

Safe in my apartment in Dione:ga’ — the Seneca name for Pittsburgh—I listened to Rahim answer this rhetorical question, thinking about the commercial fisherfolk I continue to work with. As Tropical Storm Marco had headed up the coast earlier that month, the fleet who docks at Handy’s had stayed on their boats, ready to steer their livelihoods away from wreckage. Shortly after, however, when Hurricane Laura subsumed Southwest Louisiana, many of the same folks brought their boats across the state for search-and-rescue missions and to provide sorely needed showers and food to first responders and residents. This was not because of some sort of innate resilience but because the conditions of white supremacy and environmental sacrifice require those who live under them to create networks of care that circumvent state harm.

“As goes the Gulf, so goes America. As goes America, so goes life as we know it,” Rahim later said in his speech. He was right: as the Gulf’s culture washes away, so does that of the United States. But perhaps in a place where white supremacy is equally visible in the form of confederate monuments in city squares and uncertain working conditions at water’s edge, the resistance we witnessed—whether rebuilding chosen families or tearing down memorials to racist violence—can fundamentally change what we understand American life to be. Vivid and frank, An-My’s images show both possibilities: the impossible present and, hopefully—as in the image of two statues of confederate generals quarantined in storage—what is to come.

1 Take ‘Em Down NOLA is a Black- and community-led group whose driving principle is “We don’t need a renaming commission; we need an entire restructuring of the system.”

2 The term “sacrifice zone” has never been officially defined by a single scholar in the US, but refers to a space or place that, by proxy of being inhabited by primarily people of color or economically disadvantaged folks, is slated for environmental sacrifice—traditionally, pollution or other toxic harm—by decision-makers based on who lives there.

3 For more about this, read Craig Colten’s book *Southern Waters: The Limits to Abundance*, (LSU Press: 2014).

4 Macarena Gómez-Barris defines an extractive zone as “the logics of colonial seeking that depict land and territory as [spaces to extract from], as if it is there for the taking, to be owned” and which “violently reorganizes territories as well as continually perpetuates dramatic social and economic inequalities” (Duke University Press: 2017).

5 Name has been changed.

IN CONVERSATION WITH PAM LONGOBARDI

ELIZABETH GIDDENS

On view in the group exhibition *She is Here* at Atlanta Contemporary through January 2021, artist Pam Longobardi’s installation *Onar (repair the dream)* reveals the evolution of her practice as a conceptual artist working to address the multilayered human and ecological consequences of what she calls “an extraction mentality.” The title *Onar* comes from a brand name for Turkish life vests worn by some refugees in the Mediterranean. In Arabic, *onar* means “repair;” in ancient Greek, the word means “dream.” This installation expands upon her 2015 film *Plastic Free Island*, which focused on cleaning plastic out of a remote cave on the Greek island Kefalonia.

Onar immerses the viewer within an intimate experience similar to a sea cave through its setting in the former coal chute in the museum’s basement. Mound-like “islands” of golden (and plastic) survival blankets—as well as crystals in hues including turquoise, magenta, red, green, peach, and amber—suggest connections between immigration, failed states, global capitalism, and disregard for the effects of a throw-away culture. Signs of hope appear in the film’s final sunlit seascape, which shows an enigmatic blue figure floating in the calm water—imagining that a sustainable relationship between humans, non-human species, and natural forces is possible when the value of all is affirmed.

Our conversation took place in October 2020 and has been edited for publication.

PAM LONGOBARDI

I’ve been going to Kefalonia since 2010—this is the first year I haven’t gone. That particular island is really interesting because it has a history of earthquakes, and it’s very geologically unstable. Because of this, there are amazing caves all around the periphery of the island, and those caves are packed full with plastic, which I’ve been excavating for all these years.

Plastic is the ultimate symbol of the extraction mentality. We are remaking the world in this material in a sort of godlike manner. We can transform materials into plastic, something that’s never existed before, and yet—on a planetary scale—we don’t have control over it at all. And we certainly don’t seem to have taken responsibility for the creation of this material. We’re don’t know what we’re doing, and we’re extracting oil from five miles below the surface of the ocean and causing enormous disasters like the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, which are permanently changing those ecosystems. At the same time, we’re running out of oil but continuing to overproduce this material that’s converting that very same substance into the form of toxic waste, essentially. There’s so much interconnected complicity



Pam Longobardi, Installation view of *Onar (repair the dream)*, 2020. Photo by Kasey Medlin, courtesy of Atlanta Contemporary.

in all of this. I think every one of the crises that we're experiencing right now are essentially products of the same crisis—it's just taking different forms.

ELIZABETH GIDDENS

Your work as an artist is informed by concerns with environmental degradation and plastic waste and their connections to the suffering of displaced peoples. At the same time, your process also seems somewhat intuitive and deeply personal. Could you speak a bit more about how you came to work this way?

PL It really goes back to my childhood: my dad was an ocean lifeguard, and he also worked for Union Carbide. So I was at the table—so to speak—to see the invention of these different types of plastic, because he would bring them home and do little experiments for us in the kitchen. Nobody thought anything about this, except for that it was this new miracle material. I think we all got convinced that it was completely benign. Much earlier on than they want us to realize, plastic companies knew that they were making something that was never going to go away, something that was not really safe to use in the long run.

In some ways, all my great lessons have come from just being in contact with these enormous natural forces, like nearly drowning when my dad was taking us surfing when I was really young, maybe about eight. He had my brother and my little sister going into the waves, and I was waiting for my turn and got sucked into a jetty by the riptide. I was held under water for so long that I actually gave up.

And then I opened my eyes, and I just

watched the barnacles feed. It was so beautiful and so fascinating that I must've relaxed enough to where I was able to get myself out of the jetty. As soon as I stopped fighting it and simply marveled at this mysterious creature just doing its thing underwater, I was released. For me, the lesson from that was that we have to save ourselves. I was waiting for my dad to come save me, but he didn't because he was busy. In some ways, marveling at this strange other was the thing that ultimately did save me.

EG Do you think of your work as modeling an alternative approach to environmental activism?

PL I just know that I have to do this and that I can't behave any other way. I think it is activism. I think it's a form of activism just to bend over and intercept a piece of plastic, even on a city street, from going down into the water system and ending up in the ocean. I think all of those actions add up. I want to try undo some of the millions of actions that I've done that have hurt the environment. I mean, I was seduced by all those little travel bottles in the 80s.

In a lot of ways, my work pushes environmental activism into different phase, toward something way more complicated than simply an economic view of the world. I really do think about these pieces of plastic as information. They're a form of communication from the natural world, from the ocean world, from the water world, because they've traveled through those worlds in the most intimate ways. They've been pushed around by it, across the globe. They've been cracked by the salt in the sun. They have been inside other bodies and bitten by those bodies and expelled by

those bodies, so they come back with all this information. If you adopt a kind of aesthetic and forensic approach to cleaning—as opposed to a strictly janitorial approach—it is incredibly illuminating because then these things are not just garbage. They can teach us about this liquid entity that makes up most of our planet.

When I do beach cleanings, I do this kind of forensic beach cleaning training before we go. It's about a study of circumstance and site and looking for material traces of information. It could be identifying the original manufacturer, which tells you about where was this made and when was it made and who made it—but then there are all these other layers which have changed that object from its original state. They're just full of knowledge. That's why I've created this massive archive of material, because I do think that it is going to be a place where we learn something about ourselves and the world around us. If plastic is sort of ultimate extension of humanity's id—the willful child who wants to make everything simply because they can—what can we learn from that?

EG Something I'm struck by in what you've said and in your work is that you seem to acknowledge the harm and suffering humans have caused ourselves as much as the environment.

PL That reminds me of something amazing I read last summer in an issue of *Flash Art* about hybridization, coactivity, and the non-human. The issue includes an essay by the composer John Luther Adams about the idea of universal rights. He discusses how we're now facing another mass extinction on a global scale and suggests that we need to acknowledge the rights and agency of all

living creatures so that the question becomes one of universal rights instead of human rights. He lists seventeen articles of universal rights, such as, "All living beings are born free in dignity and rights. They are endowed with spirit and consciousness, and are all interrelated in the great web of life."

We are in such a moment of revolution and releasing historical trauma that has been buried for generations. These power inequities have truly damaged people and our planet. But maybe that's actually the first step. We have to learn how to take care of each other before we can begin to even think about other species.



Pam Lombobardi, Installation view of *Onar* (repair the dream), 2020. Photo by Kasey Medlin, courtesy of the artist.