

Flotation Devices

The great Roman baths in Bath, England were built over springs whose steaming, mineral rich water rises up through flutes in the densely folded strata of archaic rock. It should come as no surprise that magical, healing properties have been attributed to such waters, for they have the burnt, metallic reek of the underworlds' hot rivers, and they invite us to bathe in a primordial and dangerous source. Fascination with springs is a fascination with purity and an anxiety over the mortality of the body; perhaps only the floating spirits of the dead are healthy and clean and healed. One of the pivotal, framing photographs in Joan Kaufman's Flotation Devices series is a long, horizontal print of the elegant yet spooky apses, stairways, and corridors of the baths' architecture, the water itself sliding down almost vertically off the lower edge of the image. A Giclee digital output on sheets of watercolor paper, the water is heavy, saturated, smoldering ink black, and the drifting wisps of steam rising off it are ghostly.

The water is black, an absorptive, magnetic hole, faintly glimmering, its mass and weight far greater than that of the graceful stone above it. The black water is warm, deep, and alive: one can sense its unstable, inner motions. The light, on the other hand, is both rapturous and corrosive, a beautiful and acidic phosphorescence. Uncannily pouring down from above, it does not so much illuminate as dissolve and dematerialize what it touches into an otherworldly haze. Most of the images in Flotation Devices involve a woman in a single-piece black bathing suit and a tight black bathing cap, hanging in various postures from a harness which looks like it might be used to train acrobats, and often donning a variety of flotation devices on her arms and back or around her waist. In Flotation Devices, Series I #1 (2002), for instance, the woman is in an apse beside the pool limply suspended face first from the harness, light streaming down from above. In Flotation Devices, Series I #6 (2002), the harness' long, elastic straps are attached to her arms as though to help her imitate flying, with white floats fitted to her upper arms. In another piece the devices are dangling all around her like strange tools, her knees pulled up to her chest. Kaufman did not stage these images of the woman on site in the Roman baths, but rather digitally placed her in the architecture. The effect is at once seamless and eerie, for the woman, clothed in that unnatural light, always appears subtly incongruous, a figure in an apparition or a dream.

Human beings need flotation devices because we want to rise and float and fly and cannot, because it is our nature to fall and sink. The devices in Flotation Devices are subtly perverse, stylized, and even at moments nostalgic – think of the neat little Red Cross insignia in the center of the life saver ring she wears around her waist in one picture. Her pose is self-conscious, her flesh pallid, the woman often seems as though she has been transported from the past, a lost water ballet dancer from a Busby Berkeley musical in the 1920s. The harness is of course a device for floating in air, and the floats for her arms, waist, and back are aids for remaining afloat in water, but it is important to these images that she is not so much floating as not falling. Kaufman's interest in what is effectively athletic equipment and architecture invites comparison with the work of Matthew Barney, but her treatment of the woman's body is less allegorical than sculptural. She hangs, she dangles, she leans, and, though she is beautiful and fit, she seems to have relinquished control to the downward pressure of dead weight and gravity. The stone, light, and water in Flotation Devices is ethereal and sensuous, but the woman's body has the ungainliness of flesh, sinew, and bone. She doesn't float. She is always falling, always about to lose her balance.

The woman's body is suspended between the descending conflagration of light and the black water; the flotation devices, and the architecture itself, simply shore her up, temporarily. There are numerous pieces in the Flotation Devices series, however, which move away from the specifics of architecture and place and toward the water and greater abstraction. In Flotation Devices, Series II #9 (2002), for instance, she is still attached to restraints but reaches out, dipping a single hand into the water. In another she squats on an ancient stone bench, arms extended, black gloves on her hands, in a gesture that is both liberated and sinister: perhaps she no longer even wants to float. In Flotation Devices, Series III #10 (2002), the woman is luxuriantly stretched full-length in the ribbed structure of what looks like a canoe or the spinal column of a prehistoric beast, everything suffused in bright, ecstatic, annihilating light; she seems to be riding down some deep, interior river of dreams. And in the next image in the series, she is standing up, dressed in a sheer gown, paddling her strange boat through the shimmering light. The look on her face is blank, like a zombie or someone under hypnosis, and she is nearly translucent. She is weightless, floating. She is at the source. She is a ghost.

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ABOUT THE WRITER

Daniel Baird is a writer who currently lives and works in New York and Toronto.