Laura Magnusson
I was wearing golden clamshell earrings

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Breathing Underwater:

On Laura Magnusson’s I was wearing golden clamshell earrings

The first time I saw Laura Magnusson’s film Blue, I saw a dancer moving. Not a virtuoso; soloist now moving a limb or a leg body part with perfect control, but someone in deep connection to an unimaginable array of forces, sensations, histories, bodies and beings. Someone dancing the edge of risk, so deeply in her world, breathing on borrowed time and moving with a strange and evocative intensity. So vulnerable, this small body on the underwater and vast dance floor of the seabed, with its delicate choreography of underwater other’s gravities. The whole film testifies to the experimental grace of the risks Magnusson took making this work, her body on the line. Watching her uniquely, a deep witness to the sensation of moving through this suspended time. It took me time to register that the film was silent, that I wasn’t to actually hear the sound of the sea soaring in my ears, to hear the space carved out from these conditions. Rarely has a silence felt so present, so insistently. A silence that is the sound of making life.

To enter the arena of the justice system as a survivor of sexual violence is to be asked to become an expert in everything, in a situation you never asked for: to advocate for yourself as an amateur lawyer, nurse, social worker, therapist, detective. Amateur (noun): a lover of. If you cannot figure out how to act to care for yourself, there is no guarantee anyone in the many institutions of care you pass through will do it for you. And yet, as a survivor, in the system you are often absent from the experience itself: beholden to, but unable to act upon, chains of evidence, testimony and judgement. In I was wearing golden clamshell earrings, Magnusson has shifted this devasting encounter to her own territory in this work, fundamentally about an encounter with survival, she reimagines the terrain of art not as one of mastery and perfect control, but as radically vulnerable and necessarily shared. Remaking an archive of lived experience, she radically expanded her technical repertoire in search of forms and practices adequate to what she lived, finding her own ways to be with materials and experiences not of her own choosing. Again and again, she has created a sensory forensics that insists on the living body in the aftermath of trauma; hers, yours, mine. The artist and activist Jasmeen Patheja, founder of Blank Noise, has spent years working at the intersections of art, advocacy and sexual violence. From this work, she has cultivated a specific demand: the right to be vulnerable. Magnusson’s evocative edgings of risk in this work are an exploration of such a demand, inviting us into charged and crafted spaces of care.

Magnusson makes the archive tremble in this installation, restoring flesh to the fatty of judgment, dissection, and certainty. Amongst the archival materials are documents from her cross-examination, at the pre-trial for her sexual assault, and from the final judgement, despite our failed to find her guilty. They have come to bear the touch of her own body—blackened out lines and blurred words— that make our own attempts to witness, to read, to see for ourselves deeply embodied acts. On the surface, a lawyer on the attack: the question, the question, the question, the question. No room for Magnusson to breathe in here at all. Blacking out insists on pause, insist on the beat of a breath. In music, a clam is a wrong note, a misstep lyric, a bad performance. Replaying this archive, Magnusson sounds all the falsity, all the failed to find her guilty; in the sound of a memory, of an image, of a documentation of the judge’s decision, Magnusson restores a rhythm to this drowning voice of god. Does that blur in vision belong to the page or to my perception? I don’t know. I don’t know to what hidden history of misogyny and pre-empted rise up, a knowing in advance how these things go. The blur makes the this page oceanic, a gazing into the depths, a form of scrying. In the softened zones that disappear and interrupt all this verbiage, my eyes receive a zoning in and out, a smudging of authority and the eternal. A knowing in advance how these things go. The blur makes the thin page oceanic, a knowing in advance how these things go. The blur makes the thin page oceanic.

I was wearing golden clamshell earrings, and judgement. In 74 minutes, in Laura Magnusson’s Breathing Underwater, she has cultivated a specific demand: the right to be vulnerable. Magnusson’s evocative edgings of risk in this work are an exploration of such a demand, inviting us into charged and crafted spaces of care. Up through Water, Into Stark Light suspends a hand-cast bronze clamshell over a small mirror. The shell is opened, and inside is a small, bronze swatch. The monumental materials belie the disposability of this everyday item, and this still life, minimalistic and restrained, vibrates with intensity. I was wearing golden clamshell earrings documents an experience that exploded time and its measure. The materials of this work are “massive temporalities, real extreme slowness, extreme longevity, durations” as much as bronze, oxygen, paper, fabric, resin. The loop of Blue and its fragmented and non-linear images; a clam in the act of opening/becoming opened suspended above “an altar, a pond, a place of reflection, a witnessing, a space to be with,” the finality of a legal decision that is laughable at effectively ending things; the tender curiosity and care for the dissected clam. The lifespan of a clam might well not be so alien in relation to the unmoored time of trauma and institutionalized forms of violence.

In this process, Magnusson calls out to and calls on Hafrun, an Arctic islandica clam, who was dredged up from the seabed off the coast of Iceland in 2006. Like rings of a tree, clam shells are prized historical markers, with the caveat that they are only reliable witnesses in the event of their own, dated death. Pried open, Hafrun is already dead when her body is made to speak by scientists, her witness also her extraction of truth, her evidence, she only matters measured again the stillness of her body. To clam up: the body’s defense against trauma. I was wearing golden clamshell earrings takes place in the center of Hafrun’s dismemberments. She was dead, and was held to account again and again. Documented here as 74 minutes, even when she couldn’t speak, her body scratched out a counter-testimony to her assailant’s words. Part of the brilliance of this work is how Magnusson reimagines what it could mean to clam up, to witness the silence that fills volumes, to map and document where words and cries are not heard. To clam up is also to be a star witness. In Blue, Magnusson burrows her body into the sand. That sand returns, after the fact, in Examination, contaminating the evidence of a hand-crafted tape kit with the memory of another site of life. Diving off the coast of Iceland, near to the seabed where Hafrun buried in for the long haul, Magnusson wondered if her own Icelandic ancestors fueled their survival with the flesh of clams. In these waters, women were drowned as witches by men fearful of what they might say. Did Hafrun filter their silenced screams through her soft body, her hard shell and send them back out into the sea, to find their echo in Magnusson’s art? To clam up might be to make yourself a soft shell. Shell, a handcrafted parka transposes the ice air of Northern Manitoba first to the seafloor, and now to this gallery. Underwater, it is made for the wrong kind of cold, but Magnusson makes it work. Wherever it is, Shell continues to insist: it hurts here, it heals here. Magnusson describes her commitment to working in underwater spaces she dove in for this project as “an experimental place… a contained space where I could try to work out some of the somatic qualities of the trauma and experience… I didn’t find it terrifying, I found it really peaceful”. In the deep silence of her work, “the medium of water was so receptive, I felt like I could inhale like things into the water and that it would receive it in some way”.

The time signatures of a shaking hand punctually interrupted by the swap of a fresh page to write on in 74 minutes becomes another form of dance notation, a technique Magnusson developed for being able to stay still in the courtroom as her assailant’s words—“…a contained space where I could try to work out some of the somatic qualities of the trauma and experience… I didn’t find it terrifying, I found it really peaceful”. In the deep silence of her work, “the medium of water was so receptive, I felt like I could inhale like things into the water and that it would receive it in some way”.

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At the start of the installation, Blue stands apart, Magnusson’s careful curation of spaces and silences capacious enough to hold all the feelings this work evokes. Her film fills the room with an immersive and magical blue light. The film’s silence is a ritual surmoming, a calling to aid. What do you hear in this image of Magnusson dancing? I was told not moving a limb or a leg body part with perfect control, without her usual points of repair. She could barely see, she couldn’t hear, she had to trust that the support system of colleagues and equipment she set in place would be there. But she found new capacities for the bodily re-orientations diving demands, new way to move in the alien atmosphere of the underwater. There, in the absence of our habitual ways to check that we are okay—that we can breathe, move, feel safe—the diver comes to rely on an expanded set of references and tools in the pursuit of neutral buoyancy, those are a profound kind of attention. If dissociation and disconnection are trauma responses that distance oneself from one’s own body, for Magnusson, “at a time, when I didn’t feel like I had lot of connection to my body, diving was kind of a forced way to reengage in a new way with my body… being able to take care of myself, and experience this freedom of moving through different dimensions”.

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