

ARTFORUM

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Sara Magenheimer

THE KITCHEN

Louis Agassiz, 1862: "I have never felt more deeply the imperfection of our knowledge of some of the most remarkable types of the animal kingdom than in attempting to describe the beautiful representative of the genus *Cyanea* found along the Atlantic coast of North America. I can truly say that I have fully shared the surprise of casual observers in noticing this gigantic radiate stranded upon our beaches, and wondered what may be the meaning of all the different parts hanging from the lower surface of the large gelatinous disk." Claude Monet, 1924: "It took me time to understand my water lilies." Ani DiFranco, 1998: "They say goldfish have no memory / I guess their lives are much like mine / And the little plastic castle / Is a surprise every time."

I present these statements, by a scientist, a painter, and a songwriter, respectively, in part because their subject matter—jellyfish, water lilies, aquariums—all figured into Sara Magenheimer's solo exhibition, "I Collect Neglected Venoms," curated by Lumi Tan and Tim Griffin. Its centerpiece video, *Best Is Man's Breath Quality*, 2017, is ostensibly narrated by a member of the species *Chironex fleckeri*, commonly known as the sea wasp or box jellyfish, who speaks over footage as varied as a motorbike emitting exhaust fumes, a summer solstice festival in Sweden, and water lilies absorbing sunlight. As installed in the Kitchen's black-box theater, the video played across two screens that stood staggered behind a fish tank filled with neon plastic plants and five genetically modified phosphorescent Glo-Fish. A live feed of the tank was projected ten feet high onto the theater's back wall, subtly framing the darkened room as the interior of a tabletop aquarium.

More important, these three statements reflect the different epistemological modes—of zoology, impressionism, and pop music—that Magenheimer deployed over the course of *Best Is Man's Breath Quality*'s fifteen minutes. Jellyfish are slippery, alien. As Agassiz put it, "The most active imagination is truly at a loss to discover, in such a creature, any thing that recalls the animals with which we ourselves are most closely allied." *Best Is Man's* resembles an absurdist nature documentary where the animal itself, voiced by Leo Smith, explains the functions of its nervous system and the potency of its venom. Simultaneously, Magenheimer treats jellyfish as Monet did water lilies, i.e., as an occasion for testing and thematizing the limits of vision. Clips filmed on both iPhone and HD cameras attempt to capture the sea wasp's quivering translucence, while the split in the video's double-screen projection triggers stereoscopic effects. "Your primate eyes," says *C. fleckeri*,

Sara Magenheimer, *Best Is Man's Breath Quality*, 2017, aquarium, Glo-Fish, vanity mirror, video camera, tripod, two-channel HD video projection (color, sound, 15 minutes 30 seconds). Installation view. Photo: Jason Mandella.

