

ON THE LURE OF THE SEA:

Alexis Hunter, mermaids and me



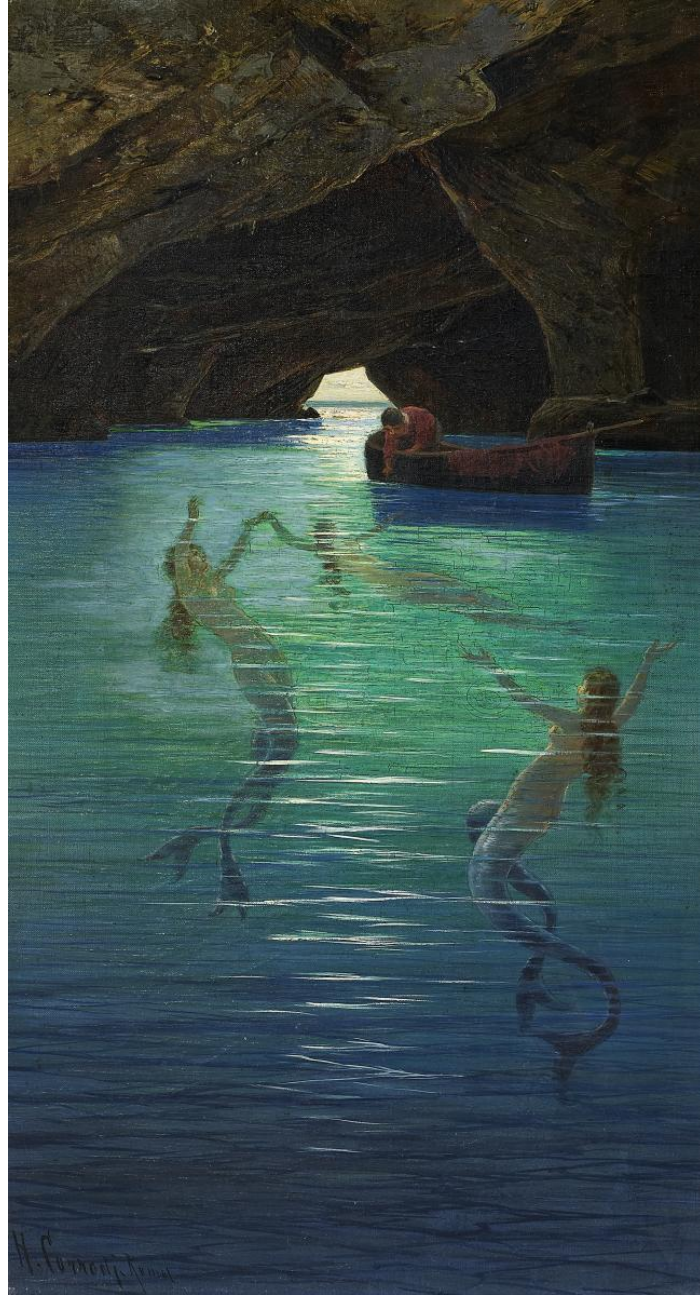
Alexis Hunter (1948–2014), *The Lure of the Sea*, 1988, oil on canvas, private collection, Auckland. Installation view, *Megan Dunn: The Mermaid Chronicles*, Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery, Te Herenga Waka University of Wellington, 2022. Image by Ted Whitaker, courtesy of Te Pātaka Toi Adam Art Gallery

Megan Dunn
May 24 2023

THE LURE OF THE SEA is an oil painting by Alexis Hunter, but I first fell for it as a jpeg. I dragged and dropped it into a PowerPoint called 'The Muse of War: Mermaids, Hybridity and Feminism in the art of Alexis Hunter'. It was the last slide, the crescendo of my presentation. In October 2017, Hunter was my excuse to attend the *Mermaids, Maritime Folklore and Modernity Conference* run by Island Dynamics in Copenhagen. It was my idea of going to Disneyland. I had high hopes, and even now, years later, I can't

say the conference didn't deliver. In two days, in a banal brutalist building with scant biscuits and draining coffee, I considered everything from the racial stereotyping of Sebastian, the 'Jamaican' sea crab in *The Little Mermaid* to the metal mermaids of Jung, and Deleuze and Guattari.

One afternoon, a stout woman who looked like Pat Benatar stood up and gave an unillustrated lecture on some writer who once wrote some poems about mermaids. Afterwards, I told her it was fantastic. She had no PowerPoint. Her brown eyes brimmed with gratitude. "Thank you," she said. Who was she? Who were any of us back then? How had we ended up on this queer mer-tangent together? A swede in a turban contemplated presentations of fey fish boys in Manga. In the break, I asked to photograph his bearded ginger merman doll and he gave his consent. I shouldn't go on, because this is just the introduction, but I will because I paid \$1500 of my own money to attend that damn conference. I wasn't being bankrolled by a university like most of the speakers. But what's the hook Megan? I hear you ask. Back then I would have told you the hook was Claire la Sirène, a professional mermaid who was giving a keynote on the final day. But now, I think the hook was *Fisherman and Mermaids in the Blue Grotto on Capri...*



Hermann David Salomon Corrodi (1844–1905), Fisherman and Mermaids in the Blue Grotto on Capri, date unknown, oil on canvas, 500 x 280mm

SEE? THIS PAINTING is by Hermann Corrodi, an Italian artist who died in 1905. And the Blue Grotto in Capri is actually real, a cave steeped in the lore of mermaids and nereids and surrounded by unearthly turquoise waters only reachable by rowboat. But I didn't know any of that when the image first drifted into my Facebook feed in early 2017. I thought it was simply a reflection of me, treading water in the City Gallery Wellington basement where I was employed as a part time researcher in the archives.

That year was the start—but by no means the end—of my mer-mania. I was a woman on a mission. I skyped professional mermaids at night, using the time zone meeting planner to organise my interviews. Each day, I sat in an alcove in the basement of the gallery, surrounded by walls of manilla box files. There was no natural light. The floor was painted a dense, institutional grey. I didn't care. It was my first job since I'd had my daughter, Fearne. She was two; I was forty-two. Why is the image of a fish tail attached to a woman's torso so sexy, I wondered? That didn't have anything to do with my job in the archive, but I thought it anyway.

I sifted the paperwork pertaining to [Alter/Image](#), a feminist group show that opened at the gallery in 1992. I was in the basement to make sense of the gallery's ephemera. I researched and wrote blurbs for each show that are now published online. But really, I was a mermaid swimming in the waters of the blue grotto, my legs split into a pair of fins. All the better for peddling. The basement had an ancient, rickety lightbox in the corner. I would swim over to it, then bend down, pulling out exhibition slides from their plastic sheathes and inspecting each slide through a small magnifying glass. What to do with it? This tiny residue of the past, did it matter? Was it important? "This is like counting the grains of sand on a beach," I said to another passing mermaid who might have been a gallery intern. My mobile didn't get reception in the basement. I watched it, fretfully, a black stone that might sound an alarm when I began my ascent up the well of gallery stairs towards the surface. I was constantly strung out, worried that something might happen to Fearne while I was gone. Occasionally, an earthquake shook the building on its foundations in Civic Square, and I was on edge for the big one and the accompanying tsunami. I had a landline on my desk in the alcove that never rang. Or when it did, scared me out of my skin. Even in the basement I could hear the mermaids calling...



Alexis Hunter, *Object Series*, 1974–75, oil on canvas. Installation view, *Alter/Image*, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 1993.
Image courtesy of City Gallery Wellington

NOT LITERALLY. I was sleep deprived, not stupid. One day, I opened a box file releasing the scent of old paper sitting around unread for decades, and I found a snippet on the late New Zealand artist, Alexis Hunter. Hunter was merely one of a long roll call of feminists included in *Alter/Image*. Yet, I did a deeper dive, searching for more information on the *Object Series* (1974-75)—a six-panel photorealist painting series of hunky bad boys, with ripped muscles, motorcycle boots and leather pants, their heads cropped out of the frame. I could see why the curators of *Alter/Image* had included the work, it was a triumphant moment for the female gaze. I landed on Hunter’s last interview—titled ‘Manhunter’. The article in *Dazed* was illustrated by *Towers* from the *Object Series*. The male model in the painting reminded me of Jim Morrison from the waist down (*early* Jim Morrison), he held a lit cigarette in front of a backdrop of the Twin Towers.

In the article, Hunter briefly discussed her 'day job' in film and animation. Of Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* she quipped, “I painted the foam.” She had motor neuron disease and could no longer speak by the time of that final interview so wrote her answers on

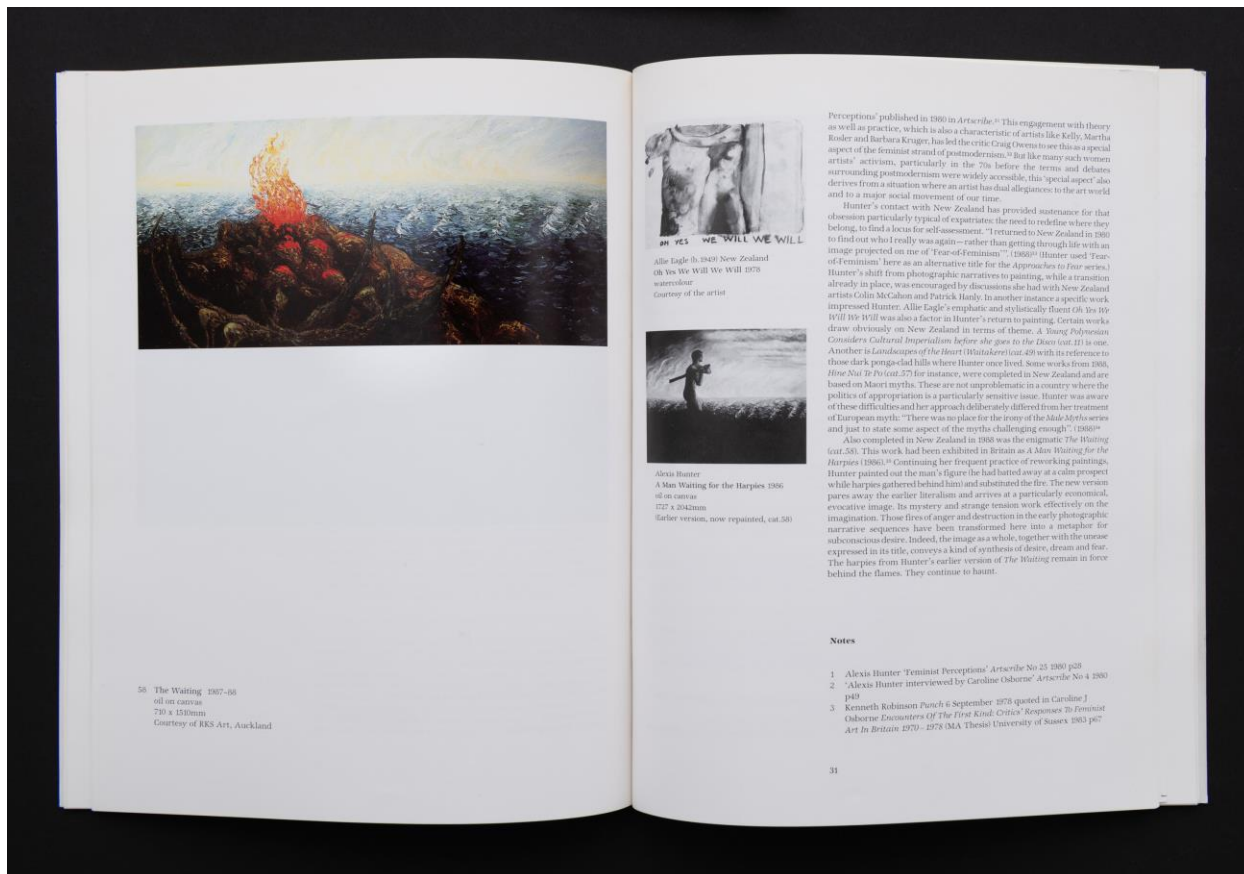
an electronic pad. Like the little mermaid, she had lost her voice. It was a case of cosmic irony. I stopped in my tracks and looked at the photograph of her on my screen—a lady with a white-haired bob. “I painted the foam,” wasn’t just a throwaway remark, it was a hook, and I had taken the bait. What did Hunter, a pioneering feminist artist, make of *The Little Mermaid*? And how the heck did she wind up working on a Disney film? I had to know. Hunter died of motor neuron disease in 2014, yet I felt her psyche reaching out to me.

Why is the image of a fish tail attached to a woman’s torso so sexy, I wondered? That didn’t have anything to do with my job in the archive, but I thought it anyway.

EVERYONE KNOWS THE gist of Hans Christen Andersen’s *The Little Mermaid* (1837). She gives up her voice and her tail to try and win the love of her human prince, but she fails. Not very feminist, Hans. Not everyone remembers the end though. Andersen’s little mermaid is destined to be turned into seafoam until she is rescued by the daughters of the air. If she does good deeds for three hundred years, the little mermaid will earn her immortal soul. Disney of course ditched the tricky Christian subplot, in their retelling, plucky redhead Ariel finds her voice, bags Prince Eric, and lives happily ever after. No foam necessary. I should have put the lid back on the *Alter/Image* box file and backed away. I had what I needed for my day job. Instead, I became embroiled in a personal quest to establish whether Hunter did—literally—paint the foam in Disney’s *The Little Mermaid*. I’m not sure now if I thought answering this question would help Hunter’s immortality or mine?

Hunter graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts in the late sixties, then moved to London in the early seventies where she became renowned for her photo-narrative photography. In [The Model’s Revenge 1 \(1974\)](#), a bare breasted woman aims the barrel of her little black gun at the camera, like a Bond girl in a bait and switch. In *Sexual Rapport* (1973-74), Hunter took photos of working-class blokes on their lunchbreaks, then stamped each image with the words: yes, no, or maybe. And her [obituary in the Guardian](#) was illustrated by *that* photograph of a blazing strappy silver high heel on fire. The heel is held by a glamorous young female hand and is from a larger photographic work, [Approach to Fear XIII: Pain – Destruction of Cause \(1977\)](#). Tate Britain put this series on display in memorial to Hunter after her death. Every time I look at the strappy heel burning, I remember a drag queen I once saw at a Vogue Ball screaming,

“Fucking iconic!” These are the photographs Lucy Lippard once referred to as “...a hot message in a cool medium.” But in the eighties, Hunter stopped being cool, and started painting chimeras. I’m being blunt here, but Hunter’s expressionist paintings have not enjoyed the same critical attention as her photography. Her paintings don’t even get a look-in during the Guardian obit. However, it is Hunter’s paintings that endear me to her immortal soul.



Alexis Hunter, *The Waiting*, 1987–1988, oil on canvas, 710 x 1510mm as photographed in the catalogue for *Fears, Dreams and Desires* (1989), published by Auckland Art Gallery, 1989.

LOOK AT *The Waiting* (1987-88) in the [Fears, Dreams, and Desires](#) catalogue. The waves chop, chop, the pyre blazes on the beach. This painting was first titled, *Man waiting for the harpies*, but Hunter found it too literal. She painted over the man once standing on the cliff, a bludgeon held over his shoulder. In the foreground, a pair of bald, buzzard-like heads pop into the picture frame. Is a harpy a mermaid? In Greek antiquity, the ‘siren’ was first depicted as a bird-woman, but sometime in the Middle Ages the image of the fish-tailed mermaid took over. *The Waiting* existed in my mind already. Perhaps I

once saw it on display when I was still an art school student, maybe at the Auckland Art Gallery? I graduated from Elam in the nineties, and in Hunter I still see traces of the artist I once hoped I'd be. You know, a painter! When I was at Elam, I wanted to make glorious thick oils that raged with feminine symbols from my subconscious mind that also somehow inexplicably toppled the patriarchy. I wanted to be like Alexis Hunter. In 1982 Hunter wrote, "My new work engages the language of painting to attack mythic archetypes of the patriarchy: the witch, siren, amazon and the foolish woman."

Back in my grotto, I fished up one lonely, poorly photographed image of a white goddess holding a tail in each hand. *Mermaid*, 1991, oils, 20 x 26cm. The painting dates to the year Hunter took a studio in Beaurainville, Northern France – an area associated with the Mélusine, a figure of European folklore often depicted as a twin-tailed mermaid. Hunter's painting was obviously just a quickie, a sketch, perhaps a trigger drawing, the preparation for a larger painting? I'd been speed-dating other archives on my days off—the Te Papa Library, the E.H.McCormick Research Library – and knew Hunter often consulted old books on magic to find symbols of the collective unconscious. She was influenced by Jungian concepts of the anima and animus, and psychoanalysis, she meditated, and did left-hand drawings too.

Like me, I fancied that Hunter always had two lives, two careers—the Mélusine's twin tail, pointing in opposite directions. The woman you want to be, and the woman you are, still working in the basement of your psyche, the place where the mermaids seethe. I discovered the painting belonged to a London-based artist, Elsa Dax, who told me Hunter was her next-door neighbour and had gifted the work to her. We had a brief email exchange, Dax also told me the Mélusine painting was for sale. Pity I had no money. "We were both Stuckists," Dax wrote.

Stuckists—what the heck? I googled it. Stuckism was an art movement that favoured representational painting over conceptual art. Goodness, Alexis had wound up high and dry, campaigning with the other Stuckists outside the Turner Prize. The movement was initiated by Charles Thomson and the musician Billy Childish. The title came from Childish, who once went out with the artist, Tracey Emin. She used to say to him, "You're stuck! Stuck! Stuck!" Emin was referring to his art, rather than hers. Stuckism has obviously wound up on the wrong side of art history. Yet beneath Hunter's Guardian obituary, I noticed the Stuckist co-founder, Charles Thomson, wrote the longest comment: "Alexis Hunter was not only a photographer, but also a painter, especially in the last 10 years or so of her life." He is right to address this important omission. Now I wonder if I am an accidental Stuckist too? How cringey and reprehensible! I also prefer representational painting to conceptual art. And I am aware

that when I worked in the archive I became “stuck, stuck, stuck” on mermaids as a subject. And I am still stuck.



Alexis Hunter, title and date unknown. Photographed by Megan Dunn in Auckland storage unit, 2017.

SEE? THIS IS why I am stuck. Because I found a painting of a woman swimming with the fishes in a storage unit in Auckland in mid 2017. That year, I saw mermaids everywhere and, perhaps because I worked in the archive, I thought I could somehow personally catalogue them all, catch them in my net for posterity, make the world see how important mermaids are, and not just to me. By that stage I had also skyped an Australian academic who told me about the Copenhagen conference—he was the organiser. Together we riffed on Daryl Hannah—he had named one of his daughter’s Madison after her character in *Splash* (1984). He also proposed that the Gillman from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), was her male equivalent, a butch aquatic hunk. “I think you’re on to something,” I said.

I had to *speak* at that conference. The sirens were egging me on. “The mermaid is a potent symbol in Hunter’s art and suggests her own situation as a feminist artist stuck between a rock and a hard place,” I wrote in my abstract. Pretty rich, considering I only had that one Elsa Dax mermaid and Hunter’s quip about the foam to go on. Next, I booked a flight to Auckland and met with a lawyer, who was an old friend of Hunter’s and the first executor of her Estate (or was it her will?). The lawyer drove me out to the storage lock-up where I was lucky enough to browse Hunter’s remaining paintings and drawings in New Zealand. What was I searching for that day? The foam? No, I had already located *The Lure of the Sea* (1988). The lovely lawyer had told me about it! *The Lure of the Sea* had recently sold at auction, and she sent me a link to the sale. I had struck the mermaid jackpot. The painting clearly depicted a mermaid embracing the silhouette of a man made from the foam of a cresting wave. Hunter had painted the foam. I had my evidence.

The Little Mermaid was released in 1989. It was Disney’s last fully animated film to use all hand-inked and painted cels. In 1989, Hunter also had her first retrospective, *Fears, Dreams and Desires*, at Auckland Art Gallery. In a letter to the show’s curator, Alexa Johnston, Hunter explained, “I used to be able to support myself pretty well in England by working in animation, but I can’t anymore so I’ve had to be realistic about it. I have to sell.” I emailed Hunter’s identical twin, Alyson. The symbolism of the two-tailed mermaid not lost on me. Alyson and Alexis studied together at Elam, they both moved to London and worked in illustration and animation. Alyson didn’t remember Alexis working on *The Little Mermaid*. She instead recalled how they worked together on the Channel 4 Logo. “The work we did on films was not about our art career at all, we saw it as just finance to make art.”

Well, that wasn’t what I wanted to hear. I had browsed old photocopies of Alexis’s CV in the Te Papa Library. I knew the tantalizing facts. The connection between Hunter’s day-job in film and animation and the serial nature of her photo-narratives is acknowledged. But what about the links between her work in animation and Hunter’s mythic chimera paintings? In 1973 Alexis trained as an apprentice animator at Halas and Batchelor Film Company—most famous for their animated version of Orwell’s *Animal Farm*. She later was a prop maker on *Star Wars* and even *Alien*. In 1979 she even worked for TVC on Raymond Briggs’ *The Snowman*. I ruddy love *The Snowman*! What a classic! Did Hunter paint the snow? “It was an exciting time, we knew we were making history,” Hunter said in one interview. She was talking about her early Feminist art, but I fancied that she knew these films were making history too.

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NOW FOR ANOTHER rupture in the fault line of my psyche. I came up from the basement one day and told Robert Leonard, then the chief curator at City Gallery Wellington, that I was presenting a paper on Alexis Hunter at a mermaid conference in Copenhagen. "She painted the foam," I gushed. We were probably sitting in Nikau, the cafe beside the gallery. Robert blinked. "Alexis liked your videos," he said. Sunlight flooded my face. Out of the basement, it often took a while to adjust to daylight. "What do you mean?" I asked.

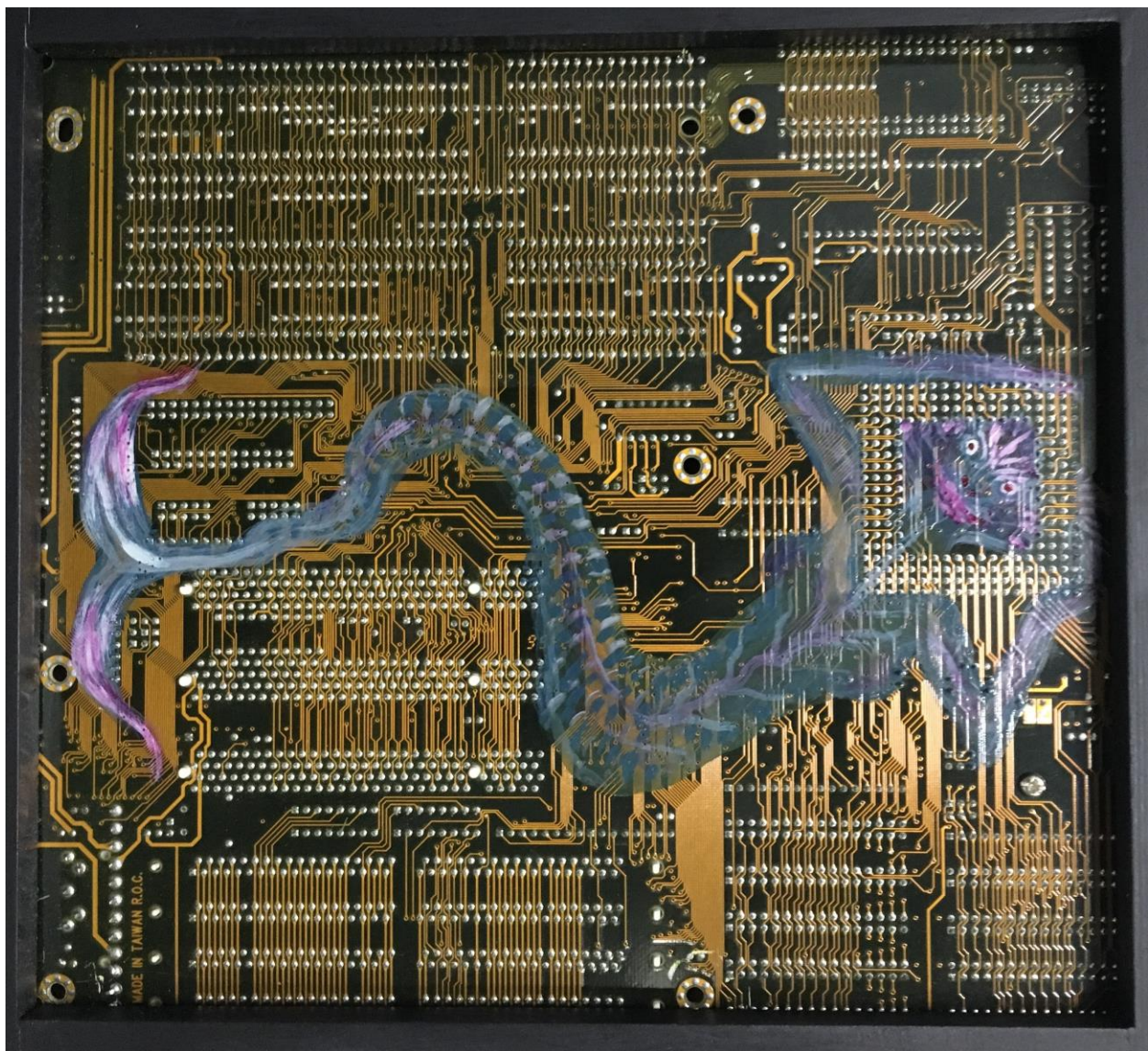
Turned out, Hunter had seen my early show, *A Forest*, at Artspace, in 2000, when Robert was the gallery director and I was a video artist. In that show, I presented two appropriated video artworks that layered and sampled animations from several Disney films. Back then, I frequently worked with Disney animations. It wasn't just the nostalgic hit of the stories, it was the artistry of the animators. I wished like hell I could paint like that.

The universe kept sending me siren signals. There was a mer-fire going on in my mind and I couldn't put it out. I wheeled a VHS player into the basement and watched a copy of the documentary, [*Pleasures and Dangers \(1991\)*](#). In the footage, Hunter is working on *The Muse of War*, a giant canvas inspired by the Gulf War. The painting features a black chimera, with the head of a dragon, six breasts and her tail on fire. Author Sue Hubbard called *The Muse of War*, "an angry harpy with a fiery tail that flares up like an oil pipeline...like some ancient fury she reminds us of the fragile inter-relationship between our psychic, ecological and physical health and the consequences of hubris."

I thought nothing of the consequences of hubris as I worked on my PowerPoint for the conference. I was simply happy, free-associating, I dropped in a film still of Ariel, her arms tied back by the two evil purple eels, Flotsam and Jetsam, and pasted it next to Hunter's own painting of a woman riding a purple serpent bareback. I even dared to copy and paste a black and white photo of Hunter herself, young and foxy dressed in a leather jacket, beside Disney's Ariel.

But I did have another genuine mermaid up my sleeve. I had discovered Hunter's little-seen motherboard paintings. The motherboard is the green circuit backbone inside each computer that allows the various components to 'talk' to one another. Hunter produced over eighty of these paintings, using the circuit boards as canvases, and adding tarot

card motifs and symbols—everything from cats and nuns and crocodiles to rats and prostitutes and demons frolic within her motherboards. The imagery was so gestural and free. I couldn't figure out if the paintings were wonderful or sensational duds, they represent such an oddly analogue approach to the digital era. Now I love them, even though I've not seen one single motherboard painting in person. However, the lawyer from her estate sent me this shonky photograph of 'Mermaid' on her phone from the archive in England. I laughed when I saw her. Hunter's mermaid is an amphibious gill-woman trapped in the golden circuits of the memory board, but I recognised her as a portrait of me – a mer-monster! - lost in the currents of her own research.



Alexis Hunter, Mermaid, 2005, oil on memory board. Photographed in England in artist's archive, 2017.

Notes on Paintings on Computer Motherboards

Working inside the silence blackness of a sinister night in the country. Quiet as a moonless ghosting a desire grows, a conscious need to dissipate yet control the structural formality of a framework already designed to dispel anarchy. There is empathy to an order in these synthetic spectral labyrinths, weaving through ethereal technical umbilical cords of a computer motherboard. Within the sparkling magical surface maze a supernatural image appears in the pattern, a mirage of shapes entwining a possible understanding of what it is to be human in a digital existence....

The image, sometimes a fanciful chimera, tarot card queen or long-lost Goddess, is caught inside this real object and the new virtual world. Every meaning has no meaning in our Postmodern spiritual vacuum as images and words can mimic higher thought and base curiosity in the same instant. I give you an amulet, a talisman as you are now, a computed entity in a computed process, this digital system living as we do, alive within us, now all universal travellers in space and time.

Alexis Hunter, 2005.



Fearne and The Little Mermaid, 2017. Photograph by Megan Dunn

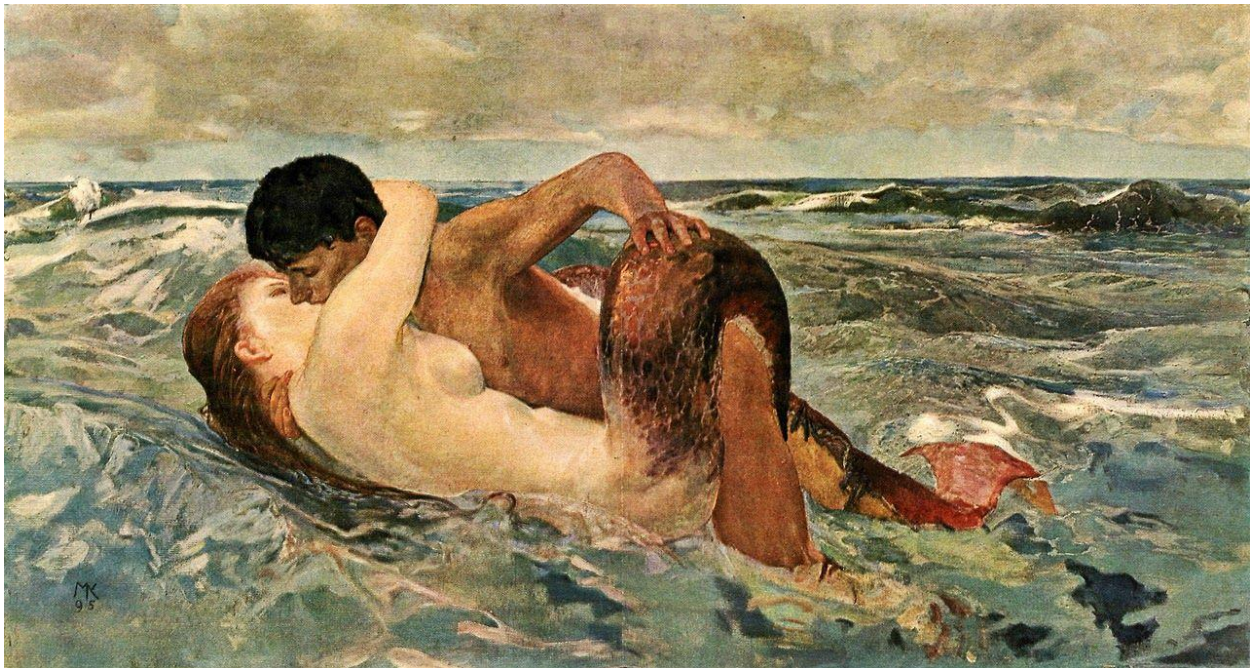
WE FINALLY made it to Copenhagen. Fearne saw *The Little Mermaid* statue first, while I watched Claire la Sirène give her keynote to a packed audience. Claire showed us footage filmed from her perspective as a mermaid swimming in the Paris Aquarium—without her goggles she couldn't see a thing! The entire room gasped. Claire's big point: in the original fairy-tale, the little mermaid wanted to become human, now we want to become mermaids, the story has been reversed. Afterwards, Claire draped her turquoise silicon tail over a table and the audience surged forward taking turns to touch it. "It's so heavy," I said. A mum and her daughter asked for a selfie with Claire.

During my presentation the room was more than half empty. "She painted the foam," I clicked the final slide. *The Lure of the Sea* flickered on the wall, then the presentation turned off. Claire la Sirène looked mildly at me. No questions. No one wanted a selfie with me. I slunk back to my seat. As I passed, one older lady leaned forward in her

chair and said, "I was Alexis' friend on Facebook. She was getting her papers in order before she died. She wanted her legacy to be remembered, you know."

"Thank you," I said. My eyes might have even brimmed with gratitude. The next speaker from Miami university stood up to give her PowerPoint on 'When the Nereid became Mermaid'. Nereids are sea nymphs in Greek mythology, the daughters of the sea god Nereus. One of the problems with the mermaid as a subject is her hybridity, the way she keeps shapeshifting and rebooting over time, updated by each generation of artists. Suddenly the presenter landed on a painting by Max Klinger, *Triton and Nereid* (1895). Snap! Hunter's Facebook friend and I both gasped. It was the lure of the sea.

And I'm still under it.



Max Klinger, Triton and Nereid, 1895, oil on canvas, 1000 x 1830mm

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