



Raine Bedsole: *The Space Between Us*, 2016. Satul, fabric, plaster, glass, watercolor. Installation, Callan Contemporary.

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## *Raine Bedsole: Currents*

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BY REBECCA LEE REYNOLDS

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RAINE BEDSOLE  
"Unseen Currents"  
Callan Contemporary  
New Orleans, LA

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**BUILDINGS VERSUS WATER.** Boats versus houses. Movement versus stability. Architecture may provide protection from the elements of nature, but living in New Orleans teaches us just how fraught that relationship is. Water can easily reduce a building to rubble, and boats can become rescue vehicles. Raine Bedsole's work is rooted in the local—in the experience of water on the Gulf Coast in New Orleans and Alabama—but every local reference is layered with representations of buildings and bodies of water far from home. Peering up close, the viewer will spy intriguing names on the map fragments used throughout the exhibition. The word fragments "Hui-Tzu" and "Chih-Chou" suggest a map of China. A collaged illustration of the domed structure of the Theatre de Bordeaux takes us to a fantasy of 18th century France. Symbols of water and home and travel lift the work to the level of allegory: the childlike outline of a gabled house, drops of rain, waves, towers, an abstracted boat shape.

These layers are not just metaphorical, but also physical. The works on paper use a ground of collaged strips of paper in

rectangular shapes, sometimes painted white and sometimes composed of antique papers that have yellowed and darkened over time. These papers include blank sheets, maps, envelopes that are stamped and addressed, title papers of books such as *The History and Topography of the United States of North America* by John Howard Hinton, and architectural drawings of Neoclassical facades, including the aforementioned Theatre de Bordeaux. Collaged on top of this ground are cut strips of more antique papers and maps, arranged to give the illusion of an image. The results are displayed in shadowbox frames to accommodate the relief aspect of the work.

Some, like *Rain Tower* and *Navigating Gravity*, depict structures. *Rain Tower* mimics the tower of Babel as illustrated for Athanasius Kircher's 1679 book about the story (a more familiar depiction is the one by Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 1563). Commonly regarded as the origin of languages, the biblical story of the tower was used by Kircher as a jumping off point for a study of linguistics. In Bedsole's depiction, raindrops surround the tower, a dark blue presence that seems to hover against the pale ground. Its crisscrossing spiral shape draws the viewer in to see the various forms of text on the cut paper pieces suggesting its round arches—some prose text, some cursive script, some equations, some maps.

*Navigating Gravity* borrows from Francesco Borromini's lantern for the Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza, a chapel in Rome. The lantern's corkscrew shape has become an icon of the Baroque style,



Raïne Bedsole: *Rain Towers*, 2016. Antique papers and maps, graphite, watercolor on paper, 51" high.

and Bedsole iterates the spiral in diagonal strips of maps, with bands alternating between dominant colors of red and blue. Bedsole gives the lantern a slightly different pedestal than the dome in Borromini's design. A doorway is placed under the spiral, with Ionic columns on either side, and then framed by rectangular strips of cut paper. A charcoal drawing of a palm tree connects the door's cornice to the spiral—an incongruous element that tells us that we are in the land of fantasy. Collaged and drawn raindrops surround the form.

Other works on paper depict ropes and coral. In *Reef*, Bedsole uses the given colors of the map pieces to imply the shape and volume of the coral. Bright blue pieces are placed on the bottom and light blue on the top, cut from bodies of water with names like Baltic, Caspian Sea, and North Channel. Pale yellow and earth-toned pieces alternate between the blue pieces to differentiate the coral's fingers. Reading the names on the maps summons up fantasies about the places, and about traveling to them—the kind of fantasies that are satisfying on their own, not needing implementation.

Though armchair travel can be a delight, the real thing has historically proven dangerous. A sense of fear emanates from the illustration collaged at the center of *Falling Rain*, a work that

features big blue drops falling on the surface of the water and creating reverberating ripples. The much smaller scale of the illustration draws us close to see a young boy dressed in white robes turning to look directly at us. He has been helping a priest on what seems to be the deck of an ocean liner. Several priests seem to be engaged in a blessing as cloaked figures to their right pray. They must be scared of the transatlantic passage taking them to a new home, and turning to prayer for protection. If they are not immigrants from Europe, then they could be the Acadians expelled from Nova Scotia that wound up in the area around Lafayette, which became known as Cajun country. The artwork's ground includes an antique paper that is a handwritten essay on "The Theme of Evangeline." It is clearly a school assignment to respond to Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's 1847 poem about an Acadian girl, Evangeline, searching for her love Gabriel. Evangeline's life has particular resonance in Louisiana because of the history of the Cajuns, and today a monument and a tree in St. Martinville honor her. This essay does not focus on the romance, but on her later life of service. The student writes, "In the study of Evangeline our duty as pupils is to see in what Evangeline found happiness," described later in the essay as "a life of self sacrifice, ministering to the sick and sorrowful." This moral lesson connects back to the image of



*Rain Boat II*, 2016. Twigs, maps, wire, steel, glass, 17" high.

the priests.

*Storm* features a charcoal drawing of the sea over strips of antique papers and maps. An illustration is collaged near the center, showing two large gondolas that seem to be a funerary procession. The first one carries a body on a pyre, surrounded by maidens. The image evokes the association between death and bodies of water, especially the River Styx in Greek mythology, used as a boundary between the worlds of life and death. Charon would ferry souls across the river to Hades. But this funerary boat is collaged next to maps that mention much more contemporary destinations on the water: Fort Lauderdale, West Palm Beach, Nassau in the Bahamas. These waters can be waters of death, especially when hurricanes race across the Atlantic toward Florida, but our popular culture usually associates the names with tropical vacations, happiness, the overindulgence of college students on spring break, and the wealthy lifestyles of West Palm Beach. The pairing of mythological narrative and banal contemporary places creates an intriguing sense of dissonance.

The ancient Greeks used myths to explain the vagaries of nature and forces beyond our control, including death. Bedsole uses names from Greek mythology to title the sculptures of boats featured throughout the exhibition. The miniature boats are cast in bronze, about a foot long, in the shape of a pirogue or canoe, but also recalling the split open shape of an okra pod. *Callisto* has a dark copper patina and starburst barnacles, and is named after a nymph of Artemis who was transformed into a bear after Zeus had his way with her. *Delphi* holds blue seed pods inside and underneath the boat, and is named after the sanctuary of Apollo at Mount Parnassus where the oracle was consulted. *Circe* refers to the goddess of sorcery, while the twig-encrusted *Theia* with its frosty blue patina refers to the goddess of sight and the bright blue sky—she was the mother of the sun, the dawn, and the moon.

At a larger scale, four boats are hung from the ceiling, and strings of glass tears or raindrops hang from the skeletal frame of the boats—the same shapes used in many of the works on paper,

pelting their landscapes with rain. The glass pieces were made in Rome and are visibly hand-blown, with thick walls and air bubbles. *Persephone* is named after the goddess of the underworld, wife of Hades, and associated with spring. The skeletal armature of this boat is wrapped in map paper, with strings in various shades of green and blue tied to the frame and attached to glass teardrop shapes, some with pieces of maps pasted onto the glass. Its companion, *Rain Boat II*, has a frame made of vines instead of steel, and both blue and clear glass drops hanging from brown strings. The glass bulbs catch the light in the gallery and disperse it around the space, while reflections on the back wall create more visual interest. Against the back wall are two larger boats, *The Space Between Us I* and *II*—one blue, one white. Each boat's skeletal frame is wrapped in fabric with plaster-coated ribbons hanging down towards the ground. Some carry the same glass shape found on the other boats, but the ribbons are often tied in pieces to create long lines reaching down to the floor.

The boats refer to the idea of travel, as do the map papers used throughout the show. Boats can be symbols of escape, or movement—a hope for a better life, and thus a symbol of change and transformation. But what's the best part of travel? Coming home to a familiar setting or creating a new home. Offerings is a collection of small bronze houses installed in a group on the gallery wall. The castings capture the texture of the original material—simple cardboard pieces bent to create a rectangular body for the house and a triangular gabled roof. Drawings inside each one use Bedsole's iconography of water, and blue patinas support the theme. One focuses on drops of rain; another depicts waves; one showcases an upside-down tree (or perhaps its roots?). These houses reject architecture's usual function as shelter and instead invite nature inside. The title suggests a connection to small sculptures used in burial practices in ancient cultures, or given as offerings at altars to the gods. As such, they function as prayers for protection from nature and death, allowing us to come to terms with the forces that daily buffet our lives. □