

CORINNE CHAIX – SUBMERGED

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Exhibition Preview by Stacy Davies

(PYO Gallery, Downtown) It wouldn't be at all surprising if French surrealist Corinne Chaix has read, or at least seen, the illustrations for compatriot Jules Verne's 1873 edition of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," the science fiction adventure classic that thrilled the imaginations of Parisians and, eventually, the world. It's also clear from her environmental themes that at least part of her work belongs in the category of eco-art — the type that uses a traditional medium to draw your attention to a topsy-turvy world that might be just around the corner.

In "Submerged" Chaix mixes those ecological alerts with the fantastic, taking us on a dreamlike journey into watery depths where man and beast come together in unexpected ways. The most dramatic creations are those featuring businessmen in suits wearing antique diver helmets in submerged cities. One sits in lounge chair on a water-filled subway car among sharks, caressing an eel; others bide their time with slippery creatures in living rooms. One Wall Street type attempts to puppeteer an unruly octopus in a clear nod to man's egoistic will to control nature. This stark and unusual imagery compels us to ask if we are viewing a future Atlantis or the next Water World, and whatever the opinion, the answer is clear: the oceans, from which all life sprang, will soon enough reclaim us.

Indications of that forthcoming fall or evolution are apparent in "The Specialists," in which two businessmen with diver helmets survey the erosion of a glacier from the bottom up. If that's a bit too subtle for some, "Looking Out," in which a man stands on an underwater chair, his helmet removed and head just above the surface of the water gasping for air, might feel more personal and troublesome.

"She" also captures the despair of doing too little too late: a woman curled up on a chair, a clear fishbowl helmet on her head, stares up through the deep at a sunshine-splashed ocean surface she will never again revisit.

Sharks and eels are prominent in the underwater depictions, and are two of the least attractive ocean creatures by most aesthetic standards. Yet eels, especially the lamprey variety (referred to in one piece as Murena), are known to be 360 million years old; sharks sprung up 420 million years before man ever wiggled out of the sea. Perhaps because they've been around so long and, so to speak, seen it all, none of these terrifying fish are attacking. They are unfazed, though perhaps curious at man's appearance, and yet seem to accept him as inevitable companions.

Even in "Dangerous Friends," in which a nude woman lounges on the deck of a sunken ship surrounded by sharks and eels regarding her directly, we can't tell if she's laughing or screaming. Maybe both. In fact, even the sharks and eels might be laughing. It's a traditional motif: bemused shrieks from one who confronts an absurd tragic end and gets the joke; it's a bit horrific when you really think about it.

Nero fiddled, we Instagram, and all the while, nature is on the move, regardless of our petty distractions or tardy resolutions. It's not the stuff for sensitive or apathetic constitutions, to be sure, but Chaix renders each glorious nightmare with softness and whimsy, her acrylics and pastels soothing the scene that we just don't want to consider too deeply. And that's why the work is so effective. It's not in your face, but it's definitely making a point.