

Interview

Glenn Kaino, On Concepts and Coral

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In a small space at the biennial exhibition Prospect.3 in New Orleans, seven aquariums in artist Glenn Kaino's installation Tank give off a mechanical hum, generating a white noise that creates an oddly comforting background to their ethereal, fluorescent glows. Each contains thriving coral colonies, bursting with reds and blues. The undersea-biome aesthetic of the installation is striking in itself, but what makes it especially interesting is that the bedrock in which the coral is rooted is not actually rock at all. Rather, the reefs are flourishing on chunks of discarded military tanks, or more accurately, clear resin facsimiles cast by Kaino—which makes a surprisingly nourishing environment.

Ten years ago, Kaino learned about how the military observed reef beds growing on weapons dumped in ocean areas where reefs had previously been wiped out. He was attracted to "a poetic contradiction that the smallest organisms of the world were reclaiming the instruments of displacement of some of the ostensibly largest [humans], but also that these instruments of war were becoming a biologically positive thing, helping rebuild these reefs." Two years back, he resolved to recreate the ecosystem for an artwork, which came to fruition as Tank, a commissioned piece for P.3 that is on view through January 25, 2015.

Staging the installation in New Orleans seems especially fitting, as the city is still mending from its own oceanic natural disaster. Notions of rebuilding and recovery have clear thematic reso-

nance with Tank, but, as Kaino watched his pet corals develop, he realized their growth patterns also superficially mirror that of a city's. "As they developed, the shapes started to look like maps," he said. "In a rebuilding state, [like in New Orleans], there are so many social contracts and different assumed perimeters in terms of social space and geography...it resonated with how the corals were growing."

For Kaino, this tendency brought the piece to a global scale in reference to conceits of war and rigid geographical borders. "When [the different corals] touched borders, there was actually a high degree of conflict. The corals were fighting each other for territory by stinging each other, or sometimes they would push their stomachs out and burn each other with chemicals. They don't have brains... they are acting on instinct, right?" Kaino explained. "Philosophically it was striking. It made me question and think about the nature of our humanity and empathy. We are sitting here, fighting to create territorial space with an instinct for colonization and occupation. How does that make us any better than coral?"

While viewers of Tank mull that one over, Kaino is recovering from a busy few months. His three month long solo-show "Leviathan" at Chicago's Kavi Gupta Gallery ends in December, and Bridge, a suspended footbridge sculpture in Washington D.C. opened last month. Earlier major works have included large-scale pieces that often hinge on a single fundamental element, such as fire in this year's interactive performance piece The Burning Boards, and sand in 2004's Sandcastle, which was part of the Whitney Biennial.

Much like Tank, Kaino's art tends to be enjoyable for the fusion of concept and appearance. The guiding idea is sophisticated but not pedantic, and that's because he devises works in a simple and visually appealing way. "When I started making work, I was trained in two schools of thinking: one was a very didactic, conceptual school, and the other was a formal, aggressively nuanced school. I would go home and think, 'Why do I have to choose?'" he remembers. "The moment when art happens is when the idea becomes art and when concepts become art—and how can that be beautiful and engaging."