

*In the ARMS of the SEA:  
CLAUDE CAHUN and MARCEL MOORE  
at the WATER'S EDGE*

AMELIA GROOM



FIG 1

I ' M  
knee-deep in the water, looking back at La Rocquaise, the grand old farmhouse on Jersey Island, in the English Channel, where the artist couple Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore lived together from 1937 until Cahun's death in 1954 (FIG 1). Next to the house, on the right side of the photo, you can see St Brelade's Hotel, which is where the couple stayed when they had summer vacations on the island throughout the 1920s and '30s, before they purchased La Rocquaise with an inheritance and decided to relocate from Paris and live here full-time. On the other side of the property (on the left in the photograph), there's a parish church and the cemetery where CC and MM are now buried in a shared grave. It was late July when I took this picture, and the sun was blazing. When I got out of the water

and walked to the spot on the sand where I had left my towel and beach bag, I found that they were saturated. The beach had a huge expanse of sand when I arrived, and I thought I had chosen a spot sufficiently far from the shoreline, but the water's edge is elusive and illusionary, and the sea seeped into my things from the ground up. Something I didn't understand until I travelled here is that the Channel Islands sit in waters with an extremely dramatic tidal range—one of the most extreme in the world. The island of Jersey is said to double in size at low tide. I suppose you could also say that it halves in size at high tide. Or you could say, more accurately, that it has no fixed size or shape. Like Claude Cahun, this land mass is a continual shapeshifter, always spilling out from itself, and pulling veils up over itself, and calling its own edges into question.



FIG 2



FIG 3

At high tide, the sea often reaches right up to the wall of La Rocquaise. But then twice a day, the waters are sucked back out towards the horizon. When the tide retreats, it's a total transformation: new surfaces, new smells, new colours, new forms of life, new paths of navigation. The sand will often be left carpeted in neon green sea algae, and the light completely shifts as the beach becomes a wet sandy mirror to the sky above. Expansive rocky landscapes are revealed, dotted with warm shallow rockpools that provide sanctuary for crabs, anemones and other creatures that thrive in these liminal intertidal zones. All of a sudden, you can walk between bays that were previously separated by water, and you can reach the coastal caves where CC and MM sometimes took photographs. And then, as quickly as the tide went out, the curtains are drawn once again as the waters surge back in and cover it all up.

This was the metamorphosing landscape of continual veiling and unveiling that CC and MM looked onto from their seaside property. And, just as the sea seeped into my unattended belongings, it also permeated the couple's artistic and literary work. CCMM's photographic oeuvre was only discovered posthumously, first gaining international attention in the 1990s. The images that became the most iconic are the indoor portraits showing CC through many-gendered guises and expressions:

Cahun as Satan, Cahun as a weightlifter, Cahun as a doll, Cahun as a dapper gentleman, Cahun confronting the camera with their fierce gaze through an ever-shifting array of transformative masks and costumes—some of them stemming from their involvement, during their Paris years, with Pierre Albert-Birot's experimental theatre company.

My current research aims to shift the spotlight of attention away from these portraits, to focus instead on CC's ecological writings and on the outdoor photographs that CCMM made on Jersey Island when they had left the cosmopolitan centre of Paris behind. What happens to CCMM's critiques of separated individualism, stabilised gender binarism, and human exclusivity when we follow them towards expanded ecological relations, into the coastal landscapes of Jersey Island, and down to the beach? It turns out that the realms of the thalassic and the littoral constitute extremely important modalities in their artistic-literary practice, as I will aim to show in this essay. At the end of the text, I will consider how an oceanic imaginary also came to feature in the undercover resistance work that CC and MM embarked on when Jersey fell under Nazi occupation in the 1940s. In response to this catastrophe, the artists began to fantasise about the sea as an antifascist ally.

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 ceanic and tidal forces can be traced in CCMM's work from very early on. Their first book, *Vues et Visions* ('Views and Visions'), was set at Le Croisic, a port town where CC's family had a waterfront holiday home, and where the couple had vacationed several times. The book was published in 1919, with illustrations by MM framing twenty-five pairs of prose poems that CC had published in a literary journal five years earlier, when they were a precocious teenager going by an earlier alliterative chosen name, Claude Courlis.<sup>[1]</sup>

The writing in *Vues et Visions* is dreamy and watery, evoking a series of time-travelling hallucinations at various coastal settings. One of these settings is the Traict du Croisic, an area of intertidal wetlands where expansive mudflats and sandbanks are periodically covered over with the high tides. In French, a geographical term for inlet areas like this is *bras de mer*; with 'the arms of the sea' reaching into this intertidal zone of salt marshes, the Traict is a place where the Atlantic Ocean seeps into the European continent. When the adolescent CC writes about this landscape, they evoke indistinct *vues* and slippery, unstable *visions*, wherein 'the grey of the sky' merges with 'the grey of the sea' and the 'pale yellow' of a boat's sail performs a vanishing act while coming into relation with the 'dull gold' of the sandbanks that are seen emerging towards the horizon.<sup>[2]</sup>

Through the seepage and retreat of the tides, the landscape produces an optics of confusion that is imaginatively generative and in a constant state of flux. A similar unsettling of boundaries is also at play in an early series of illustrations by MM, which imagine scenes of more-than-human thalassic relationality. FIG 2 shows someone becoming oceanic by extending an arm out

to catch a ride with a jellyfish. The gesture of the extended arm is repeated in FIG 3, but here the arms belong to the sea itself; the waves have hands that reach out and take hold of the beard of a vaguely anthropomorphised solid mass, tugging threads of it into the water, and messing with the boundary between the dry, stable land and the flowing realm of the oceanic pull.

Further elaborations of ocean and seaside relationality can be found when we look to the environmental images in CCMM's photographic oeuvre. In a series of indoor portraits from 1928, CC faces the camera as a masked figure wearing a black cloak; a cloak that is covered in a scattering of more masks (FIG 4). Compare this with *Entre Nous*, another series from the same era, where we encounter a pair of domino masks that have gathered on a sandy beach with some found scraps and littoral leftovers—a comb, a cigarette, a box of matches,



FIG 4

[1] Scans from the original publication in *Le mercure de France* (16 May 1914) can be found at the Bibliothèque Nationale De France website: <http://tiny.cc/vuesetvisions>

[2] Claude Cahun, *Vues et Visions* (Georges Crès & Cie, Paris, 1919) 82.

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and various feathers, shells, rocks and twigs (FIG 5). In the portraits with the cape, there is a pluralisation and dispersal of faces, through which the masks begin to move away from the body's former confines and configurations. When we follow the masks to the seaside, we find that they have left the human figure behind entirely. It's the beach who wears the masks now, in an impromptu cobbling together of subjecthood that temporarily emerges from—and remains enfolded with—its encultured 'natural' setting. Throughout CCMM's outdoor photographs, the previously individuated human subject is found reaching into an expanded ecology of relations. In the photographs with the mask cape, CC appears on their own, as an upright figure in the centre of the image, facing the camera front-on. In the pictures of the masks on the beach, we have two entities who appear supine and laterally extended through enmeshment with their surroundings. And, in front of this impromptu

pair of debris-strewn, mask-made faces, we find an affirmation of the aesthetics of relationality, with the words *entre nous* ('between us') written in the sand.<sup>[3]</sup> Bringing the avant-garde dada-surrealist techniques of collage, assemblage, readymade sculpture and *objet trouvé* into the outdoors, CC and MM would frequently comb the sandy beaches of Jersey and find playful communion with the objects and broken parts of objects that had been deposited by the tides. Approaching the beach as a gathering ground for fragmentary leftovers, they would sometimes assemble ephemeral, impromptu companions like the ones documented in FIG 5 and 6. These monstrously hybrid beings, who were made on and from—and partially *by*—the seaside, affirm CCMM's continual search for forms that could exist beyond the confines of compartmentalised subjectivity and binarised gender stability. Take, for instance, the splayed body in FIG 6, who

has been pieced together from bits of driftwood, cuttlefish bones, and other littoral leftovers—along with an inscription in the sand—and who seems to be equipped with both phallus and vulva. In FIG 7, we encounter the same character (identified by CCMM as 'Le Père,' *the father*) with a slightly altered arrangement of parts (notice how the spoon that formed the right hand appears to have become a feature of the genitalia). Through double exposure, this queer fatherly figure of moving fragments hovers over another scene, where some seaweed strips have been picked up on the beach and worn as an impromptu skirt—a skirt that offers a prosthetic multiplication of the limbs. Recalling MM's early illustration of a person reaching out to hold on to, and move with, the tendrils of a jellyfish in the ocean (FIG 2), this seaside refashioning of the body marks a desire to reach towards a post-gender, more-than-human tentacularity.

[3] The words 'entre nous' appear in the title of an article in which Tirza True Latimer elucidates the radically collaborative nature of Cahun and Moore's work, and argues against positioning Cahun as a solo artist who made 'self portraits'. Tirza True Latimer, 'ENTRE NOUS: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore', in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (12.2, 2006) 197–216.

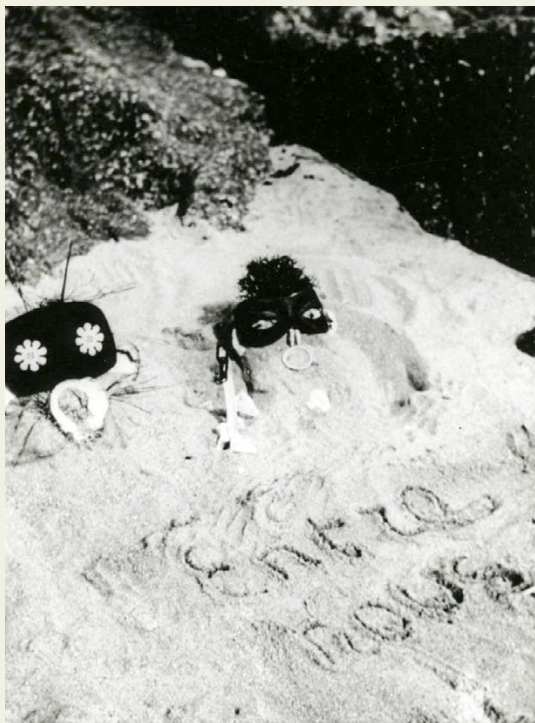


FIG 5

FIG 5 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. *Entre Nous (variation)*, 1926. Private Collection Alberta Pane/Patrice Garnier. All rights reserved

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FIG 6



FIG 7



FIG 8

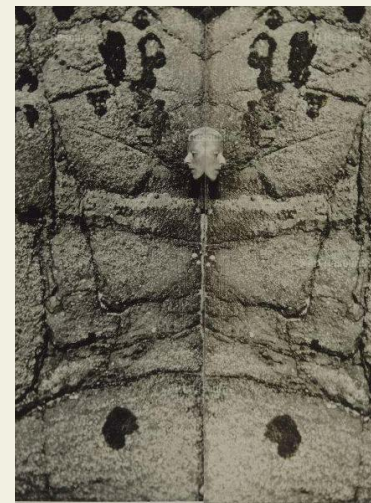


FIG 9

FIG 6 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. *Le Père*, 1932. Musée d'arts de Nantes / Cécile Clos. All rights reserved

FIG 7 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. Untitled photograph, 1932. Jersey Heritage (JHT/1995/00030/z)

FIG 8 Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore. Untitled photograph, 1928. Jersey Heritage (JHT/1995/00032/b)

FIG 9 Self-portrait, around 1928, Cahun Claude (known as), Schwob Lucy (1894–1954), Musée d'arts de Nantes.

In another series of photographs, we find CC lying at the edge of a tidal pool, half in and half out of the water, between the terrestrial and aquatic realms (FIG 8). Is this creature emerging from the sea, coming up for a breath of air, or are they retreating back into the oceanic world, from which all life began? Their ankles appear to be bound, emphasising a refusal of bipedal verticality, and bringing the human body closer towards its marine ancestors—towards the realm of the sea and its wet, shifting grounds, where normative spatio-temporal footing is lost and the uprightness of the standing body is no longer tenable. CC and MM reworked this image into several variations, including one where the photograph is vertically sliced and mirrored on itself (FIG 9). The result is that the body is completely edited out and all that remains is the strangely doubled face of a fragmentary being who is entangled in new ways with the landscape. Once again, the body reaches not only away from gender identifications, but also away from wholeness and human exceptionalism—and away from the humanist logic that sought to separate the 'figure' from the 'ground.'

Images like these suggest that, for CCMM, the seaside was a place that offered new (and old) ways to experience (what in today's language we might call) transness.<sup>[4]</sup> This is something that can also be traced throughout CC's writings, which are frequently permeated with oceanic forces and longings. To give some sense of that watery permeation, I will turn to a small section of CC's highly fragmentary, kaleidoscopic text in the 'anti-memoir' surrealistically autobiographical artist book they made with MM, *Aveux non Avenus* ('Cancelled Confessions') (1930).<sup>[5]</sup> It's a section in which CC narrates an immersively destabilising, erotically animated, temporally disorienting, and trans-affirming encounter with the foaming sea ...

The section is titled *Precedents*, and it opens in the first person. 'I was walking towards the sea and suddenly stumbled,' CC writes. 'My knees in the foam, a child (it's actually me) falters and laughs with fright. He contemplates the great mass of waves so much bigger than him, their strength beyond comparison with his own.' Notice, here, how the 'I' is suddenly switched out for a 'he' and distinctions between 'then' and 'now' are all messed up, as the (assigned female at birth) adult remembers (and experiences) themselves as a boy in the past. Straddling past and present tenses, CC then describes the waves, which 'outdo each other, cheat, stand on tiptoes, taking advantage of the unevenness of the shore, competing for height and speed with

no sense of fairness.' After these waves 'reveal their firm teeth and seize the child by the back of his knees,' they then 'suddenly appear to be calm, the supreme ruse, and slyly start scooping the sand from beneath his feet ...' The sea doesn't only knock the upright off their feet, bringing them down to the ground before 'trampling the bodies of the fallen;' it also scoops that very ground out from underneath them.

While getting knocked around by this forceful and frothy spacetime of obligatory surrender, the child suddenly ages a whole year. Straight time is all messed up in the churn, and then, through the boy's newly adolescent eyes, the spectacle of the sea becomes 'indecent.' The erotics of the oceanic swell are suddenly brought to the surface, and CC the young boy now sees the waves 'mount each other like animals,' as the previously 'chaste' seascape now 'displays an image of rutting that his adolescent body suddenly craves'. 'It's too late to conceal the spectacle from him—and in any case what good would it do?' CC writes. 'For him, from this moment, any emptiness would be peopled by orgies.'

At the end of *Precedents*, CC flips from the third person back to the first person, with 'I have just heard my laugh ...' It's a laugh from a remembered past, but it's heard in the present and it has, CC writes, 'scarcely changed.' Hearing themselves laugh across time in this tidal setting, they understand that 'faced with the sea, with love, with all the forces of the elements (we so willingly surrender!) age, sex, even individuality cease to be relevant'—and that 'maybe separation of souls and bodies that seek to unite is not possible.' Ultimately, this erotically unsettling, time-travelling encounter with the sea induces new forms of embodiment and togetherness, where constructs like straightened-out timelines and gender legibility are no longer relevant, and where individuality as we know it no longer holds up, because imposing a separation between things that want to unite is simply 'not possible.'

Once we unmoor the image of CC as a queer urban figure of the cosmopolitan interwar Parisian avant-garde, we encounter a very different set of images—including the image of CC as a young boy getting erotically knocked over by the waves at the seaside, where there's no stable ground and it's no longer clear where the body begins or ends ...

ow that we've looked at some of the outdoor images, I'd like to turn to another photograph from CCMM's archives; a picture that shows their beloved cat Kid by the window in their Jersey Island home (FIG 10). In the background of this image, a group of German troops can be seen on the beach in front of the property. It's an ominous scene, and as Kid turns his head back in our direction, it's as if he knows it. When CC and MM had relocated from Paris to the island in the late 1930s, circumstances had initially appeared quite idyllic. As CC recalled, it was 'the illusion of holiday without end ... It seemed that the only thing left to do was to become familiar with the trees, the birds, the doors, the windows and pulling from the clothing trunk the appropriate article, short or long, to dive into the sun and the sea.'<sup>[6]</sup> However, in 1940, the year this photograph was taken, shortly after Germany invaded France, the Channel Islands were themselves invaded, becoming the only British territory to be occupied during the war.

The seaside is often imagined as a site of care-free leisure and as the most coveted place to live, with the priciest real estate being situated near the coast, and the most extreme concentrations of wealth being found right along the water's edge. During the war, however, the coast was transformed from a desired site of respite and play into a militarised zone of defensive fortification, and Jersey's beaches were soon spiked with large metal anti-tank obstacles. Hitler's Atlantic Wall was one of the largest construction projects in history. It was supposed to stretch from the Norwegian Arctic right down to the Pyrenees mountains, with 15,000 bunkers overlooking every inch of the vulnerable coast. Millions of tons of concrete and steel were allocated to building the wall, as an attempted (and ultimately failed) defence against an Allied attack. Hitler was very attached to the propaganda value of having occupied British territory, and, as such, the Channel Islands became some of the most heavily fortified parts of the Atlantic Wall. The Nazis transported over 16,000 men to the islands—mostly prisoners of

war and workers captured and deported from occupied countries. These men were forced to build an intricate system of towers, bunkers, tunnels, gun emplacements, and concrete walls along the coastlines. They worked under conditions of horrific abuse and deprivation, with many being starved or beaten to death.

Because CC and MM were privileged enough to live by the seashore, the edge of their property was designated as part of the Atlantic Wall, and soon became a construction site. Next to La Rocquaise, St Brelade's churchyard (FIG 1) was turned into a German military cemetery, with frequent funerals and hundreds of graves marked with swastikas. The hotel on the other side of the property became a leisure centre for the occupying troops, and in 1941 CC and MM received a swastika-stamped requisition order from the Germans to say that the regime would be taking over the horse stables of La Rocquaise. While all of these encroachments increased the

[6] Claude Cahun, cited in Jennifer Shaw, *Exist Otherwise: The Life and Works of Claude Cahun* (Reaktion Books, London, 2017) 203.

[4] For an analysis of Cahun and Moore's work as a theorisation of trans nonbinary identity, see Jordan Reznick, 'Through the Guillotine Mirror: Claude Cahun's Photographic Theory of Trans against the Void,' in *Art Journal* (81.3, 2022) 53–69.

[5] I am using Susan de Muth's English translation of *Aveux non Avenus*, which was first published as *Disavowals* by The MIT Press in 2008. That book has long been out of print, but the translation was republished (without the accompaniment of Moore's photomontages) as *Cancelled Confessions*, a 2022 ebook by Thin Man Press (unpaginated).



FIG 10

[7] Claude Cahun, 'Lettre à Gaston Ferdière (Mars 1946)', in *Claude Cahun: Écrits*, ed. François Laperlier (Jean Michel Place, Paris, 2002) 663-708; 672.

[8] Addressing their communist comrades in the Association des Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires (Association of Revolutionary Writers and Artists), Cahun published a pamphlet, in 1934, in which they defended the idea of 'indirect strategy'. See Claude Cahun, 'Les paris sont ouverts', in *Claude Cahun: Écrits*, ed. François Laperlier (Jean Michel Place, Paris, 2002) 501-536.

[9] Claude Cahun, 'Prison Notes' (trans. Michelle Bailat-Jones), in *Spolia* (12, 2016) 21-40, 23.



FIG 11

risk of surveillance, the artists were determined to carry out an undercover antifascist resistance campaign. CC's initial impulse when the German troops arrived on Jersey was to try to shoot the commandant. They took a revolver to the forest at Le Fret Point for target practice, but they weren't a very good shot and MM convinced them that they would miss.<sup>[7]</sup> The couple then set out to attack the occupying forces through more indirect means.<sup>[8]</sup> To try to sow discontent within the troops, they created a fictitious German newspaper and produced thousands of flyers with surrealist, insurrectionary messages, secretly disseminating them around the island. MM, conveniently, had learned German as a child, so they were able to write everything in German and try to create the impression that there were anti-militarist and anti-Nazi sentiments coming from within the Nazis' own ranks. All Jersey residents who spoke German were supposed to declare that fact to the authorities; CC and MM kept it secret. They also refrained from registering CC's Jewish heritage, in defiance of official requirements.

Sneaking around the island disguised as an inoffensive pair of bourgeoisie, cishet, Aryan spinster 'sisters', the couple managed to carry out this highly risky counter-propaganda campaign undetected for almost four years. Eventually, however, they came under suspicion. They were arrested in 1944, and much of their work and

archives were destroyed as their home was ransacked. Kid, the cherished feline companion from the 1940 photograph, was killed. The couple was supposed to be sent to Germany to be executed, but there were several delays. They spent the long winter of 1944/45 in a Jersey prison, sick and malnourished, often in solitary confinement, with no heating or running water, sometimes not knowing if the other was alive or dead. They had tried to commit suicide with the barbiturates they had kept in case they were ever caught, but the overdose had only left them severely ill. Their illnesses were one of the reasons why their extraditions were delayed, and they ended up being kept alive until the Channel

Islands were liberated at the end of the war. Looking back on the harrowing eight months that they spent in prison, CC recalled the cruel verticality of the walls of their cell, and how much they had longed for the horizontal expanse of the sea. 'Height replaced distance,' they wrote. 'The vertical plane of the walls became a replacement for the solace that is the horizon of the sea [...] that vast familiar stretch in which nothing stops one's gaze.'<sup>[9]</sup> One of the first photographs taken of the couple after liberation shows them sitting together at the edge of their garden, looking out at the sea (FIG 11). The portion of the wall that the Nazis erected, which partially blocked the view of the sea, has been hacked into, leaving a ragged opening in the concrete, which is still there today (FIG 1).



FIG 12

CC's health never recovered after their time in prison, and they died in 1954. MM remained on the island and committed suicide in 1972. One of the few materials that survive from the couple's wartime activism is the flyer reproduced here as FIG 12. In this quickly executed drawing and poem inscribed on cigarette paper, we can see that the artists' sustained relations with the sea as a force of disorientation and transience also fed into their antifascist longings. Loving and craving and respecting the ocean while hating Nazis and dreaming of a post-fascist world, CC and MM pictured the Third Reich as a pathetic dinghy boat stranded all alone out at sea. The text is in German because the flyer is intended for the occupying troops. The words play with the lyrics of *Die Lorelei*, a famous German folk

song by the popular nineteenth-century Jewish German poet Heinrich Heine. The Nazis had branded Heine a 'degenerate' and, in 1938, they officially banned *Die Lorelei*, which is based on the myth of a singing siren who lured sailors towards shipwreck and death. In CCMM's version of the poem, the dangerously tempting oceanic 'voice of the Lorelei' is replaced with the deathly 'roar of Hitler'. The attribution at the end of the poem plays with the name 'Henie'; is it the poet Heinrich Heine or is it Siegfried Heine, who was the Nazi commander ('Oberst') of Jersey Island during the war? CC and MM set up the ambiguity by leaving out the first name and signing the poem with only 'Heine' followed by the parenthetical question '(Oberst?)'. Nazi ideology involved not only

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separating out and exterminating living populations but also dismissing and erasing all Jewish German contributions to German cultural history—hence, the regime had set about destroying historic monuments to Heinrich Heine all around Germany. CCMM's overlapping of the identities of Heine the banned Jewish poet and Heine the local Nazi commander thus flies in the face of the fascist project of fabricating a German identity based on ethnic purity and cultural homogeneity. CC and MM's work opens towards an oceanic episteme that grapples with interconnect-edness and flies in the face of authoritarian projects of control and containment. In their illustration for this flyer, we also encounter an anti-fascist fantasy in which the sea emerges as force of destruction on the right side of history. The boat, which is labelled 'Das Reich,' is about to be swallowed up by the waves, and when it sinks, the raised swastika flag will go down with it (landing on the seabed with other sunken scraps, or perhaps getting torn apart in the ocean's surge and ending up in broken pieces deposited on the shore, ready to be assembled into new formations). The German propaganda machine produced images of relentlessly triumphalist grandeur, visualising Nazism through heroic physical fitness and impenetrable military might. In contrast with this, CCMM depict Das Reich through a picture of extreme vulnerability. The stranded Nazi in this picture doesn't stand a chance; he's calling out for help but he's already being taken in by the force of the sea. I like to imagine that CC and MM have also included themselves in the scene: notice the two sea monsters who have come up to the surface to witness this little man's demise.

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## Martin Wong RIP WE LOVE YOU

BRONTEZ PURNELL

There has been somewhat of a growing fear in this digital age—something like a conundrum, that there is a period of “missing art”—in the push to the downloadable era, there now sits those scores of artists and works that missed the upload era, and work that sits in that void of modernity but never arrived at “contemporary”—we suffer greatly from this—as so many roadmaps and curiosities fall by the wayside—intersectional places and identities are often the most likely to be obscured from this point. But then, there are these certain mavericks, that peak through every age, whose histories, through either a glitch in the system, or even perhaps, great insistence, peak through, the work timeless, and the hand that made the work, something like immortal. I remember being in San Francisco in my 30's at an exhibition (I can't recall the name) and there being a picture of Martin Wong—he was in his studio, crouched over what looked like a blanket or canvas he was painting and was giving the camera this insane look, defiant mostly, and I remember him being very handsome— everything about what I read was coded in “this is some form of distant relative of mine?”. The man himself signified so much of the radical West Coast art making of the last century. A gay Chinese American man, born in Portland but split his adolescence and adult years between the burnt-out logging town of Eureka California and the peak hippy days of San Francisco. He spent his time between making ceramics and paintings. But he also experimented heavily with other forms, doing set designs for the experimental acid-dropping theater group “The Angels of Light”—before making his way to the Lower East Side in Manhattan in the 70's to pursue art on the East Coast. Wong's art, or rather, the through line of the subject matter, was a working class, socially minded dreamscape, what could largely be defined as from a perspective of social realism, intended to critique the power structures controlling the condition of the subjects. What was normally thought of as a movement that flourished between the first two world wars, Wong's work brought the conversation to the current—and annotated it with notes of psychedelia, and also (like most artists) leaned heavily on the quotidian and autobiography—“Everything I paint is within four blocks of where I live and the people are the people I know and see all the time” explained Wong.