



Elsa Guillaume, *Tritons VIII*, 2020, ceramic, 21 1/4 × 17 3/4 × 25 1/2". From the series "Tritons," 2020.

## Elsa Guillaume

### BACKSLASH

As its taxonomic title indicated, Elsa Guillaume's recent show "*Tritonades & coelacanthe*" (Tritons & Coelacanth) was teeming with prehistoric-looking newts and fish. The artist's interest in these species lies in their relationship to the evolutionary aquatic-to-terrestrial migration made by vertebrates millions of years ago. The coelacanth (once thought to have gone extinct before being rediscovered in the mid-twentieth century) is a transitional organism that links lobe-finned fish to tetrapods. Tritons, commonly known as newts, migrate from water to land over the course of their lifetimes. Usually born as aquatic larvae, they move onto the shore as they mature. In featuring protagonists that embody a key evolutionary tipping point, Guillaume's recent exhibition was not so much an ode to Darwinism as a poignant reflection on transition and identity.

Working in clay and with soft-lead pencil on paper, Guillaume bases her imagery on biological illustrations, scientific documentation, and her own observations of the sea. In addition to being an avid scuba diver, she notably spent two months as artist-in-residence aboard the French research schooner *Tara* as it sailed from Easter Island to Papeete, Tahiti,

in 2016. And while there is a clinical precision to Guillaume's work, it is offset by references to mythology, science fiction, and comic books. Her peculiar brand of whimsical naturalism also draws freely from familiar tales of the sea in the Bible and Greek mythology.

In eight table-mounted clay sculptures from the "Tritons" series, 2020, a gray, cartoonish newt—whose perky ears, humanoid torso and limbs, long tail, and vacant eyes are reminiscent of an Art Spiegelman mouse—engaged with various sea creatures. In *Tritons VIII*, a seated newt cradles a more realistically represented coelacanth whose long body coils around it like an affectionate pet. In addition to the contrast in styles used to depict the two animals, surface textures and lusters further distinguish their clay bodies. The triton's smoothly modeled form has been treated with a matte glaze that affects an earthy dryness. The coelacanth, by contrast, appears slippery and scaly thanks to dark and glossy crosshatching made with a ceramic underglaze pencil. Guillaume denotes water at the base of the sculpture with rugged smears of white-glazed clay. Suggesting a nostalgic connection to the sea, the triton sits serenely as the frothy waves lap over his tail and feet. The Hellenistic coelacanth, meanwhile, writhes with mouth agape, desperate to splash back into the water even as it hugs the triton. Guillaume visualizes a familiar ambivalence about transition as a fleeting and bittersweet adieu.

Coelacanth and triton appeared together again in four sculptures from the 2019 "Hieronymus" series, which abounds with fragmented and reconfigured bodies. Paying homage to Bosch's monsters, Guillaume has created hybrids that are more comical than creepy. In *Hieronymus III* and *Hieronymus IV*, a triton wears the body of another sea creature—a giant squid and fish, respectively—over its head like a Halloween mask. With just the tritons' humanoid legs and webbed feet visible, these sculptures evoke scenes from the biblical story of Jonah and from Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* (1870). As in the "Tritons," Guillaume has used glazing and firing techniques to distinguish the intermixed bodies, accentuating material differences between limbs, fins, and tentacles. For example, in *Hieronymus III*, a metallic-black glaze coats the triton's legs, with the result that they stand out brilliantly against the carbonized appearance of the squid. But as much as Guillaume insists on the distinct physical qualities of her subjects, her sculptures ultimately celebrate the formation of something new and hybrid. These representations of

beings modifying and constructing their identities affirm a powerful fact: Change is not only the result of evolution. It can also be brought about by a revolution.

—Mara Hoberman

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