation to finish. I was unemployed and feeling the pressure to find my calling. I took a stab at photojournalism. I found a mentor in *Life Magazine* photographer, Flip Shulke. He instructed me to open a newspaper, close my eyes, and randomly point at a page. I opened my eyes and read an article about a controversy between animal activists and youth deer hunters in northern Florida. After months photographing, writing, and learning how and where

to submit, it came to nothing. I panicked as money went out and none came in.

Simultaneously, the AIDS epidemic was raging. I put down my camera and took a job that launched a 30-year career in HIV prevention, treatment, and advocacy relations. A few years later, Hurricane Andrew hit. I was preoccupied with evacuating a dying friend and had only a few minutes to pack. I threw a skirt, sensible shoes, and forty rolls of undeveloped film in a bag. Twenty-five years later, I found and developed those roles of film —a priceless time capsule and the spark to return to photography.

As a feminist and activist, what can you say about an artist's role and responsibility as a political citizen?

Each generation has its political battles and its artists who shape perceptions and move us to act.



Backslide

I'm a late baby boomer — old enough to remember “Duck and Cover” drills but young enough to miss out on the counterculture revolution of the 60s. My graduating class launched into the disillusioned wake of Vietnam, Watergate, and a stalled Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). On the upside, we had reproductive choice, and my male counterparts were the first 18-year-olds in decades who didn't have to register for the draft.

I didn't vote until I was in my mid-20s. I took my privilege and freedoms for granted, unaware of their fragility. As my awareness grew, I got involved in reproductive health and choices in childbirth. Artists and activists inspired me to honor the women who paved the way and to forge a path for those who don't yet realize what's at stake.

Later, my focus turned to HIV treatment activism and lobbying pharmaceutical companies around drug development and access. The creative arts were core to that practice. Through theatre, dance, music, poetry, and visual storytelling, I partnered across multiple disciplines to build and sustain social movements to reduce stigma, increase awareness, and foster political will.

Your work has a dark side. Where does that depth come from?

I'm still unraveling that mystery and I can't yet articulate an authentic, full answer. I do know that when I first discovered photography I was drawn to the intimate, moody, and sometimes, twisted, black-and-white portraits of Emmet Gowin, Diane Arbus, Mary Ellen Mark, Sally Mann, Robert Mapplethorpe, Gordan Parks, and Eugene Smith.

I'd written an earlier, more academic, response to this question. I focused on concerns around divisive politics and propaganda – All true, but all external to me, not a proper accounting for how I frame the world. I shared it with a friend who knows me well and has a deft talent for cutting through bullshit. She challenged me and reminded me of early black-and-white portraits of my family and a series of brides that makes the chilling horror of the Stepford Wives pale in comparison.

Many of us remember an aesthetic event, from late childhood or teen-age, a "shock" that demonstrated the power of art. Do you?

Two things come to mind. When I was thirteen or fourteen, I went to a triple feature: *Night of the Living Dead*, *An Andalusian Dog* (the French silent short by Buñuel and Dalí), and *Freaks* (1932). I'm not sure what affected me more, the horror on screen or the silhouette of teenagers making out in front of me through a veil of

smoke. My introduction to zombies, surrealism and the macabre, supercharged by stale popcorn, pheromones, and cigarettes.

When I was sixteen, I went on a school trip to see Richard Burton and Peter Firth in *Equus*. I was forever changed. The top-lit, raging Burton, the passionate, mad, naked boy, both possessed and doomed. And the horses(!) — actors on platform hooves with towering horse heads, blinded as red light swamps the stage. I was thrilled and devastated.

Maybe I do know where the dark side comes from!

Do you have a regular critic/editor? Someone who sees your new work first?

Kent Wisner is my fiancé and a wonderful photographer. When we met, I was still on hiatus from photography. Under his spell, I started making images with my phone's camera. He was there when I got the contact sheets from the film that survived Hurricane Andrew and 25 years of moves. Among those images was a portrait of a friend, since passed, which brought up this memory: She and I were sitting on bleachers in deep conversation while her four-year-old son ran up and down a basketball court, empty-handed, playing an imaginary game of basketball for at least an hour. Suddenly, he stopped short and burst into tears. Alarmed, I said, "What's wrong, Ryan?!" Sobbing, he stammered "I...I...I...NEED A BALL!" I told this story to my new love. Two weeks later, he presented me with my first DSLR saying, "You need a ball."

High creatives have a way of finding each other. Anyone in particular, past or present, who deserves a shout-out?

I became friends with Catherine Angel at Indiana University when she was doing an MFA in photography. She went on to a career as a photography professor at University of Las Vegas. When I picked up a camera after 30 years, I flooded her inbox with images. She couldn't have been more excited for me or more encouraging as I

found my sea legs. Incisive and provocative, Catherine is my touchstone for critique and insight.

As I sought to re-enter a photographic community, I took a workshop with Aline Smithson. In addition to having amazing and varied bodies of work, Aline is a great teacher and connector. Generous and forthright, lyrical, and practical, it's not hard to see why she is revered.



WTP3

For twenty years, my friend and colleague, Angela Gaetano, has been my go-to person to wrestle words and ideas into submission. Our love/hate working relationship survived many sleepless nights, trapped in combat with unformed concepts and fears of inadequacy. Miraculously, we would break through the morass and bring forth something compelling and impactful. We made amazing things happen that neither of us could have done on our own and we've emerged, still friends, and better people. She is the person to whom I share words and images to help me find the through line.

I am also eternally grateful for the influence and support of early mentors Jeff Wolin, Lorette Steinberg, and my cohort at Indiana University. They fanned the flames and imbued in me a hunger for, and faith in, creative pursuit.

Along with its darker side, there's an equally deep, idealistic, believing, romantic side to your work. Is there a story?

For better or worse, every Broadway musical from the 1930s forward formed the soundtrack and organizing principle of my youth. The stories, stylings, and lessons went in one ear and right into my subconscious. My mother and father met in summer stock. She was in the chorus. He was the leading man. She was sitting on the bleachers, knitting between scenes. They struck up a conversation and started spending time outside of rehearsals with other cast members. When the show ended, he left. Not long after, he sent a marriage proposal. Surprised, she balked but agreed to a courtship by mail. Some months later they were wed and had two babies within two years.

When she told this story, I asked if she had the letters and if I could read them. She took offense. They were private, and I was presumptuous. Years later, she embarked on a series of purges. Nervous that she'd be over-zealous, I asked about the letters. She said, "I burned them."

When she died, we cleaned out the house. On the night before the yard sale, I found the letters. Two days later, grieving, and slap-happy, surrounded by the flotsam and jetsam of dissolution, we donned an odd assortment of clothes that didn't sell — my brother, in a knit cap and mink stole, me, in the half-zippered wedding dress from a failed marriage. We sat on the front porch as twilight gathered and I began to read.

We always knew the musical, *Brigadoon*, had special significance for our family. In these tender moments of recitation, we learned why. *Brigadoon* is about a magical village in the Scottish Highlands that appears for only one day every 100 years. My parents planned a virtual date. They each went out and bought the album and designated a date and time to listen to it, alone but in tandem.

"Come to me, bend to me, kiss me good day! Gie me your lips an' don't take them away."

**Thank you so much, Ann! What's next? A project underway?
New course? Travel? Show(s)? A book? Anything we can help
you publicize?**

After six years, we're leaving beautiful and complicated Malta. We'll pack up our cat and the possessions we promised we wouldn't accumulate and head to Lucca, Italy, where we'll study Italian for 10 weeks before returning to San Francisco to figure out what we want to be when we grow up. I'm continuing to make work for *This Is Water*, and to refine articulation and design exhibition concepts. I'm looking for solo exhibition opportunities.

This Is Water is a love letter – to people, to the sea, to Malta, and a point in time. I'd forgotten my connection to waters. It's a breathtaking and restorative homecoming.

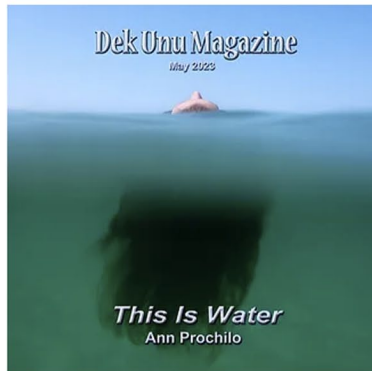
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