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Janet Bellotto, Look and Sea – June 2009

Living in Dubai, many of the local art community may know Janet Bellotto as a professor at Zayed University, who often writes and contributes to forums on art. What one may not be as aware of is Bellotto's background as a curator in Toronto and an internationally exhibited artist in her own right. Having previously completed residencies in Mexico City and Basel, Bellotto has most recently shown her work in New York, Beijing and Venice.

Her book 'Waves and other worldly stories' was recently launched at Art Dubai and is an impressive collation of her works themed on water. Presenting the project along with her curator, Bellotto put on a series of mini-performances including one called 'Under water' where she simulated playing the flute.

We asked the versatile artist, musician, teacher and curator about her diverse influences, practicing as an artist in Dubai and of course her avid relationship with water.

ChinarTree: Tell us about the artistic process you most commonly use in your works.

Janet Bellotto: The process is called 'lenticular' or 'flip photography' – most people know of it from the magic eye posters. It takes one to three images and combines them, so depending what angle you're looking at you see a different part of the image. Then a refractive lens is applied on top. The way I use it is so that when you move across the image it changes.

CT: What led you to this particular method?

JB: I was working on a project where I was looking to create a three dimensional space without using sculpture or installation and I stumbled upon this method. I hadn't seen it since cracker-jack boxes as a child! From there I found small programme I could use and started.

My first piece was a test, where I used several little panels to create a fuller image. I took an 18th Century painting called 'Adieu' and layered it with an image of a wave. The image shows a boat has collapsed, a couple are perishing and saying their last goodbye - and then you see this wave going over and over them. This work is called 'Ode to Adieu.' It basically allowed me into this magical space I was previously creating through installations.

CT: So is this interactive element an essential part of your work?

JB: Yes, I was always interested in bringing the viewer closer to the work. With this method, no matter what, you are always seeing something different.

For me this technique is about the idea of reflection. Reflection is a strong part of my work, also relating to water. When you look over a body of water that is moving, you can see what's underneath it, but the image is always changing.

CT: Are these overall images depictions of personal worlds?

JB: I see them as a creation of space. In this one called 'Mira Mare' I went upon a search for abandoned castles and stumbled across a hidden lake in the mountains. It was this glorious green.

So I created this photomontage of a model, which is me, standing at a balcony shot at this castle. The castle was built by Maximilian for him and his wife, just before he became king of Mexico. He created it so that no matter which way you looked through the windows, the water would look the same.

So I played with this and the title, 'Mira Mare' which means 'Look and see' but also 'Look and sea'. It combines with my research on ideas of wonderworld, atlantis and the otherworldly.

CT: There is an obvious running theme of water in all your works, where did this connection to water come from?

JB: I've always been attracted to water and again I think it comes back to my heritage. My parents are from Italy and we would regularly go to Venice, so I've always been very attached to the sea. A bit of that nostalgia has always propelled me to use water as a subject to talk about other things.

CT: Is this heightened living in Dubai, where perhaps you feel a lack of water?

JB: The environment always plays a role in my work. This is an interesting place and people talk of the desert as the 'arid sea'. Also we are at sea in the Gulf, it's a big part of life here. In Dubai you're in between these two seas, physically and culturally, there's a fusion.

CT: How does your role as a teacher in Dubai affect your art?

JB: It's hard to separate the two. In one sense the teaching reflects my own research, but it can also be very draining constantly giving your ideas and your input. It is also important to practice yourself if you're teaching, its keeps you up to date.

CT: Tell us about your latest works which seem to have more of an Islamic influence.

JB: This piece is called 'Interlace' and is the first of the new series. My initial idea was that of a magic carpet, where things are changing - the imagery is in flux.

I used photographs of architectural details from the Al Hambra, which I recently visited with my students and then created my own pattern like you would in a carpet. I weaved those into an early 19th century image of a woman wearing a *naqab*. Then there was this Arabic text from the poet Ibn Rubi which I took and created another pattern. He talks about the idea of oceans, endless oceans, which in a way reflected the idea of time.

To me these works become windows rather than images and this is a series I will explore further. Dubai allows this type of multiplicity to happen.

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