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Michele Oka Doner: Into the Mysterium

Jill Deupi

University of Miami

Michele Oka Doner

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Nancy Voss

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MICHELE OKA DONER
Into the Mysterium
Primordial Soup

serene

Conception - little eggs in stems

release - ghost images

jellyfish material (a release ballot)

"dropping branch"

Fertilization - hands image receive egg image

"hands" image a - porifera

"speckled texture"

"medusa sky" card - immersive moment!

manifestation - explosion of life

womb brain image with light currents (antipathidea)

sleep sponges

"interior landscape" of antipathidea

looks like blood vessel catching floating ball image (Fertilization?) can be used transitonally

"heartbeat" - card 12
MICHELE OKA DONER
Into the Mysterium

Jill Deupi, J.D., Ph.D.

CONTRIBUTORS:
Michele Oka Doner
Manuela V. Hoelterhoff
Oliver Lyons
James Prosek
Nancy Voss
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COVER:

MICHELE OKA DONER
(American, b. 1945)
Double Portals, 2017
Archival pigment print
15 x 22 ½ inches
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Fascinated with order, Michele Oka Doner is captivated by humanity’s desire to bring regimentation and predictability to an otherwise messy world. The artist is equally enthralled by nature, a palimpsest on which all creatures’ passage through this mortal realm is inscribed. She sees vestigial remnants of an existence that is both eternal and fleeting: they are Disjecta Membra, or scattered fragments that can be knit back together into new stories by those who are truly in touch with the rhythms of Mother Nature and Mankind’s majestic legacy. Oka Doner is precisely that person. With her Midas touch, the artist transforms what others might call detritus—but she would label “Mother Nature’s marginalia”—into works that are notable both for their material beauty and their intellectual impact. They equally speak to her deep interest in civilization’s push-pull relationship with nature (which ultimately bows before no one) as well as the paper-thin membrane separating orderliness from chaos.

Understanding Oka Doner’s intellectual and aesthetic priorities provides an invaluable lens through which to view Into the Mysterium. Born of an ostensibly straight-forward fact-checking visit to the Marine Invertebrate Museum (University of Miami, Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science) in 2004, this compelling project is the fruit of the artist’s enchantment with the hidden museum and its 93,000 specimen jars. For when Oka Doner fatefully crossed the MIM’s threshold more than a decade ago, she was inspired to capture what she saw: whispers of ancient time embodied in creatures whose subtle beauty was other-worldly. That they were already neatly systematized and categorized (the Museum’s specimens comprise twenty-three separate phyla) only added to their allure. And thus, Oka Doner entered the Mysterium, taking us back to our aquatic roots and inviting us “into a oneness of being.”

I would like to extend my deep personal thanks to Ms. Oka Doner for her tireless devotion to this project. I am equally grateful to Presenting Sponsor Fiduciary Trust Company International and our Community Partner Books & Books, Beaux Arts, the Miami-Dade County Department of Cultural Affairs and the Cultural Affairs Council, the Miami-Dade Mayor and the Board of County Commissioners, the City of Coral Gables, the University Miami and its College of Arts & Sciences, and the Lowe’s Members also supported this exhibition, and for that I am most grateful. I am equally indebted to contributing authors Manuel Hoelterhoff, James Prosek, and Nancy Voss as well as the faculty and staff of the University of Miami’s Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science for graciously sharing their time and talents with us. My final note of thanks is reserved for my team at the Lowe as well as Laumont Studio, Jonathan David Kane, Oliver Lyons, and Aaron Yassin; all contributed in countless, invaluable ways to the resounding success of Into the Mysterium.

Jill Deupi, J.D., Ph.D.
Beaux Arts Director and Chief Curator
Lowe Art Museum
Opening the steel doors and entering the silent world of the Marine Invertebrate Museum for the first time jolts the senses. Row after row of randomly placed specimen jars occupy the shelving systems in a coded specific manner, almost a million amorphous forms merging into harmonic cacophony, floating in mysterious fluids.

This vast universe of underwater creatures is dramatic, even cinematic, chimeric: monster cephalopods and octopi vulgaris with their sucker bearing arms, poetic sea anemones with multiple hundreds of tentacles, gelatinous medusas evoking primordial memory, divine translucent abstractions seemingly dredged from the deepest and darkest unknown.

As always, the gods have arrived uninvited, and of their own volition, seeking what I discovered in this isolated and wayward site: the invisible presence of mystery. Is it because our human inheritance is embedded in this Mysterium?

All of us are originally natives of the sea. When we stare into the specimen jars, probing with our eyes and minds, wanting their secrets, marveling at their diversity, complexity, we remove from our smaller selves, into a oneness of being.

Michele Oka Doner
July 2015
Michele Oka Doner can easily be imagined emerging from an ocean reef near Miami Beach, pulled to the shore in a sparkling shell surrounded by swarms of silvery fish and piloted by a determined octopus. Standing tall in her conveyance, she is of course swathed in her trademark white gown, coiffed, perfectly draped, and smiling slightly like a goddess.

I like visiting her studio in New York. I get to sit at a ceremonial table called a “radiant disc” and look out on an immense room filled with tiny pods and crustaceans, totems, coral twigs, and towering hominids, all thoughtfully gathered and coaxed into brilliant arrangements over the past fifty or so years.

Oka Doner doesn’t so much transform the real world as look beyond it. She compares artists to shamans who move silently through surfaces and peer into our souls. How amusing that she lives and works in a building that was once devoted to making buttons, which help us hide from each other!

Sitting down on the Bugatti chairs she assembled over time to blend with an imposing table of her own design, we talked about the silent world of the University of Miami’s Marine Invertebrate Museum. Water covers about seventy percent of the earth and we are lucky that some of the Deep’s astonishing creatures ended up here as specimen stars of Into the Mysterium. Nothing really could remind us more of the fragility of our planet than this exhibition devoted to delicate and vital members of our endangered chain of life. They radiate beauty and impending loss.

MVH: Let’s start at the beginning with the Lowe Art Museum in Coral Gables, which goes way back to the early 1950s when museums were rare locally. Did you go there as a child?

MOD: Yes! We’d pile into the car. There were no expressways then so it was a daytrip with a stop at a barbecue place my father loved. I remember the Bible paintings with their story-telling—the Museum has a Kress collection of Renaissance and Baroque art and wonderful pieces of pre-Columbian art, which you didn’t see in Europe.

MVH: I love the Miami Beach book you created with your friend Micky Wolfson [Miami Beach: Blueprint of an Eden, 2007]. Those photographs are mesmerizing—a Miami Beach before flip-flops. Elegantly dressed people at dinner with, say, the shah of Iran and Soraya; manicured gardens; mansions in the Italian style. We could be in Rome! Your father was Mayor of Miami Beach and your mother a great beauty and fabled hostess. I bet they went out every night.

MOD: They did. I’d watch my mother get dressed when I came home from school. Long before people traveled to exotic places, she brought back textiles from India and Thailand and fabrics from Damascus. Her imagination was sparked by National Geographic and Freya Stark. She looked up to adventurers and not Hollywood stars. Her dressmaker was a Greek born in Alexandria who studied couture in Paris and ended up in Miami Beach in the early sixties. I would come home from school and my mother was having fittings. She was fabulous and original. She loved being a woman. She embraced being the femme fatale that she was: very dramatic and a natural actress.

MVH: The book includes a note your father jotted down just before giving his Mayoral farewell speech. It’s short, yet poignant.
This was in 1964 and he was apprehensive about the future. There were challenges ahead, he wrote, and solutions had to be found quickly. I wonder, of course, how he would feel walking around Miami today.

MOD: I think he would be appalled at the lack of responsibility exhibited in the last half century. We had a federal law that you could not build in federal flood zone areas. (Bebe Rebozo, remember him?), convinced Nixon to change the law.

This will up-end us in the next half century. It was a huge error. You talk about greed. My father did not vote to put the high rises on Miami Beach from the Fontainebleau all the way to Aqua. Those were private homes. As they came on the market, the buyers wanted variances. My father knew he could not keep holding things back.

Council members were paid off to change the law. My father wanted there to be a drive along the ocean. He talked about Copacabana in Rio de Janeiro and how everyone could use the beach. Now you drive down and see slivers of ocean between the canyons of buildings.

MVH: What did he do then? He was still pretty young, early sixties.

MOD: He left Miami Beach for Japan with my mother in 1965 when he saw all the work he had done being undone to head the People to People program started by Eisenhower, which linked sister cities, in this case, Fujisawa and Miami.

MVH: Earlier this year a sizable iceberg broke loose from behind a collapsing huge ice shelf in
Antarctica. More locally, flooding is projected for Miami Dade on a routine basis. If there is a silver lining, it is that destruction of valuable property may help individuals in positions of power and influence who have been in denial understand that the threat is real.

MOD: Yes. A top engineer from Holland gave a lecture at the University of Miami in which he said that because of the porous limestone substructure, twenty years are what’s left; thirty on the outside and during those years there will be a constant struggle to keep flooding at bay.

There are already issues on a daily basis. I can smell the sewage, which I never could before. Miami Beach will be completely underwater during my granddaughter’s lifetime. She is now seven. Miami will be an island.

MVH: What’s to be done?

MOD: The Mayor of South Miami, Philip Stoddard (who is a geologist and an enlightened man), thinks the humane thing is to begin depopulation. But how do you do that? What happens to those who remain when the “Happy People”—to quote a friend of mine—leave for their homes in Aspen? What water will those left behind drink? Malaria, cholera, zika come in. Fort Lauderdale has closed five of its eight aquifers.

I was walking to my sister’s recently and heard a sound that—because of urban development—I hadn’t heard in sixty years. “Steffi,” I asked, “did I hear frogs?!” Delightful though this sound from my youth may be, it is a stark reminder that conditions in Miami are changing: the water table is rising and flooding is a regular occurrence but people are in their own bubbles. “Not in our lifetimes,” they say as water seeps into their backyards. “How’s the flooding on Fairgreen Drive?” I asked the restaurateur who lives in my parents’ house. He said it’s not too bad. But he knows his home is not an asset he will be able to leave to his children.

MVH: Do you remember when you took your first walk on the beach? Picked up your first shell?

MOD: I have a picture of myself crawling on the beach in a little striped suit. Like a sand bug (fig. 1).

MVH: Creating A Walk on the Beach at the Miami International Airport with all those embedded shells and aquatic creatures must have been a walk back in time.

MOD: Once I was finished with the airport, I realized it was a bouquet I threw back. Into the Mysterium is the bouquet to the future. I realize now that I have a trilogy, the first part being the social history I wrote with Micky.

MVH: How did you discover that magic room, the “mysterium” at the Museum? It’s so small and out of the way.

MOD: I needed a manuscript fact-checked. So I went there and opened the door. To the left was a room filled with shelves and jars. And to the right was a seventy-four-year-old woman with white hair: Nancy Voss. We sat down and she examined the captions.

Nancy was a woman of not too many words. “Dear,” she said, “this is not an algae, but an alga, singular.” When she was done I asked if I could look in the other room and she said, “I suppose so.” It took a year for me to set aside the time and figure out what kind of lens would be necessary for this photo expedition into another world.

MVH: What kind?

MOD: A Nikon D1x camera with a Micro-Nikkor 105mm f/2.8 lens. Once I began, Nancy was
so generous. The room is packed; I mean floor to ceiling packed with more than 90,000 jars containing almost a million specimens. You can hardly squeeze your body between the rows. People can’t understand the value of what she’s done—and she’s not finished yet. She was upset with the cover of the book because it showed a jellyfish she had not yet identified.

MVH: How did you get it?

MOD: I pulled it out of one of the jars and put it in a petri dish.

MVH: It looks so beautiful and complex. How big is it?

MOD: The size of a pancake. Doesn’t it look like a scrim? Don’t the openings draw you in? Lurking behind the scrim is a mysterious world! Sirens like us can enter the portals on the cover!

MVH: What about this collection itself? I looked it up and realized it’s embedded in the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, which is off a causeway surrounded by lots of water on Virginia Key!

MOD: The collection needs to be removed from this tiny spit of land. I am hoping the exhibition will help generate new awareness.

MVH: And what about Nancy Voss, who is now 87? How has she dealt with this unexpected burst of attention?

MOD: She’s been wonderful. It’s changed her life and brought her out of her shell. At the Miami Book Fair, she talked about how she came here and fell in love with—and later married—her professor, Gilbert Voss. I also met her son, who is at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, but devoted to larger, vertebrate animals.
Michele Oka Doner’s gestures as an artist reference fragments of earliest written language; natal impressions of the sea, sky and desert; and humanity’s primitive attempts to navigate the sensual world through expressive representations of lived experiences.

No pattern sign, signal, or motion of nature goes unnoticed by Oka Doner, no matter how subtle—the marks left by the legs and claws of a crab as it scuttles along the sand or a blade of grass drawing lines on soft soil as it blows in the wind. These marks are the residue of passing time, fleeting gestures momentarily frozen, and may have been our introduction—by nature’s instruction—to the powerful and essential act of drawing. Oka Doner incorporates these marks made by nature into her own symphonic works.

My impression of the artist, both in person and through her work, is of a kind of earth mother, clothed in flowing drapery—often monochromatic, black, white, or blue. Her tone of speech is gentle and thoughtful, and she maps out her sentences carefully, selecting words as if each were a stepping-stone laid across a river.

One hot July day this past summer, I approached the door of Michele Oka Doner’s studio in Lower Manhattan. The air was hot, humid, and a little oppressive. On the second floor, the elevator door opened to a light and airy space with very tall ceilings in which I felt almost weightless. My immediate impression was that I’d entered the sea, not from the surface but from underneath the water. A giant sea fan, or what appeared to be one, larger than any that exist naturally, commanded a far wall. Tables with objects drew me in to take a closer look. Were these curiosities honed by the action of tide and wind, or perhaps made by the artist’s hand? The ambiguity and tension between real and imagined, I soon learned, is an integral part of Oka Doner’s work. The objects appeared to be grouped by specific ideas or emotions, collections that could only have been made by her, not arranged by a scientifically-sanctioned system of classification, but a personal method, a visual or emotional taxonomy.

And then I was approached by the artist herself, an elegant lady wearing a diaphanous white cloth that resembled sea foam or cresting wave. There was something almost shamanistic about her, as if she channeled nature into art not with her hands but through incantations. Her works were somehow more than drawings or sculptures; they were amulets, altars, totems.

Oka Doner grew up on Miami Beach, and in some ways she never stopped combing the unlimited potential of the beach and its give and take relationship with the ocean. An early picture of the artist at the age of five shows her on all fours at the beach, grubbing in the sand as her sister poses for the camera. (page 9, fig. 1) Decades later Oka Doner is still digging, interacting with the pulverized silica and coral, discovering crystals of inspiration, illuminating patterns and associations for her viewers, searching for other worlds, inquiring.

The beach, as a boundary between two worlds, is not a boundary at all but a meeting place for erosion, for vitality, a point of contrast between order and disorder. This borderland of sorts, which is at the same time boundless, is the perpetual wellspring of Oka Doner’s work. She starts with the natural instinct to look, collect, and arrange, and she takes it to a place that few would think to go, creating a new world from fragments of the realms of the living and the dead.

Because Oka Doner appeared to draw from disparate worldviews partly influenced by...
extensive travels, I asked the artist what her spiritual or religious leanings might be.

"I believe in the life force," she said.

And she quoted a line from a Wallace Stevens poem—"I believe in 'the green vine angering for life." She then recited the entire poem.

Nomad Exquisite
As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth
The big-finned palm
And green vine angering for life,

As the immense dew of Florida
Brings forth hymn and hymn
From the beholder,
Beholding all these green sides
And gold sides of green sides,

And blessed mornings,
Meet for the eye of the young alligator,
And lightning colors
So, in me, come flinging
Forms, flames, and the flakes of flames.
I asked her what attracted her to the idea of the green vine. “That spiraling energy,” she continued, “those helix and tendrils to hold on to things. Creativity can’t happen without structure.”

I asked her about her drawings, in particular a few hanging on the walls. She said early humans were artists, making ephemeral marks with a stick in the sand.

“Is it about documentation?” I asked.

“It is the need to register, to make notations.”

“Was it for survival?”

“Absolutely,” she said. “It’s connected to language and walking.”

Our conversation kept returning to language. Oka Doner’s collections consisted of some things that were recognizable, nameable in form or material—a shell, a branch—but more often than not there was uncertainty as to what the object was exactly. Encountering each artifact was a cherished moment—if it could not be defined or named, then we were forced to overcome our need to label the world and we could just look. Was the thing in question made by nature, or manipulated by the artist? They could not be pinned to specific words and yet many of them looked like letters from an alphabet that had not been deciphered. We look for recognizable patterns, for meaning, and if we search hard enough we eventually invent our own. Oka Doner wants us to look closely and to question, as she does when she selects and juxtaposes these forms.

Our conversation returned to gifts delivered to us unexpectedly, as waves can do on the beach.

We spoke about fish. As denizens of a medium we could not fully attain, they were creatures of mystery. I mentioned the eel as a fish I had come to admire; limbless and sinuous, it almost resembles a green vine angoring for life.

“I like eels,” the artist said. She continued, “I caught one off of Gerard Drive in East Hampton. I used to fish … the plumbers would come at lunchtime, and they taught me how to catch an eel. They gave me an extra weight. They said they’re on the bottom. I also then got a fluke, because they’re also on the bottom.”

Of fishing in general, Oka Doner added, “It slows you down, you’re looking at the currents and the water. It’s like watching rain.”

We approached one of the tables laid out with objects.

“Some of these are made by nature and some are actually manipulated by a human?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said. “I hope to confuse future archaeologists.”

I pointed to a few objects that looked like small human torsos. Were they found on the beach? Did she make them? I couldn’t tell.

“These are pre-Columbian. I bought them from a dealer in LA who sold to Diego Rivera.”

“And this?” I asked, pointing to another object.

“I found this in the witchdoctors’ market in Mozambique.”

I asked her how she prepares for finding the objects.

“I don’t search for them,” she said, “they find me.”

I ask Oka Doner to tell me about some of her influences. She says only that she’s influenced by Egyptian and Japanese art and then the subject shifts. There are Biblical references in works hanging in her studio—the burning bush, for instance. There is also a portrait of
Adam—the first human (and first “namer” of animals)—which, she tells me, is made by placing roots covered in ink through a print-making press onto paper. “This is Adam from roots,” she said, “I had to break down the roots, they were wild, you can imagine, they were talking back, I had to tame them, I had to yell at them.”

It was a kind of human form made from a nest of plant limb matter, angry vines of sorts, a handful of ribs pulled from the earth. It was mesmerizing, a figure with no neatly defined edges. I began to see patterns in Oka Doner’s work—her plumbing the bottom of the sea for a fish, digging a hole in the sand, rendering the first human of the Old Testament with roots.

I could try to put Oka Doner into an art historical context, search for flavors of, or similarities with, the works of other artists I admire—including Kiki Smith, Judy Pfaff, Mark Dion, Ursula von Rydingsvard or even (going back in time) Ernst Haeckel or the nameless artists who made the earliest known drawings on cave walls some 30,000 years ago. But to do so, to try attempt to put her on the linear map of art history, would go against the ethos of her work. To label her would counter the import of her un-nameable altars, to limit the green vine of creativity. Her work unmoors our expected thoughts by going back to the beginning, over and over. Hers are earth works, made with a palette of bone, mud, clay, sand, stone, and beeswax—and they are all her own.

James Prosek is an artist and writer living and working in Easton, CT.
The collections of the Marine Invertebrate Museum at the Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science, University of Miami were begun in the late 1930s by the school’s founder Dr. F. G. Walton Smith. Dr. Smith, a young British scientist, had been invited by the President of the University, Dr. Bowman Ashe, to investigate a mysterious sponge disease that had infected the sponge beds off the Florida west coast. In his study, Dr. Smith collected samples of all the invertebrates he encountered, stored them in his UM biology office, and continued to collect during his student field trips. By 1941 the collections had outgrown his office and were moved to a separate room and designated a museum. Subsequently, as biological research flourished with the generous funding of the National Geographic Society, National Science Foundation, and the State of Florida, and collections were received from numerous researchers from the Americas, the museum grew and will continue to grow.

Nancy Voss, MS
Director of Marine Invertebrate Museum
Rosenstiel School of Marine and Atmospheric Science
University of Miami
Research Professor, Emerita

above:
Michele Oka Doner and Nancy Voss

below:
Michele Oka Doner’s Manhattan studio. Photo by Emily Andrews, Courtesy of Introspective, the 1stdibs magazine.
Exhibition Checklist

VIDEO & SOUND

*Mysterium Alive*, 2017
Video by Michele Oka Doner and Jonathan David Kane. Surround Sound composition by Oliver Lyons created from music by William Cepeda on an array of shell instruments. Four-channel video installation with surround sound. Dimensions variable. Length approximately 10 minutes.

MYSSTERIUM SOUND COMPOSITION

The sound for Mysterium presents shifting undulations that continuously morph, collect and separate throughout the space. They mirror the ways in which the infinite myriads of frequencies emanating through the ocean constantly layer over and travel through and past one another. The musical center of the composition is a spatialized treatment of multiple takes from a shell blowing recording session by the Latin Jazz Master, William Cepeda, from his composition, “Del Mar a las Estrellas” (From the Sea to the Stars), commissioned by Michele Oka Doner in 2011. The resulting new composite reveals the magic inside the improvisational nature of Cepeda’s masterful performance.

– Oliver Lyons

PHOTOGRAPHIC PRINTS

All works:
Michele Oka Doner and Aaron Yassin, 2017
Archival pigment prints
Print dimensions: 15 x 22 ½ inches
Framed dimensions: 15 ⅝ x 23 ⅝ x 1 ½ inches
© Michele Oka Doner
Offering

Root Stock
Diacritical Marks

Radiating
Dance

Shadow
Electricity

Solar
Relic

Lightning
Guardian

Warrior
Inner Vision

Firmament
Filament

Inner Life
Heliotropic

Solid Wave
Motion

Ripe
Wizard’s Trove

Materialization
Elysium

Cosmic Dance
Inner Oracle

Oracle
Homunculus

Attached
Monumental

Nodes
Corona

Sorcerer
Double Portals

Inner Glow
Germinating

A Source Within
Genesis

Origin
Running Away

Light Wand
Hands

Second Kingdom
Grace

Embryo
Another Kingdom

Cobra
Crevice

Cave
"Okaan" 70% 4-channel projection
Writing title: "Folding tubes" ghosts will help them in different images
Conception - dreamscape of golden grass
"Floating delicate branch"
(7 Series available)
"Floating sphere"
Conception can't
Kelp Rite - choreography amazing use in conception - glistening world embedded magical eggs pulsates, possible opening sequence kelp with floating sphere
Pennshell like monolith in 2001! can end video with structured shape golden glow - optimistic
Surround with card 11 immersive moment - in the womb being fertilized
card 12 - fertilization pulsing image