

ARTIST STATEMENT

The Denizens of 'Submersia' Breathe New Life into Ancient Artifacts in Oil Portraits by Kajahl

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"Amphibian Resurfaced" (2022), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches. All images © Kajahl, shared with permission courtesy of moniquemeloche

From his studio overlooking Monterey Bay, California, Kajahl has created a new series of paintings that draw inspiration from the sea and ancient heritage, continuing a practice that employs portraiture to subvert white, European historical narratives. The artist merges classical motifs and mythical realms in *Submersia*, a fictional underwater world where artifacts take on new life.

Greek and Roman vessels like glass balsamarii, wine jugs known as oinochoes, and conical rhyton vases often depicted figures or were fashioned in the shape of human or animal heads. Kajahl reimagines artifacts like these as mystical seaborne figures, redefining the historical portrayal of “aethiops,” an archaic term for dark-skinned people. On household containers, these often showed “individuals possessing phenotypes typically associated with Sub-Saharan Africa,” he explains in a statement. “Harkening back over two millennia, I interrogate these fascinating and controversial subjects, probing our relationship to these objects that confront us from an alien world.”

Kajahl’s “Iceberg Entities” are human-iceberg fusions that are starting to thaw, isolated in deep water. The figures gaze intentionally at the viewer, who is given a simultaneous view from above and below the surface that separates “the visible from the invisible world, emphasizing water’s ability to obscure, conceal, or reveal what was once beneath,” he says. On the sea floor, the “Oceandwellers” and “Coral Kids” inhabit a realm brimming with colorful rocks, coral, and shellfish. Air bubbles escape from their mouths, and their gaze also meets the viewer, represented not as inanimate artifacts but as living, breathing figures who are capable of emotion and perception.

Submersia is on view at moniquemeloche in Chicago through January 7, 2023, and you can follow more of Kajahl’s work on Instagram.

