

## THE CHANGING SEAS

Exhibition Review by Jayne Wilkinson

*Voyage, or Three Years at Sea, Part IV* at the Charles H. Scott Gallery, Emily Carr University of Art and Design

Curator: Cate Rimmer

October 31, 2012 – December 16, 2012

*Lured* at the Vancouver Maritime Museum

Curator: Patricia Owens

November 3, 2012 – Winter 2013

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The bodies of water that divide life on land from an itinerant life at sea have, for centuries, been repositories of mythic legends and fearsome tales. Yet the rapid expansion and globalization of trade has caused the oceans to bear another type of mythologizing, that of the vast, utilitarian, and de-populated spaces of transport. Exploring the ways in which human relations to the sea are increasingly defined by commerce, the tandem exhibitions *Voyage, or Three Years at Sea, Part IV* and *Lured* consider the political and social processes of change apparent in the global shipping industry and the particular impact of these changes on labour. In a unique curatorial turn, each exhibition shows different components of the same projects by contemporary artists Stan Douglas, Uriel Orlow, and Allan Sekula. At the Charles H. Scott Gallery, the exhibition is the fourth installment of a multi-year project reflecting on formal and informal histories, myths, and visual interpretations of the sea through a set of thematic exhibitions, while at the Vancouver Maritime Museum the exhibition is situated in relation to the display and interpretation of objects from its permanent collection. In both spaces romantic and adventurous notions of the sea are cast away in order to investigate its function for commercial transportation—a function that continually supplies the cheap consumer goods upon which global markets depend while simultaneously serving to alter human perception of the ocean as a vast space of natural beauty.

*Review: Changing Seas*

Sekula's project, *Ship of Fools*, most directly addresses the transformations taking place in global supply chains by emphasizing the often-invisible labourers that occupy the in-between spaces of ports, docks, and ships. His project followed the *Global Mariner*, a former cargo ship outfitted as a floating exhibition on working conditions at sea. Docking in different countries and occasionally denied entry, its journey was to protest the system of flying "flags of convenience"—a system that helps multi-national companies avoid not only financial risk but also accountability for the physical risks they demand of their workers. At the Charles H. Scott gallery large-scale portraits of crew members, chefs, technicians, and activists are supplemented by lyrical texts and evocative objects that translate the complex political, social, and labour issues at hand into conceptually and visually compelling material. The sea as a foil for both the firmly entrenched global economic structure and conflicting cultural imaginaries is further evident in Sekula's films, *The Forgotten Space* at Charles H. Scott and *The Lottery of the Sea* at the Maritime Museum. Both remind the viewer that desire and risk, be it economic or physical, are still very much a part of the sea's allure.

In a city where that allure can be found in the highly privileged sites of leisure that dot the ocean's edges, curator Cate Rimmer

worked closely with the Vancouver Maritime Museum to incorporate archival material documenting Vancouver's oft-ignored history of industrial sea trade. At the Maritime Museum, photographs of Vancouver in the 1950s give a visual account of the *Clifford J. Rogers*, the first cargo container ship ever built and in operation for ten years between North Vancouver and Skagway, Alaska. Showing workers loading and unloading the square containers, the images locate a historical but specifically local precedent to Sekula's work, one that reveals Vancouver's role in the development of the container shipping processes upon which the current global economy depends. This archival material seamlessly integrates questions about the relationship between art objects and historical objects, between interpretive texts and narration, with a strategy that highlights the changing role of historical museums as they increasingly respond to contemporary concerns.

Uriel Orlow's *The Long and the Short of It*, parts of which are installed in both exhibition spaces, further shifts the boundaries between conceptual and historical objects by altering the institutional objectives of museum and gallery alike. Orlow displays a wide range of photographs, publications, ephemera, slide projections, and hand-drawn illustrations in an elaborate installation based on the 1967 stoppage of fourteen

international cargo ships in the Suez Canal. This little-reported event at the outbreak of the Six Day War trapped the ships and their cargo in the canal for eight years and, as a result, an informal, unintentional community of workers developed based on physical and temporal dislocation. Unexpectedly, the use of archival slides and hand-drawn elements here evokes an unusual sense of nostalgia. Memories of childhood ferry trips, first experiences with the sea, and the communal viewing of photographs all mix with the historical vernacular presented to suggest again the transformative potential the sea holds for both a personal and collective imaginary.

Unlike Sekula's and Orlow's sprawling multi-modal projects, the contribution from Stan Douglas is comprised of just two large photographs in the *Lured* exhibition and a single video projection in the *Voyage...* exhibition. *Journey into Fear* tells the unsettling story of two characters forced together in the confines of a cargo ship and at odds with each other over the duration and purpose of the trip. The narrative is continually re-told through the repetition of the same fifteen minute film loop overlaid with slightly altered vocal tracks that never quite sync to the actors' movements. In the context of the exhibition, the characters easily become the labourers populating Sekula's and Orlow's projects, here trapped in a slippery, changing narrative

that is transforming itself with each new iteration. While Douglas's visual strategy is unique, the extended, durational looping is reminiscent of the processes of the sea itself. Any voyage at sea is potentially transformative but the process is a necessarily slow one: the horizon extends beyond the scope of human vision, ships lethargically traverse the oceans' surfaces, and the view repeats endlessly and alters only slightly. The processes of change that globalization manifests are likewise revealed in the gap between the slow, unceasing movement of goods around the globe and the immediate, rapid exchange of information that has come to characterize our era. The ocean may still hold its mysteries and mystique, but these works serve to remind us of the changing communities of labour at sea and the demands of an international shipping industry that have permanently altered the global economy.