

The Monotypic Mirror

Yola Monakhov Stockton

LAST PROJECTS LOS ANGELES

March 15 – April 12, 2024

Opening Reception: Friday, March 15, 7–11pm

Water observes no political boundary or manmade border. It is neither pure nor clear in meaning or intent. Along the sloped depths of the Laurentian Great Lakes lies a story whose ambiguous protagonist, the invasive bivalve, *dreissena bugensis*, has reached a level of success beyond our wildest dreams.

Displacing the straight-edged zebra, its nearest rival, the round and brassy quagga mussel commands the bottom stratum of the lakes, the benthos, in what has been called an “unprecedented invasion”¹ of North America. The quagga first entered this ecologically naïve and vast freshwater system, a lake connected unto itself, in the ballast water of transatlantic commercial ships through manmade canals. Within several years of its first sighting, the quagga dominated the ecosystems of all the Great Lakes except Superior. Hitching rides on boat trailers and currents, it soon lounged in California and the Gulf Coast. In such hospitable domains, the filter feeder ably competes for resources at the expense of fish and other species and against the best efforts of departments of water resources and bureaus of reclamation to control it. Its medium, the water where it lives, has achieved a deathly clarity. “They will be big players for probably hundreds of years,”² says Alexander Karatayev, head of the Great Lakes Center’s monitoring program, whose quintennial survey of Lake Ontario, the lowest lake in the Laurentian system, was joined by the artist.

The work presented in The Monotypic Mirror is the result of Yola Monakhov Stockton’s second trip aboard the research vessel *Lake Guardian* with the Center’s monitoring initiative, and her second

¹ Nalepa, T F, and Donald W Schloesser. *Quagga and Zebra Mussels : Biology, Impacts, and Control*. Boca Raton, Crc Press/Taylor & Francis Group, 2014.

² Andrew Blok. “30 Years Later: Mussel Invasion Legacy Reaches Far beyond Great Lakes.” Great Lakes Now, 2 Feb. 2021, www.greatlakesnow.org/2021/02/invasive-mussels-legacy-beyond-great-lakes/.

exhibition on this topic in Los Angeles. Playing concurrent roles of documentarian, unexpert science worker, and artist, Monakhov Stockton deepens her view of the tools of this analytical endeavor, including the ship's operation and orientation high above the underwater landscape where the mussels reside. The photographs and video from the exhibition explore the scientists' process of counting and measuring, as well as the fissures and silences in monitoring this vast, slow-moving ecological trauma. Her work opens space for other perspectives and forms of knowing shared by the fauna, flora, minerals, and peoples who inhabit the watershed across geological and historic time.

The exhibition consists of 12 color and B&W photographs created with a 4"x5" view camera and printed in the darkroom and as archival pigment prints. The photographs' almost clinical style reconsiders a documentary and still-life canon forged by Walker Evans, whose Depression-era photographs of tools for Fortune magazine drew attention to vernacular objects and human resilience. In "Measure," for example, Monakhov Stockton recontextualizes the caliper through its relationship to the small mollusk, whose resilience far exceeds human capacity to measure and contain. The uneasy entanglement between instrument and object belies popular human conceits of uniqueness and autonomy.

The accompanying video, *Notes from the Bottom*, examines labor from the perspective of camera, mollusk, and human work aboard the ship, voiced as an imaginary haunting written and performed by crew members, including Olesia Makhutova. The video weaves together underwater footage gathered remotely by the ship's underwater cameras with scenes from the ship's laboratories and decks, offering a sensorium of alternative forms of seeing and knowing.

Monakhov Stockton first met the team from the Great Lakes Center when she arrived at Buffalo State University in 2016. She was surprised to learn that, like her, they hailed from the former Soviet Union, a geographic origin shared by quagga and zebra mussels, which originated in the Ponto-Caspian sea. The mussels, scientists, and artist had all made the same journey to these waters. During last September's monitoring session, Monakhov Stockton worked closely with Makhutova, a member of the team who is now about to complete a reverse journey back to Russia. Monakhov Stockton has left Buffalo for Honolulu, Hawai'i, where she heads the Photography program at UH Mānoa. Their collaboration aboard the ship asks what is lost when you win, and what counting leaves unquantified.