

The Light of the Cosmos, The Salt of the Sea

by Kuniko Vroman

A description of location often starts by naming one's position amongst the stars. Once this has been pinpointed, those coordinates can be further clarified by stamping them with an indication of where one is in time. More lofty locales, such as our metaphysical place in the Universe involve a series of questions whose answers are not so easy to define. Things start to get slippery. In what universe are our feet resting and in whose time are we situated? A place from which to start pulling on this ponderous thread might again be located by looking to the eon-traveling light of the stars. Light from the Andromeda galaxy takes 2.5 million years to reach Earth. This galactic light, being viewed in our present moment is the final remains of often already extinguished stars. Here on Earth we become time travelers, they ghosts.

The work of Christine Nguyen, which pulls on this very same thread, seeks answers to such questions through the use of photographic processes. Choosing to fix light on a page and illuminate a specific moment, Nguyen's elaborate imagined worlds conflate inner and outer landscapes, the heavens and oceans, the macro and micro, time with space.

Born in California, the daughter of immigrants from Vietnam, Nguyen grew up exploring what her father, a commercial fisherman, would bring home from the sea. Fostering an interest in the natural world around her, these childhood rambles through the ocean's offerings may have built the foundation for an artistic practice, which much like life in the sea, thrives on salt. From the silver halides that comprise photographic film and paper to the saline crystals grown on prints and organic materials, Nguyen has a practice steeped in brine.

In these salty depths entire universes exist as do a mind-bending array of vantage points from which to view them. In *Cosmic Mollusk Comet* (photo-based contact prints made by using drawings done on a sheet of Mylar as contact negatives on color photo paper) fractal-like beings in glowing crystal forms drift through undulating waves and amoebic

dust. Determining whether the view on offer is through the lens of the telescope, periscope or microscope is unclear. This flux between the macro and micro, which should be disorientating, instead creates a space that is as open like the heavens, yet intensely intimate like the confines of a specimen slide. The effect is somehow comforting, like the knowledge that one is as this: a tiny speck amidst all the wonders of the world, and yet, at the same time one who houses a universe unto itself containing all the mysteries of the divine.

In her cyanotypes, which are also contact prints, a vibrant blue marks out where the sun had contact with the paper – a ghostly white where materials such as seaweed, flowers, seeds, grasses, dirt, sand, crystals and shells were placed. The juxtaposition of recognizable forms amongst abstracted elements (the objects can shift in the wind during exposure or the sun's movement can elongate and distort shadows) all set on a blue that echoes that of the sky or the sea has the unexpected grounding effect that is particular to Nguyen's work.

When drawing, salt crystals and spray paint are layered on to her cyanotypes, as in *Stalagmites (California Native Plants)* and *Spires (California Native Plants)* further information on how different versions of existence can merge into one is presented. These additions augment the angle that we view Nguyen's world again ever so slightly. The landscape of a subterranean world, some kind of alien architecture or mountain range stands in the foreground silhouetted against what could be the saturated colors of an imagined sunset filled with plant-like heavenly bodies. Once again, recognizable shapes mix with more abstracted ones. And once again the viewer is pulled into a world that is familiar while being pushed toward one that is foreign.

Following the patterns of nature *Fractal* then takes this world into three dimensions. Silhouettes of plants, whose forms follow the natural law of the golden ratio, cover the crystalline form. Fractals beget fractals. Nguyen has taken other forays into three dimensional work creating sculptural works of geometric objects made of glass, metal, ceramics as well as organic material (plants, shells, bones) that have been crystallized in a super salinated solution.

Recently Nguyen has ventured farther afield from literal applications of light and salt to their manufactured representations in a series of work that uses spray paint. In *The Light Around Dark Matter* Nguyen used spray paint as one would use light when making a cyanotype. Objects are placed on paper and then are doused and dusted with color. What remains is a dizzying array of imprints looking very much like photograms that left the traditional black and white behind and opted to manifest in a host of psychedelic color.

This same palette is concentrated and then amplified in *Where the Sea and the Cosmos Meet*. Here the colors radiate with the energy of life. These are not the faded tones of entities ravaged by the passing of time; rather the images here vibrate with the intensity of life at its origins. Set amongst a cosmos of gas and dust, plants and crystals, what Nguyen describes as “totem trees” invite one to first connect with the universe contained within in order to locate oneself in the one without.

The trunks of the totem trees in *Where the Sea and the Cosmos Meet* are fashioned from rectangular blocks of color that resemble buildings. When grouped together they form cityscapes. These cityscapes are turned on their sides and then made to mirror each other. Viewed vertically, these rectangles start to appear as the markers of genetic codes on an unraveled spiral of DNA. Situated alongside the buildings are little groves of trees whose tops could be read as diatoms. Diatoms are classified as Eukaryotes, which were the first complex cells on Earth.

Almost as soon as the images on the totem trees come into focus, the vantage point shifts. When the angle from which they are viewed is changed, these familiar sights (buildings and treetops) morph into the secretive images of the origins of life (DNA and diatoms). As their meaning alters with the alteration in perspective, a prompt to dig into our own origin story is issued.

Nguyen’s work is deeply rooted in her own creation myth, her own personal cosmology. Her choice of the word *totem* when describing the trees in *Where the Sea and the Cosmos Meet* is noteworthy. The totems that are symbols of a group’s history, which

often contain elements of a their origin myth, function as guideposts that help an individual come to know and define themselves by telling where they came from.

The buildings and trees that line the trunks of Nguyen's totem trees offer one more angle with which to view our place in the Universe. Unlike the severe lines of the landscapes in *Stalagmites (California Native Plants)* and *Spires (California Native Plants)*, their playful, cartoon-like rendering serve as a gentle reminder that childlike wonder and awe have a home on the journey within. The scrolling ribbons of color that grace the top of *Where the Sea and the Cosmos Meet* hang delicately above creatures that dance as they drift. All of these elements provide an invitation to purposely frame our own movement through life with joy and vibrancy.

By the light of the cosmos and with the salt of the sea, Nguyen leads us through expansive landscapes that float above and below. Her work travels to these places with a rhythm found in nature's repeating patterns, the fractals of life, pulsing each step. The movement pushes and pulls, a conversation between what is very close and that that is very far.

Inherent in Nguyen's work is the idea that all that is required to discover one's place in the order of things is a simple altering of one's point of view. Shifting the angles of our perception we can clearly see that the position where we often start the process of locating ourselves contains rich and layered answers about place far beyond physical location. We start by situating ourselves amongst the stars.