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Renée van der Avoird on Kevin Yates

While visiting New Orleans with his brother in 2010, Kevin Yates witnessed the effects of the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico first hand. The devastation of the spill, set against the backdrop of a city still reeling from Hurricane Katrina, formed the impetus for Yates' latest body of work. Currently installed at Susan Hobbs Gallery, the exhibition consists of two highly realistic miniature ship models, as well as two experimental video works that the artist produced in collaboration with his brother, Robert. Yates' new works use water as a platform to collectively conjure up notions of ecological disaster, environmental exploitation and, ultimately, the precariousness of the human condition.

Yates has garnered a great deal of attention for his highly realistic miniatures and, in this exhibition, showcases his technical merit with two perfectly crafted model ships. In an ambitious work entitled *Emma Maersk*, Yates has recreated the largest container ship ever built. Modeled after a commercial ship of the same name, *Emma Maersk* is a commandingly powerful and strangely compelling sculptural work. Rarely do we see modern commercial sea vessels as models, especially in a gallery setting. As Yates explains, a certain mystique surrounds the Maersk fleet in the world of scale modeling. Blue prints are not released to the public and model-makers must base their plans on photos and visual memory. Creating a model version of one of the largest objects in the world is a massive undertaking and serious commitment – one that, according to Yates, has been attempted by many but never fully completed.



Living up to the challenge, Yates has produced a model that is at once simple and complex. The miniature is flawlessly hand crafted but deliberately crude and weathered – a feat of remarkable technical expertise masquerading as a commercially manufactured object. The sheer number of cast aluminum containers on the vessel point to issues of consumerism and mass consumption, global trade and population growth. As Yates explains, “I was thinking a lot about the movement of things around the world, and how amazing and absurd it all is, similar to my experience living on the west coast and seeing logging trucks travel with loads both north and south.” Evidently, the proliferation of overseas shipping during the past century has affected the human relationship with water, transforming it from one of necessity to one of convenience. “Being in the Gulf,” Yates continues, “and more recently in the inland sea in Japan, I was reflecting on how we navigate the world on this mass scale, and the negative consequence to this.”

Disaster scenarios are a notable theme in Yates' work. His 2009 exhibition at Susan Hobbs, for example, addressed the issue of flooding. The installation featured a series of miniature, dilapidated clapboard houses aligned along an invisible horizon. Yates carefully sculpted reflections of the abandoned homes to give the impression that each was partially submerged in water, in what appeared to be the aftermath of a natural disaster. Similarly, in the current exhibition, Yates has painstakingly created mirrored reflections of the ships along their horizontal axes. The reflected forms give the impression that the vessels are afloat, but also become something more than just reflections as seen in photos or painting. The reflections transform the miniatures from singular objects into hermetic cells or worlds, shrouding the vessels in mystery and suspense.

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Optically, the three dimensional form of object and reflection becomes one, referencing notions of above and below, up and down, and the very subtle differences between the object and its reflection.

The miniature *Emma Maersk*—which is actually quite large— sits in a dramatically lit display case in the lower gallery, measuring close to the average body height. The display case, which is a departure from traditional cases for model ships, is sandwiched between two large tables. These heavy looking tables, hand-crafted by the artist, mimic the visual weight and pressure of the ship. At the same time, the table on top is upside down and seems to float above the case, intentionally contributing to the whole form as not just an object, but an object *and* its mirror image. By adding the upside down table, Yates turns the case into sculpture as well, and flips the overall reflection once again so that nothing quite makes sense.



Ship In a Bottle, a wall-mounted miniature model in the upper gallery, is much smaller in scale than *Emma Maersk*, but no less impressive. Sculpted in bronze, *Ship In a Bottle* exemplifies the artist's flawless technical skill and offers a vague scenario, open for interpretation. The ship appears rusty, abandoned and derelict, yet bears no signs of damage or shipwreck. Again, Yates does not sate the viewers' curiosity, intentionally concealing details about the story of the ship, thus leaving plenty of room for wonder and reverie. The glass bottle that contains the small ship is also mirrored along a

horizontal axis, becoming part of the sculpture itself and reinforcing work's hermetic nature. The object and its container are flipped onto themselves to create a visual effect that is both chaotic and controlled.

In addition to the mysterious and forlorn qualities of Yates' miniatures, there is also a decidedly theatrical element that permeates his work. Similar to film stills, Yates' sculptures freeze time and hold space, offering the viewer an opportunity to quietly examine and inspect the object as a "paused" image. By reducing monumental ships to diminutive specimens, Yates presents a unique opportunity to contemplate some of humankind's most massive creations at a safe and comfortable distance. While commercial sea vessels are purely utilitarian in function, model versions take on a theatrical role, embodying staged scenes that invoke our imaginations and invite us to veil them in our own stories.

Given the cinematic nature of Yates' miniatures, not to mention his previous work with fictional film (*HOT HAIL*, his 2008 show at Susan Hobbs based on the 1980 Flash Gordon movie, for example), the combination of video work with sculpture in this exhibition seems only natural. The video works *Pond with Stones* and *Stones on Ice* engage directly with the surface of water itself, investigating its ability to reflect what looks into it and conceal what lies below.

Yates affirmed that although he and his brother have always offered advice and support to each other's projects, this is the first time they have worked collaboratively. "Coming together is exciting, we are close enough and similarly minded that we are both on the same path. [Robert] brings new skills and insight, and a childhood sense of play and support," says Yates. The sense of play is certainly visible in *Stones on Ice*, a video in which the brothers slid rocks onto a barely frozen pond. With ice so thin that it is barely visible, the rocks appear to be floating; however, as the camera keeps rolling and we see the rocks drop through the ice one by one, we are reminded of the evanescence of water and the fragility of the natural world. In the video's post-production phase, the brothers edited the footage to reverse the sinking of the stones, which creates additional mirrored effects and carries us even farther into a world of uncertainty and dislocation.

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Yates' latest body of work continuously confounds our expectations, and challenges our usual mode of knowing-through-seeing. The reflected forms that thread together the works in the exhibition create a mysterious, dreamlike atmosphere, and remind us of water's power to reflect reality and to reveal truths about ourselves. While Yates' artwork communicates a profound respect for the natural world, it also raises serious concerns about the tenuous relationship between humans and water, and ultimately, the future of life on this planet.

