

HYPERALLERGIC

Art

The Bone Magic of Joy Curtis

Curtis's work is sensitive to matriarchal lineage: the gory miracle of birth, the fecundity of death, generational divide and transmission.



Brecht Wright Gander April 28, 2024

Joy Curtis's work was not always so soft, though it has always been precise in its peculiarity and guilelessness. Whereas her sculptural work c. 2014 mined a vocabulary of connective fascia, architectural lintels, and molding, Curtis now deals in innards, skin, and bones. Her current show at Klaus von Nichtssagend gallery, titled *Night Hike* and *Ocean Grandma*, follows 2019's *Skeleton Woman*. But even without these titles to guide us, her work is recognizably inflected with a certain sensitivity to matriarchal lineage — the gory miracle of birth, the fecundity of death, generational divide and transmission.

During scheduled performances, Curtis's wall-mounted sculptures are taken down and donned by female performers who wear them about the gallery. "Sky and Earth 3" (2023), for instance, transforms from a totemic fabric disc into a draped poncho. Curtis used plant, mineral, and insect dyes to create its nebulas of earthy ochers and indigo blues, which bisect at a median horizon line. The work calls to my mind the foreskin of a whale, an impermeable tissue once worn as a protective sheath by sailors butchering cetaceans for blubber. There is, I should mention, a whale carcass hovering overhead in the gallery.

Even before the checklist confirmed it, I had gathered that the "ocean grandma" of the show's title referred to this eviscerated, cavernous, and grand sculpture. Its enveloping scale, as well as its decorative whorls and arabesques of stitchwork along the quilted tail and dorsal fins, evoke a grandmotherly warmth. Lightly frayed



fringes of fibers, running along the denim ribs, suggest a stringy, meaty residue. The whale is suspended with a system of ropes that is one part *shibari* bondage and one part fishing netting. Though it appears to be preparing to dive, its heart and viscera hang outside its body, linked by ropes — a sculptural agglomeration that effectively delivers a sense of precarity and expansive breadth at once. Whether this creature belongs to the ocean of the sky or the sea is ambiguous.

A kind of bone magic pulses through the show: A whale. A ribcage. A poncho composed of sky and earth. These exhibits feel like they belong to a kind of natural history museum of the artist's inner world. In "Night Hike 1 (Epiphytes)" (2023–24), what appears to be a wearable fabric heart is perforated by a set of six umbilicals, from which some nursing animal might draw sustenance. Perhaps they are meant for us gallery-going mammals, wading through the often sterile spaces where art is exhibited, seeking nourishment.