Water remains our most elemental unknown. It is a trans-cultural and historical symbol of mythologies ranging from childbirth, miracles, purification and healing rituals, to mysterious sea creatures, falling icicles, and invisible toxins. Belief in water is strong and its powers both benevolent and deadly. Water can wash away sins, cure disease, and offer eternal youth. Or it can harbor “blobsters,” freeze explorers, and swamp cities, depending on the teller and the listener, the fraudster and the rube.

Crossing Neptune is an exhibition featuring archival works on the theme of water from the personal collection of artist Tony Oursler—photographs, mostly anonymous, of baptisms, “blob monsters,” ice formations, and actual vessels of holy water—plus original installation works by Oursler on water as a transformative element embodying a long list of inherited, paranormal mythologies. The exhibition takes its name from a longstanding maritime tradition in which sailors, crossing the equator for the first time, were subjected to a hazing ritual, often involving someone dressed as the sea god Neptune and others as a variety of personae—women, most commonly, but also babies, policemen, or priests. Crossing Neptune became a cross-dressing rite of passage for younger sailors as well as a fantasy occasion for the more sea-soned on the lonely, monotonous seas. The term is borrowed here to suggest the allure of passage to other realms and water as a conduit.

Based on an unpublished text, “On Water and Magical Thinking,” a compilation of historic water mythologies created by Oursler over time, Crossing Neptune explores aquatic belief systems, ranging from the most common to the outlandishly bizarre, and their sustained echoes in contemporary culture, where historic tropes now morph into politicized commentary on evolution, climate science, and more. As water resources become scarcer, the challenges presented to scientists begin to rub against mass cultural fantasies, delivering us to a zone of magical thinking—a place of both political friction and potential generation.

Crossing Neptune is a curated exhibition for the 2022 FotoFocus Biennial: World Record. Now in its sixth iteration, the 2022 FotoFocus Biennial encompasses more than 100 projects at Participating Venues across Greater Cincinnati, Northern Kentucky, Dayton, and Columbus, and features more than 600 artists, curators, and participants—the largest of its kind in America. The World Record theme considers photography’s extensive record of life on earth, humankind’s impact on the natural world, and the choices we now face as a global community.

CURATOR: Kevin Moore, FotoFocus Artistic Director and Curator, and Tony Oursler, Multimedia Artist
Another ‘Monkey Trial’? Susan Epperson, a biology teacher in Little Rock’s Central High School, has begun a legal assault on Arkansas’ anti-evolution law, January 2, 1966

Evolution—the Incredible Hoax. Christ or Gorilla Which? Anti-evolution pamphlet

‘Respirator Girl’ Rebuilds In Water Gymnasium. They thought Frances Gleason would never leave a respirator alive. Now she is out of the respirator six to eight hours at a time. On a cot she is lowered into a warm water pool, where the youngster is slowly regaining the use of her emaciated lower limbs. San Francisco Hospital “Under Water” Gym, April 16, 1935

A sensory deprivation float tank

A pretty and talented Weeki Wachee mermaid checks her hairdo before descending 117 feet into Florida’s Underwater Grand Canyon

ADE-651 bomb-detecting dowsing rod

Bigfoot photograph

Spirit photograph of St. Bernadette, Lourdes, France

Ganges River rites, February 13, 1938

Few visitors to the shrine leave without a supply of blessed holy water, designated as a “sacramental” for Catholics, July 22, 1950

Evolution: The Incredible Hoax, Christ or Gorilla Which? Anti-evolution pamphlet

Cuyahoga River pollution

A sensory deprivation float tank

Cuyahoga River pollution

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Air And Water Pollution Slide, Pollution Engineering magazine

Health Advisory: Eat No Fish From This Water. Onondaga Lake, New York, May 15, 1986 11 × 7 inches

Ritual In The Water, April 4, 1969. 8 × 10 inches

Illustration from Rational Hydrotherapy: A manual of the psychological and therapeutic effects of hydriatic procedures and the technique of their application in the treatment of disease, 1902

Ice Fountain 8 × 11 inches

Woman being treated in a hydrotherapeutic float tank 10 × 8 inches

Dying Whale. More than 40 sperm whales beached themselves at Florence Saturday night in what was described as the third largest whale beaching ever recorded 11 × 8 ¼ inches

Billy Wilson reaches up for an icicle hanging on one of the fruit trees coated with ice from the sprinkler in the yard of his suburban Sierra Nevada home here. Los Angeles, January 14, 1963

Pregnant woman and man baptism in rushing river 2½ × 3½ inches

Wilson Bentley photographing snowflakes

An eternal Ponce de Leon presides over St. Petersburg’s famed fountain of youth, July 22, 1967 10 × 8 inches

Neptune Crossing Ritual Postcard 5¼ × 3½ inches

Slowing Down. As she nears the bottom of her dive and her speed slackens, the air cushion breaks into thousands of bubbles. An arm appears and the outline of her figure may be seen 7 × 5 inches

Ritual In The Water, April 4, 1969. 8 × 10 inches
Mates and Hamilton as a wild man and hula maiden at the Neptune Party onboard USS Marblehead while crossing the equator

5½ × 3¼ inches

Chelsea Arts Ball Preparations. A group of mermaids in the “Sunken Treasure Ship” tableau which is being presented by the girls of the Hornsey Art School at the Chelsea Arts Ball at the Albert Hall, August 29, 1929

8½ × 6½ inches

A Loch Ness Monster photograph

5½ × 3¼ inches

Daughter of Neptune, Adele Kupiec of Brooklyn N.Y., delighted thousands of spectators, as she perched on her float as “King Neptune’s Daughter” during the 41st Annual Baby Parade at Asbury Park N.J., August 31, 1932

9 × 7 inches

Flood St., Cincinnati, February 12, 1937

9 × 7 inches

Daughter of Neptune. Adele Kupiec of Brooklyn N.Y., delighted thousands of spectators, as she perched on her float as “King Neptune’s Daughter” during the 41st Annual Baby Parade at Asbury Park N.J., August 31, 1932

9 × 7 inches

Two women posing with a false wishing well

3½ × 5½ inches

Jehovah’s Witness Baptism, June 17, 1978

10 × 5 inches

Jehovah’s Witness Baptism, June 17, 1978

10 × 8 inches

R.W. Hamilton, “Water Witch” of Kansas City, January 22, 1931

8 × 10 inches

Man with wishing well

6 × 4 inches

Jesus walking on stormy water

8 × 10 inches

Neptune Crossing Ritual

4¼ × 3½ inches

P.W. Hamilton, “Water Witch” of Kansas City, January 22, 1931

8 × 10 inches

A Loch Ness Monster photograph

5½ × 3¼ inches

Mates and Hamilton as a wild man and hula maiden at the Neptune Party onboard USS Marblehead while crossing the equator

5½ × 3¼ inches

Chelsea Arts Ball Preparations. A group of mermaids in the “Sunken Treasure Ship” tableau which is being presented by the girls of the Hornsey Art School at the Chelsea Arts Ball at the Albert Hall, August 29, 1929

8½ × 6½ inches
Texas A&M University scientists Dr. Kenneth Marsh, left rear, Dr. Charles Martin, center, and Bruce Gammon explain how, using a glass of water at room temperature, they confirmed part of a controversial nuclear fusion experiment done recently in Utah. The breakthrough in Utah may be the first step in providing a cheap, long-lasting source of electrical energy.

I would rather drink beer (close up of the lake) 14 × 11⅛ inches

“Demon.” Photograph of water after speaking the word “demon” to it. By Masaru Emoto, late 20th century

“You are beautiful.” Photograph of water after speaking the phrase “you are beautiful” to it. By Masaru Emoto, late 20th century

Photograph of a water crystal by Masaru Emoto, late 20th century

An early float tank experiment

GUIDE TO VITRINES
1. Holy Water / Floods
2. Fountain of Youth / Water Carriers
3. Springs / Fountain of Youth II
4. Walking on Water
5. Baptisms
6. Mermaids / Mermen
7. Water Pollution
8. Dowsing
9. “Little Animals,” Leewenhoek
10. Snowflakes / Water Memory / Cold Fusion
11. Neptune Ritual
12. Loch Ness Monster
13. (Anti) Evolution / Cryptozoology
14. Ice
15. Blob Monsters / Dolphins
16. Hydrotherapy / Floatation Tanks / Dolphins II
TONY OURSLER
CROSSING NEPTUNE

MICHAEL LOWE
COLLECTION

FotoFocus.org/Biennial  #FotoFocus  #WorldRecord  #FotoFocus2022