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Aqua Seca

Janaina Tschäpe, Artist in Residence

Janaina Tschape has spent the better part of a decade exploring the inner life of water—literally, metaphorically, poetically. She has examined and mapped the vital liquid from the microscopic to the cosmic to the mythic in drawings, photographs, videos and, more recently, large scale oil paintings.

Given this, it may seem absurd—or, at least overly optimistic—that she found a muse in the arid lands of the Sonoran Desert near Tucson, Arizona.

Or, perhaps not.

Frank Lloyd Wright often remarked that the desert is reminiscent of the sea floor. The ocotillo and opuntia and saguaro and chapparal mimic the shape and form of coral and undersea flora in countless ways, reminding us that this desert was a sea, millions of years ago.

The memory of the desert as sea is revisited during our monsoon season when the arid landscape is transformed by the rain. The vast expanse of grey and brown lay brittle and desiccated until the monsoons arrive. Things that appeared long-dead spring to life, insects better suited to the tropics swarm as if by spontaneous generation and thick cactus skins swell like ripe balloons.

Tschape, like a sage diviner, tracked the areas of the desert where water gathers—down the chutes formed by the agave leaves, along the depressions in the rock worn away by millennia of flooding. She found the dew gathered on the delicate creosote and the wet mud lingering beneath the rock ledge, not yet dried by the noonday sun.

And she imagined creatures—long dormant—reborn and christened by the monsoons rains.

Her giant sea monster, composed of carnival costume debris, makes the long journey across the desert to an arroyo, awaiting resuscitation when the rains flow by. Just as a desert plant orphans limbs in the dry season, Tschape's sea monster abandoned tentacles during the journey across the desert floor. The limbs drop to the ground, dormant until a new rain comes. The progenetic tentacles of the monster seek out the water, slowly creeping across the desert floor in search of nourishment to begin anew. Tschape's water filled balloons become egg sacks released by the monster along the way. They rest, prone and swollen on the desert floor, to seed the desert with a new generation.

For a brief time, the desert is lush, fecund, ripe. Tschape's creatures will thrive in this time, as they writhe across the landscape, expanding their terrain, urged on by their biological destiny.

And then the rains will cease. And the sun will again burn hot. And the air will clear and the focus will sharpen and the land will appear fallow.

And her creatures will find refuge. Hiding. Waiting. Until the rain comes again.