

Islands

A true island is an ecosystem under a bell jar. There, with only limited variables in play, life forms can develop with a bias for inbred morphologies. Just like in any ecosystem, island plants and animals develop unique features to find balance and facilitate their coexistence. But because they are penned in together their interactions are forced. On a continent a species that encounters an adverse situation may survive if it runs or crawls or flies far enough away, but island inhabitants are like the characters in Buñuel's *Exterminating Angel*, no one can leave the party. And just as in the movie, the results of their forced interaction and compression can give rise to curious phenomena, bizarre behaviors or wonderful evolutionary surprises. Unfortunately, an island's isolation is an imperfect sequestration and the precious balance it achieves may be toppled in a snap. Sooner or later the random disrupter or seed of chaos falls from the sky or washes ashore and all hell breaks loose

This special quality of islands as nature's incubators of exception captivates the imagination. For the purposes of our work, an island is a platform like a stage where set pieces can be placed and characters deployed, one where the idiosyncratic threads of cause and effect can spin strange stories. But unlike a rectangular theatre stage where one can only pace back and forth, the island stage resembles a proscenium in the round. Follow the perimeter of an island and your footsteps will always lead you back to where you started. The physical circularity of islands has metaphysical implications as well. For us, as metaphorical constructs, they function like circular enigmas - riddles that resist a linear resolution. They can be savored but never fully consumed.

The English word island comes from the Latin **insula or insulatus*. *Insula* led to *isolate* which led to *isle* and then finally to *island*. Our point is that, though they have much in common, to *insulate* is different than to *isolate*. Maybe it is splitting hairs, but it seems to us that to *insulate* has a protective connotation to *isolate* lacks. To *insulate* is to create an encapsulation that separates and isolates but also protects the world within. *Insu-land* describes the two essential qualities of islands: the encapsulation and the land within. In our work, both in *Islands* and in our *Travelers* snow globe series, the encapsulation is a bubble within which exists a privileged space of potential. It is a space of exemption where continental rules may be bent or supplanted and where one may posit alternate realities or realities of exception. But to what end?

Islands have always had a special place in the collective imagination and their possibilities run the gamut from paradisiacal to dystopian with a bias for the darker end of the spectrum. Islands are ideal settings to posit the sort of dubious and mysterious endeavors that civilizations prefer to conduct out of sight. They can be places of quarantine or places where unethical experiments that went wrong become places of quarantine. Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, for example, inspired us to imagine a group of prison islands where all the undesirables that are disappeared from the world reappear. Also there are islands that are entities in their own right with mysterious powers over space and time - like Prospero's Island or the island in *Lost*. Other islands function like Venus flytraps that lure shipwrecked survivors with the

promise of safety only to enslave them as beasts as did Circe and Dr. Moreau. Islands are where treasures are buried, places where undiscovered riches or untapped resources lie in wait. Islands can be places of exemption where utopias survive out of time and marvelous or strange peoples, animals, and customs thrive. They can also be alternate realities fabricated to serve as political satire as did best and first Jonathan Swift. But as a footnote, how marvelous to find Swift's Isle of Lilliput with its diminutive flora and fauna mirrored in the real world with the discovery of the Island of Flores with its tiny elephants and pygmies!

The real world has gotten so much smaller. The mystery and wonder that islands once inspired in earlier times as the embodiment of the unknown lives on but with this distinction: now we see ourselves as the island dwellers. We live on an island we call Earth surrounded by the oceanic emptiness of space. It turns out planets are just another type of island. They are the modern day embodiment of the unknown. What has changed is the angle of our gaze. We don't look out to the horizon to wonder what might be but rather up to the stars.

As seas rise and land masses sink, the new islands that appear will be the extant high points of those former land masses; hill nobs or high plateaus will pepper the expanding seas. One of our two hometowns, Norfolk, Virginia will be six feet underwater by the end of this century. Generations of our family are interred there in the same cemetery, the oldest one in the city. One day the tide will rise around it, then over it. Fish will dart around its weather worn statues and crooked tombstones. It is a whimsical notion to imagine the aquatic ghosts of our twice buried predecessors lingering on there. We wonder if they will care enough to sometimes rise up from the watery depths like wisps of smoke and, by the light of the Witches Moon, see how the world has changed.

*The English word *isle* is derived from the Latin *insula*. In the 16th century, under the influence of *isle*, the letter *s* was added to *iland*, the earlier form. *Merriam Webster Dictionary*

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