

HYPERALLERGIC

Making Art from Global Trade Routes

Hugh Scott-Douglas takes viewers on a journey through the oceanic trade and zeroes in on the interference of bodies and labor in global transactions.

Michael Valinsky | 2 days ago



Hugh Scott-Douglas: *Boat Money*, installation view, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (© Hugh Scott-Douglas, courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, photo by Joshua White/JWPictures.com)

LOS ANGELES — “Thinking bodies don’t work. Working bodies don’t think,” said Toronto-based artist Hugh Scott-Douglas during a walkthrough of his current solo exhibition, *Boat Money*, at Blum & Poe.

Boat Money features new and old work, including inkjet prints on canvas that consider the language of global maritime trading routes, sculptural renditions of shipping mechanisms, and a video that functions as the junction of the artist’s lines of inquiry. *Boat Money* takes viewers on the artist’s journey through the visual language of oceanic trade and zeroes in on the interference of bodies and labor in global transactions.

Known for his cyanotype prints on canvas, Scott-Douglas has spent the majority of his career negotiating the different levels of control an artist can have over his chosen materials. In his previous work, he used a computer algorithm to design patterned motifs to be printed on film and exposed to the sun for fifteen minutes. The idea was to see how an environment could influence art-making practices. Essentially, how far can the artist remove himself from the manufacturing process?



Hugh Scott-Douglas: *Bođ #€\$*, installation view, Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (© Hugh Scott-Douglas, courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, photo by Joshua White/JWPictures.com)

In *Bođ #€\$*, Scott-Douglas takes a different approach. The gallery space is divided into three sections, with sculptures and paintings overlapping in the first room. The paintings, each part of a larger series entitled *Trade Winds* (2017), map out global maritime trade routes, weather patterns, and oceanic currents. “I was thinking very much about the way that capitalism, surplus, and accumulation look to quantify and, through the quantification, bring an abstraction to nature, as a way of enforcing class control,” he explained in our walkthrough.

Considering capitalism as the driving force of all trade makes us consider the function of those who monitor the routes of trade ships from remote terminals. In relaying information from one carrier to the next, this monitor effectively controls the ebb and flow of global trade, protocol, and the dispersal of information. Scott-Douglas uses FLEETMON, an industry software that allows boat owners to monitor their flow and progress while they're working, to extract images of various oceanic phenomena. "I became really interested in using this tool as a way of looking at the ocean and thinking about the way that industry is looking at the ocean," he states. "I'm not sure that what is on the screen is any less interesting than looking at the ocean. There's a sort of monotony to both."



Hugh Scott-Douglas, "MEDITERRANEAN SUEZ ASIANTIC ROUTE" from *Trade Winds* (2017), UV-cured inkjet print and digitally printed resin on canvas
80 x 53 inches (© Hugh Scott-Douglas, Courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo)

Whereas Scott-Douglas let the environment shape the artwork in his cyanotype prints, he now reclaims control of his media, using his artwork to influence the viewer's perception of the environment. Observing the ways in which the ocean is standardized by professionals, the artist screen-grabs the different layers of symbols for wind, waves, and current, prints each image, scans it, and manipulates its colors. "Each color is allocated its own layer," he says. "Each layer is printed and articulated as a separate print. These have sometimes 16, 20, 30 passes through the printer." The resulting work has both three-dimensionality and palimpsestic depth. In superimposing layers, he slows down the speed at which this program is to be interacted with and undermines its utilitarian function.

Conceptualizing his own version of maritime trading language, Scott-Douglas transitions from observer to participant, particularly in his sculptures, which he produced over the course of two years using LoadCargo, a program that algorithmically determines the most efficient way of loading a shipping cargo container. Here, the artist's own body is the information being shared, or shipped, received, and paid for: Scott-Douglas measured his body and dispersed it across five mild steel sculptures.

By putting *Trade Winds* in conversation with sculptural work, the artist raises questions regarding participation versus observation; the arbitrary versus the calculated; the natural versus the manmade. The exhibition concludes with a video Scott-Douglas shot on his iPhone. The video captures invisible ghost jellyfish pumped with LED lights, which visually and physically define these otherwise invisible creatures. Synthesizing the paintings' themes, it offers a shifting perspective of the issues at stake. Viewers gather around the tank to watch the jellyfish, taking videos and participating in social media culture. They are active observers, much like the trade overseers seated at terminals.



Hugh Scott-Douglas: *Boat #1*, installation view, 2018 Blum & Poe, Los Angeles (© Hugh Scott-Douglas, courtesy of the artist and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo, photo by Joshua White/JWPictures.com)

“With global warming, which is the result in part of shipping, trade winds are getting messed up and currents don’t move the way that they used to. This means that jellyfish don’t move the way they used to,” explains Scott-Douglas. Ultimately, [Boat€\\$](#) sheds light on the pressing problem of oceanic disturbance. Ninety percent of all imports brought to the United States are transported by ships, which means that we rely on these systems much more than we think — and it’s easy to turn a blind eye to the effects of this trade on our planet. Scott-Douglas has taken a proactive and fascinating step in revealing the extent to which bodies and trade are implicated in the regulation of information systems, while providing us with a thought-provoking visualization of the planet’s fragile ecosystem.

[Hugh Scott-Douglas: Boat€\\$](#) continues at *Blum & Poe* (2727 S. La Cienega Blvd., Los Angeles, California) through March 3.