

SHAO-FENG HSU: *Breathing Through Skin*

NOVEMBER 10 - JANUARY 4

Opening Reception: November 10, 6 - 9 PM

I'm not a scientist, but I read somewhere that hundreds of millions of years ago, massive 8-foot-long millipedes called *Arthropleura* roamed what is now known as North America. At the time, the atmosphere was composed of 51% oxygen (compared to a measly 21% now), causing plants and animals to grow to unbelievable sizes—especially those like *Arthropleura*, who could breathe through their skin. The giant *Arthropleura* originated from the sea, where they developed their ability to breathe through their gills underwater. Of course, these giants died out as the rainforests of the period dried up and oxygen levels plummeted. Deprived of the substance that had blown them into monsters, their exoskeletons suffocated.

Bay Area photographer Shao-Feng Hsu is not a scientist either. He isn't interested in *Arthropleura* or millipedes, per se, but his work emphasizes water as a source of life that has given birth to countless creatures from its depths. Using high-contrast silver gelatin prints and color photograms, Hsu abstracts familiar underwater scenes—a swimmer's hand in motion, a wall of sea anemones—into otherworldly, seemingly unknowable forms. Playing with the history of photography as a tool that reveals "true" or "accurate" representations, Hsu uses the illusions created through the photographic process to heighten our human curiosity about what *might* live below the water's surface.

"A fire on the beach burns off all the Christmas trees, a modern spiritual ceremony. We have been staring at fire since the Stone Age."

For the artist, the tides' comings and goings reveal long histories and other ways of being. Hsu's large format photo prints offer unfamiliar perspectives of tidal zones and shallow waters, the aquatic areas most affected by human interaction. All images of the Pacific Ocean—which connects the Bay Area to Hsu's native Taiwan—these high-contrast black-and-white images present anew the natural environment we might *think* we know, creating space for conversations around preservation, geological time, and histories of both human and non-human life. Hsu's unique C prints abstract the world below the surface where sunlight is bent at strange angles, its power reduced or absorbed by dense water molecules. With prismatic refractions akin to gazing in a crystal ball, perhaps these works provide a hazy glimpse into a future where we only see the

sun from down below. After all, waves have broken boulders into sand for over 3.8 billion years on these coastlines and will likely swell for billions more.

“Are these whale bones?”

“Yes, this is part of the chest. We’re standing by its heart.”

With one hand over the other, plunging our weakly oxygenated atmosphere into small, round bubbles, swimming is the closest we can feel to flying. Perhaps one day, like the nearly forgotten Arthropleura, we will adapt to a space mostly unknown to us and our ancestors; we will learn to breathe through our skin.

Shao-Feng Hsu is a photographer living and working in the Bay Area. His work focuses on the relationship between humans and water—a material that connects geographies, facilitates movement, and sustains life. Bodies of water played an integral role in Hsu’s childhood. Growing up near the shore in his native Taiwan, he took up swimming from a young age to improve his asthma, a practice he carries with him today.

Off Hours is a nomadic curatorial project led by Katherine Jemima Hamilton, Shaelyn Hanes, and Ebt. We present artist-driven exhibitions that result from dialogue developed through studio visits, ongoing conversation, and collaborative writing practices. Off Hours supports and spotlights emerging Bay Area artists through thoughtful curation, programming, and writing.