

HALF-SWALLOWED

My alarm sounds faintly from my phone. A soft pulsation of pressure around my legs, a weird sucking at the hips. Waking from a particularly bad-night's-sleep, a large fish has appeared around my lower body, lips around my waist. Half-swallowed yet entirely undigested. I am not dreaming (the fish indicates this, meeting my gaze with its eyes of moist marble). I'm still me, I think to myself. But I'm also it. Or, rather, the fish and I are one, a hybrid thing. My bedsheets are salty and wet.

Through a collection of spoken and written text, imagery and costume, HALF-SWALLOWED presents fragments from a scenario in which a person finds themselves part-way consumed by a large Fish. Childhood memories of playing on the seashore; watery mythological creatures; hoax Mermaids and the surprisingly wet feeling of an interspecies connection are unpacked in a slippery series of fragmented thoughts. The exhibition is the latest manifestation of ongoing research and writing into multispecies entanglements, climate precarity and more-than-human survival that permeates Williams's practice. HALF-SWALLOWED is a response to growing up on the border of land and water and spending time in Blackpool, as well as the appearance of the mermaid and other forms of human-fish hybrids that appear in both local and global folk tales.

Sam Williams

Exhibition Text

A response by Rebecca Jagoe

Science can be a language of distance which reduces a being to its working parts; it is a language of objects. The language scientists speak, however precise, is based on a profound error in grammar, an omission [...] in scientific language our terminology is used to define the boundaries of our knowing. What lies beyond our grasp remains unnamed. ^[1]

The English language is noun-based, and as such, taxonomic. Beings are assigned categories, assigned objecthood, and in this process become restricted, restrained, and bound in their containers. Beneath this rigid, ordered framework of perception, though, there exists another world: a slippery, watery world of shifting boundaries, a world of perpetual becoming, of mutability, and fluidity. Materiality offers a place of refusal against a scientific metaphysics. The river, as Heraclitus would say, is ever-shifting: the only constant is change.

Across the works in HALF-SWALLOWED, the borders between beings are in a constant state of flux. This is not a fantastical other world but a queerly poetic reinterpretation of the material realm we occupy. In a lamenting sound piece, a person describes waking up to find they have been half-swallowed by a fish, and their two bodies are starting to fuse. This event is not a site of body horror or monstrosity, but instead an ambivalent hybridity that mirrors the interdependence found across myriad species. Fish and Human now co-exist together, a fate that neither of them chose but must now be negotiated. This is neither good, nor bad, but quite simply, reality.

There is a viscous porosity of flesh—my flesh and the flesh of the world. The porosity is a hinge through which we are of and in the world. I refer to it as viscous, for there are membranes that effect the interactions. These membranes are of various types—skin and flesh, prejudgements and symbolic imaginaries, habits and embodiments. They serve as mediators of interaction. ^[2]

When Heraclitus was describing the mutability of a river, he was engaged in an argument with Parmenides. Parmenides, for his part, believed that all change is a sensory illusion and that the only truth is permanence. Heraclitus, on the other hand, stated that we ‘step and do not step in the same river’. A simple look at the membraneous borderlands between water and land demonstrates that Parmenides had no idea what he was talking about. The coastline of Blackpool requires constant maintenance of a sea wall in order to prevent erosion. A river will perpetually meander across a landscape, redefining both land and itself. Southend, where Williams is from, is blighted by both the sudden and gradual encroachment of the ocean. As the speaker in the sound piece for HALF-SWALLOWED contemplates, ‘What I like about spending time on the shoreline is the landscape's dissolution of borders. Borders are a denial of a shared humanity, a connected planet’.

The recognition that bodies and places are continuous incites transit across traditional boundaries. ^[3]

Human fusing with Fish exists as a borderland, too, neither of land nor of water. At what point does this fused body require water, at what point does it require air? The hazy edges of this meeting point between bodies demonstrates the awkwardness of their condition. As the speaker describes, they are trying to speak to one another, attempting communication, but it is unclear if they understand one another at all. As such, this queer hybrid being described in this work cannot fall into the mythological tropes of mermaids or selkies: symbolic and seamless creatures who move between sea and land easily: their existence is too clunky, unstable. This is mirrored in a screenprint in which research images of Jonah being eaten by the whale shift into images of mermaids, seamlessly tailed humans, then slowly shift again into tilapia skin grafts, faked taxidermy, and finally, beached whales.

Like the queer Human-Fish hybrid, this is a show of fragments and components, which allude to a singular whole without ever fully merging. The show will not give the satisfaction of a mermaid, a coherent legend. Instead, much like the monkey sewn to the fish in the Horniman Museum (who appears in the screenprint), much like the Fish-Human themselves, the show suggests coherence without ever reaching it. The performance alluded to across the works – a human within the massive, glittering fish body, talking of their merging – is never fully realised: a costume, an audio recording, a transcript and research images create an uncertain temporality, both waiting to be activated and residues of a past.

At the close of the narrative in the sound piece, the narrator drifts off, and dreams that Fish and Human return to the sea, attempting to swim, but neither human nor Fish quite know how to interact with each other, like two runners in a three-legged race. But in the dream, they return to the sea, nonetheless, a place infinitely alluring in its ability to absorb a body. Out in the open water, a person can lose themselves, forget their limbs in relation to

their surroundings, self-conscious awareness of their body melting away into the surrounding salty waters. The sea is a place of escape, and a place of return, and this human-Fish hybridity offers an opportunity to merge not only with another being, but with all of one's surroundings.

For, we reflected, what if the entire intrauterine existence of the higher mammals were only a replica of the type of existence which characterised that aboriginal piscine period, and birth itself nothing but a recapitulation on the part of the individual of the great catastrophe which at the time of the recession of the ocean forced so many animals, and certainly our own animal ancestors, to adapt themselves to a land existence, above all to renounce gill-breathing and provide themselves with organs for the respiration of air? ^[4]

^[1] Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

^[2] Nancy Tuana, 'Viscous Porosity: Witnessing Katrina'

^[3] Stacy Alaimo, *Bodily Natures*

^[4] Sandor Ferenczi, *Thalassa or, a Theory of Genitality*

Work List

HALF-SWALLOWED I

Text, 2024 (ongoing)

HALF-SWALLOWED II

Audio loop, 19m 9s, 2024

Performed by Nando Messias

HALF-SWALLOWED III

Video loop, 19m 9s, 2024

Performed by Nando Messias

Fish fabrication by Allen & Adcock and Esther Dillner

FISH

2024

In collaboration with Allen & Adcock and Esther Dillner

UNTITLED (HALF-SWALLOWED IV)

2024, Halftone silkscreen print on Somerset Satin 300gsm, 77cm x 113cm

Edition: UNTITLED (HALF-SWALLOWED IV)

2024, Halftone silkscreen print on Somerset Satin 300gsm, 59 x 81 cm. Edition of 10