

# Tiburón

## Anne Ashton

September 12 – October 17, 2015

"[...] The painting desires much more than just to be known for itself; it is a living thing that wants to be as alive as possible, to live its life in whatever situations arise: to have the full effect, speak to every person, touch everyone deeply, prompt all kinds of discussion, whether relevant or not [...]; the painting wants to *draw a current interest* in any era, in any viewer."

– Henri Lewi, *La visite au musée*, 2015

### *Tiburón* or a Chronicle of a Foretold End

**A**nne Ashton's immersive installation is composed of a polyptych of five panels, painted on wood and installed against a black background with an accompanying soundtrack that gently descends, like a light rain, over the visitors' heads. Viewers can sit on a small plain wooden bench to contemplate the great white shark, or stroll in front of it while listening to Woody Guthrie's music and lyrics in his ballad "Will You Miss Me?"<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the five paintings create a musical rhythm, as a small space "the width of my little finger"<sup>2</sup> separates each of the panels, whose side edges have been

painted black just like the wall on which they hang. The cadence created by these gaps and the number of paintings also evokes the passage of time.

While art critics have focused a great deal on Anne Ashton's iconography and slick painting style, they have paid less attention to the fact that she is a remarkable colourist who subtly plays with light to create strange, dark, but also radiant, atmospheres. In recent years, she has brightened up the skies in her paintings with a variety of hues and tones of sky blues, such as in *Spin-O-Rama* (2003-2004), *Motel America* (2005–), *El Centro* (2005-2007), *Mojos* (2007-2008), *Enduro* (2009-2010), and *Lotería* (2012–). A technique often used in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, the use of these blues and shades of white enhances the paintings, giving added value to the other hues and colours.

The blues dominate the backgrounds of *Tiburón*. The polyptych takes us from day to night across the celestial or marine tides that the white shark navigates towards a foretold end. Yet a glimmer of hope glows in its eye as it stares at the viewer. Just like the dogs that, in certain scenes from daily life in Renaissance paintings, appear to be observing us without their master's awareness, here the shark's eye seems to hold unfathomable knowledge and wisdom of the universe unbeknownst to its predators.

Ashton masters the medium and support in a compelling manner. She likes to mix pigments and apply the paint in a very physical way, contrary to what we might think from the painting's style. It is all in the process, according to this artist who trained in Californian schools, the beacons of conceptual art. Language and words have also been a long-time integral aspect of her images, especially appearing at or on the edge of the painting, much like the illuminations of the Middle Ages. In *Tiburón*, language and words are no longer pictorial but aural, coming from Woody Guthrie's ballad.

Ashton explains: "My artwork depicts the natural world in many manifestations: sensual and ominous, serene and raging, mysterious and vulnerable. It explores the cyclical transformation between these states, and the interconnection of each element within a complex system."<sup>3</sup>

Her manner of using light, skies and clouds is evocative of paintings by 19th century British painter John Constable. Closer to our time, Ashton readily admits the influence of American artist Kiki Smith on her work. This influence is particularly evident in the subject matter, the unusual atmospheres, and in the search for beauty. Yes, beauty is important for Anne Ashton. We can sometimes find it in unforeseen spaces or in uncommon subjects, in places where we least expect it. Like Smith, Ashton has a particular affection for “unloved” subjects, such as spiders, or other natural elements that might repel us at first. Moreover, she recently read a text by Smith stating that: “It’s always about shifting the possibilities of what can be beautiful.”<sup>4</sup> Thus the reflections of the two artists intersect in the zeitgeist.

Ashton values this fantastical fauna and flora, these sometimes menacing creatures, giving them back their intrinsic beauty, which would go unnoticed without her remarkable skill. We are used to her smooth painting style that hides many pictorial, conceptual, procedural, or sensory elements. This manner of painting throbs in her fingertips, helping her express and reveal the many worlds and preoccupations engrossing her.

With *Tiburón*, Anne Ashton delivers a message. The artist wishes to depict a chronicle of the possible extinction of many shark species that have been swimming in our planet’s oceans since the Jurassic period, before most types of trees even existed. It is an inevitable extinction if humans do not act, in the short term, to reverse the situation. The shark becomes a metaphor for all endangered animal species, whether terrestrial, marine, or aerial. Since the time of colonialism, trapping, killing and turning animals into taxidermy trophies has been the unequivocal symbol of colonial power over nature and animals, but also over the men and women of the colonized countries.

Born in San Diego, California, Anne Ashton has lived with and around the sea since her earliest years. Although she has been living in Quebec for thirty years, she often returns to her birthplace, for her family certainly, but also for the ocean with its fauna and flora, its powerful and sometimes menacing energy. Recently, she went snorkelling to observe the leopard sharks that swim in the shallow coastal waters of San Diego.

*Tiburón* developed over a long period of time before finding its final form. Although Ashton only saw the leopard sharks once her installation was almost completed, her underwater expedition reinforced the intensity of her convictions on the synchronicity of her project and the urgency to act in order to curtail the upheaval predicted if sharks disappear. Extinction, for the profit of divers who are jeopardizing the planet’s entire marine ecology as they scan the seas for shark fins—a coveted delicacy destined for Asian restaurants—and trophy hunters, who prize the heads of the great white shark as symbols of the ultimate catch.

Anne Ashton’s exhibition surely deserves merit for making us consider these issues more deeply, beyond the cliché of the man-eating white shark etched into our collective unconscious by the movie *Jaws*.

Sylvie Lacerte, Ph.D.

Translation: Oana Avasilichioaei

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1. Woody Guthrie (1912-1967) was the songwriter of “This Land Is Your Land,” among others, and a politically engaged artist. He was the first folk singer in the United States, giving a voice to the oppressed, particularly those who suffered during the Great Depression of the 1930s.
  2. Ashton, Anne. Personal interview. 2015.
  3. Ashton, Anne. *anneashton.com*. Web. 31 August 2015.
  4. Interview with Kiki Smith. *ART21*: 2015. Web. 19 August 2015.  
<<http://www.art21.org/texts/kiki-smith/interview-kiki-smith-family-history-and-the-history-of-objects>>

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