



It Was Never Really A Decision...



A conversation with Josephine Meckseper (Teil Eins).

By JAMES SALOMON April 7, 2021

Italics in Josephine's voice

Pitch Pines capture my imagination, especially in the colder months when people aren't around as much to crash their party. They are tough trolls, small giants, rough and wily. They remind me of my youth in Westhampton, riding my bike down Dune Road with a surfboard under my arm and box of Entenmann's cookies in my backpack. They all hang out together, stuck into the sand along the Atlantic coast of America. Driving to Provincetown, for example, you have to enter and exit through a long corridor where these onlooking trolls are watching you judgmentally.

This time I was in Amagansett, in a neighborhood inhabited by these furry, rebellious trees. It was a bone chilling spring afternoon but the light was majestic. I imagined using that light for my portrait of Josephine, a woman that I haven't seen in over twenty years. The artist Pia Dehne introduced me to her around 1998, when I first arrived in New York. We met each other briefly though hardly spoke a word to one another.

When I called her up a few weeks ago, we launched into conversation like we were old friends. It was oddly comfortable. I'd been following her work and had seen her face in the online art tabloids, but in all these years we never crossed paths since Pia. The reason I called was because an old friend and colleague Chris Byrne mentioned her name, and I was curious. She'll be doing a residency at Chris' storied **Elaine De Kooning House** in the Northwest Woods section of East Hampton, and it gave me the perfect excuse to reconnect.

So I pull into her driveway where she comes out to greet me, we exchange pleasantries, and set off for a walk on the beach a few blocks away. En route, we stop to look at needly branch on the side of the road.

*I started collecting tree branches that came down during heavy winter storms during the winter months of the pandemic, and traced their contours with spray paint. Earlier in the pandemic, I resorted to recycling objects and hardware store items strewn in my studio creating similar ghostly silhouettes on paintings and in short films. This process somewhat reminds me of the ending in Michel Houellebecq's book *Map and Territory* in which the main character eventually surrenders to his misanthropic tendencies and barricades himself in the French countryside to produce "meditations on the end of Industrial Age – depicting a civilization falling apart and triumphantly overgrown by vegetation."*



Work in Progress, 2021

We get to the beach, all masked up. There is a driftwood log about 40' long blocking our path in the dunes. It was a beautiful piece, bleached and smoothened out from the elements. Once upon a time I once got a bunch of high school kids to drag a driftwood tree over the dunes. They asked me if I could buy them a case of beer for it, and I surely obliged. The tree wound up alongside my pool, the trunk serving as a bench.

Since there were no high school kids in sight, we forgot about reliving that moment and marched on, westward, into the sun, into the wind. The light coming through the clouds, those heavenly rays. A Coast Guard helicopter was circling.

The helicopters are a regular occurrence. I'm somewhat obsessed with how low to the water they often fly. There are days when you can see the faces of the Coast Guard or Marine, their hands clutching rifles, their eyes surveying every inch of the coastal line. The loud humming of the rotor blades are a stark contrast to the quiet that reigns the rest of the day.

We come across a shallow tidal pool, it wasn't inviting, though beautiful to look at. The sun, sea, and sky deliver a cold iridescent mirror. We gaze for a moment.

I'm curious to know about Josephine's upbringing. She told me that her father, artist Friedrich Meckseper had passed in 2019. I knew who he was, or at least I had learned who he was.

My hometown of Worpswede was a Utopian artist community at the beginning of the 20th century which is still manifested in a rare combination of Jugendstil, German Expressionist and Modernist architecture. In some ways The Springs in East Hampton, not far from the Elaine de Kooning House, remind me of Worpswede. Rainer Maria Rilke lived there for many years and wrote a book about it. Werner Fassbinder shot one of his films, "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant," in my friend's home next door to where I was growing up. My father moved to Worpswede from Berlin in the 1960s, following an invitation for an exhibition at Galerie Die Insel. It is there, where met my mother Barbara, a photographer and descendant of one the artist colony's founder, the artist and architect Heinrich Vogeler. Needless to say, in many ways, being an artist was never a decision for me, I started making drawings when I was 2-years old. Especially with my father and the entire environment I grew up in, paved the way of my destiny.

Next we encounter a weathered lounge chair, half buried into the sand. It was perfectly functional, complete with plastic straps that will last forever, though the metal was corroded and had barnacles on it. Barnacles. She had to have it. Luckily no high school brawn was needed for this job, so I slung it over my shoulder and we headed back. I said I'd carry it on the condition that she turn it into an artwork. Of course that was already in her plans.

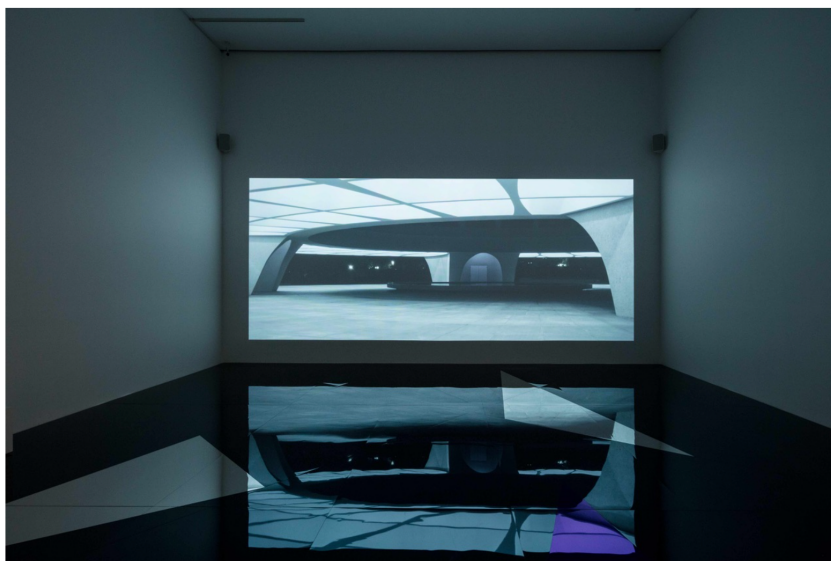
Did you ever hear the story of the Nazi submarine that landed here?

I had not.

Right here on Atlantic Beach, when you look out at the water, there was a sandbar. That's where the submarine got stuck. The vessel was part of a larger conspiracy in 1942 named Operation Pastorius. Four Nazi conspirators made it to the beach and buried their uniforms in the dunes. But they were confronted by a shocked unarmed Coast Guard officer who kept his cool to buy himself more time to call for help. The Nazi soldiers proceeded to walk to the train station in civilian clothing to continue their mission to set off self-made explosives at several US hydroelectric plants, rail roads and Penn Station. The officer reported them, and they were caught by the authorities and eventually executed. It's crazy that this all happened right here on this beach.

Josephine is an experienced storyteller.

*FAT magazine is an ongoing conceptual magazine project that I started in the early 90s which allowed me to collaborate with other artists to create a somewhat Dadaist outlet for ideas and images. It was inspired by the French revolutionist Jean-Paul Marat's newspaper *L'Ami du peuple* and the avant-gardist tradition of breaking down barriers between art and life. For example, Dan Graham's early magazine pieces take on a new life in the magazine's tabloid layout style. The magazine was distributed in newsstands, but also exhibited in wallpaper form.*



Pellea[s] installation still at NGV Triennial, Melbourne, Australia, 2017-18.

I've also made over a dozen short films over the years, mainly shot on Super-8 and 16mm. My first narrative film Pellea[s] was catalyzed by the sociopolitical upheaval resulting from the November 6, 2016 election, and the events that unfolded since. The film combines eerie footage captured from the presidential inauguration, the historical women's march that followed, and a reimagined adaptation of Maurice Maeterlinck's play Pelléas et Mélisande. The film also gives voice to a debate on traditional notions of gender in film and theater by revolutionizing the characters of the original play and by analyzing D.C.'s monumental architecture through a Lacanian lens. The film is rooted in my earlier works; the set designs and film props relate to my vitrine works, at the same time it presents a continuation of my earlier protest documentations.

We are almost back at our sculptural driftwood marker. She now notices nearby a horseshoe crab with a patch of barnacles on it. We took that as a sign. She ripped out the underlying biological sci-fi mechanism, whose engineering had endured hundreds of millions of years of evolution, and toted the shell and tail along.

When we return to her house, I set the lounge chair down by her covered pool, and she plops the crab on it. She moves it around a few times before settling on the right position. We're both very pleased with the haul. The crab's past is the chair's future, I thought to myself.

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Josephine and I had a fine afternoon. We bid our farewells and agreed to meet again at the Elaine de Kooning House when she's all set up and making new things over there. I got my portrait, though it wasn't as glamorous as photographs of her that I had seen before. In fairness, I went into it with a certain degree of uncertainty because we both were freezing our asses off. It resulted in equal parts Magritte, Freund, and Pink Floyd. You can throw some others into the pot.

The next day she called me to say that the crab was gone.