

Liza Sylvestre

asweetsea

8 October 2022

to 14 January 2023

**A guide to the exhibition by
Sarah Hayden**

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Gallery guide

asweetsea as elaboration upon, and sonic compression of 'Sweet Sea': title of a 1980s kids' cartoon about the adventures of a mer-child and her sub-aquatic friends.

a – as prefix: the indefinite article signalling scope for alternatives, versions, variation.

a – as trace of the enunciative style of Sylvestre's child, who voices the 'asweetsea' video. Onscreen and in audio, their elongated 'aaaaaand' makes legible the effort of communication.

a – as the reach to remember, the stretch to convey, the delay as speech is formulated. In spoken conversation, such small phatic sounds – 'umms', 'aaaas' – cue a listener or receiver to anticipate language as on the way. Like the pins by which lego bricks connect (the same little pins that turn up everywhere in asweetsea) an **a** – can maintain the connection between interlocutors. Keeping a channel open, an 'aaa', 'uhhh' or 'ummm' says 'hold the line, stay with me, there's more'.

In Sylvestre's 'Memorabilia' sculptures, shapes drawn from cochlear implant parts amalgamate with memories of the Sweet Sea cartoon.

Tantalisingly textured, these sculptures are scaled to suggest something held and manipulated: a tool, a tactile personal device, a toy. Their low plinth affords a view to sighted people of all heights and modes of moving. Light catches them unevenly. Translucent, but not fully see-through, they disclose their details gradually.

As a child, Sylvestre brought her Sweet Sea doll to difficult medical appointments. As an adult, the artist gives material form to this mix of memories, sensory fragments and feelings. These sculptures encompass both her haptic recollections of Sweet Sea's accessories and elements of the cochlear implant towards which these traumatic hospital consultations ultimately led.

Working in Illinois, Sylvestre designed sculptures for printing in Southampton. Digital files containing 3D printing information were transferred across some 6,500km. Downloads were translated into objects. Materials and machinery introduced tiny surface

glitches, new colour tones and shimmering grains. Now, biological and technological forms combine in a time that is simultaneously the 1980s and the near-future. Sweet Sea's accessories evolve into prostheses and a microphone sprouts a strange bloom. Via human-machine collaboration, the 'Memorabilia' sculptures propose possibilities for new modes of communication.

In a new 'asweetsea' video, Sylvestre has collaborated with her child to reimagine an animated cartoon from the artist's own childhood.

Sylvestre shows how access is created between intimates, within families, among friends. She dislodges access thinking from disability-specific discourse – pulling it to the surface of communication in general. In asweetsea, a child relays a story that is no longer audible to a parent who remembers and recreates. Their remake of Sweet Sea is a tender evocation of access in the everyday: access as what is made in the act of description.

To recall the TV shows that entranced us as children is to enter reverie. Narrative events lose their edges. Feelings and sensory impressions melt together. In Sylvestre's video, fragments of the mer-child's underwater escapades with mudpuppy and a creature ultimately designated 'that squid-guy' stick, blur and repeat. Animated sequences arrive in flurries. Like memories, they dissolve, go blank and startle with sudden jumps – sending the storyline astray. Sound and image freeze and shiver. What prevails is a palette, an abundance of bubbles, and a certain 'swaying' quality of movement.

Sylvestre's remake chops into and reassembles the animated material. The treacle-toned original voiceover is replaced by a child's retelling. Moments of high peril are recounted with unabashedly high emotion. Characters are recalled with enthusiasm, but not necessarily with their names intact. Aspect ratios shift about. When soft-edged, striated analog images surface within digital frames, they register the transmission of cultural artefacts across phases of media technology as well as generations within families.

Throughout, the film's soundtrack is intermittent. Undependable sound swells without warning, then cuts sharply. With legible affection, Sylvestre's captions catch the character of her child's vocal delivery. They make visible the idiosyncrasies of a voice that is (like any other) specific, and still in formation. In the pacing of text onscreen as well as voiceover sound, the cadence of kiddish storytelling conveys affective textures and tone. Viewers and listeners bear witness to an intimate, technicolour parent-child interaction. Two now-differently configured sensory sensibilities meet over one fuzzy 1980s cartoon.

In the 'Parts' drawings, instructions for the construction of Lego models overlap on tracing paper with diagrams for the assembly of cochlear implants.

Visual vocabularies interact in Sylvestre's 'Parts' drawings. Details – of Lego constructions, magnets, microphones and toys – are rendered with delicate, evenly weighted attention. In sharing the same simple, line-drawn aesthetic and combining on a single (though composite) plane, disparate systems seem to become mutually intelligible. Scales

collide without resolution and boundary-lines are partly obscured. Pulled from their source contexts, recurrent elements take on a compelling ambiguity: is that a wire, a subaquatic flower stem or the handle of a watering can?

Sheer layers of tracing paper give partial access. Blurred zones of overlap invite closer speculation, but resist total disclosure. Patterns of fold-lines amplify the impression of work-in-progress. Tracerics of creases imply topographies of iteration and revision: blueprint drafts discarded, retrieved, then smoothed out.

On the lobby's digital array, 'the flashlightproject_' excerpt video presents a conversation about language: a dialogue in which voices and captions overlap.

When Liza Sylvestre and Christopher Robert Jones performed here, they invited participants to converse in the dark, using only flashlights (torches) to make their lips readable. This video is, accordingly, mostly image-less. The screen is made a channel for captioning: text that is only very occasionally accompanied by brief bursts of video footage. Discs

of torch-light bring the speakers' facial details into momentary, close-up view. The camera's address is as intimate as the laughter that passes between their voices onscreen.

Here, as in the 'Parts' drawings, beginnings and endings are blurred. Overlaps proliferate and overwhelm is inevitable. When two voices speak together, the caption track bifurcates. Colours differentiate speakers on this screen, as they do in BBC captioning. The voices onscreen (and in audio) speak of spoken language: its rules and rule-breaking, its weaponization, the oppressive policing of pronunciation. Wryly, wearily, Sylvestre and Jones discuss how language can be deployed both for and against communication. In this video, as in the live performance, 'Flashlight Project excerpt' takes the form of a conversation. Pick it up and carry it on.

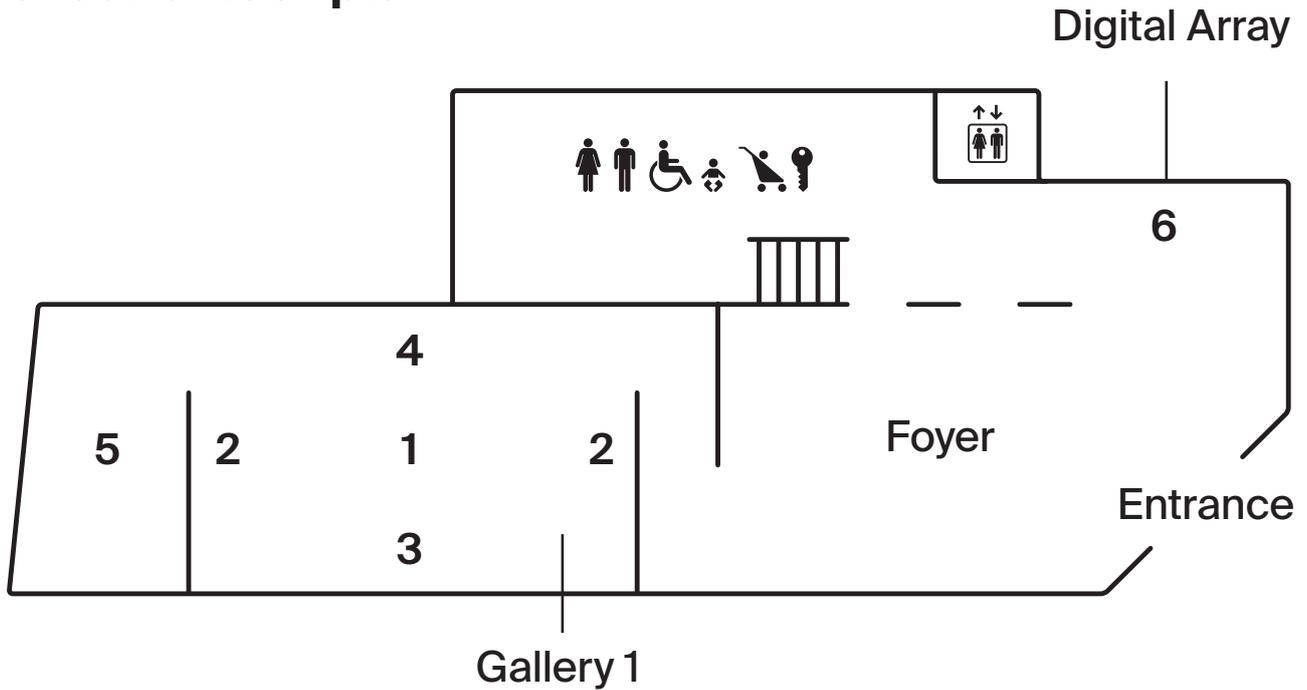
The artist's audio(visual) guide is an interpretive artwork that can be accessed via multiple channels.

In place of presuming any universally shared mode of engagement, 'asweetsea' provides options. Sylvestre has made an audio(visual) guide to the exhibition in a variety of formats. These can be

accessed both inside and outside of 'asweetsea's' time and space. Distributed throughout the gallery, access coalesces in integrated form online. Two captioned videos with sound can be found on the JHG website; these integrate all six audio and visual ways in.

Captions on four screens allow visitors to read what plays as sound on two sets of headphones. One audio channel ('asweetsea_descriptive audio tour') delivers Sylvestre's detailed visual description of the exhibition contents and arrangement. The other ('asweetsea_excerpt_audio') is more experimental; it offers a lyrical entry route. Sylvestre's descriptions of sound are speculative, sometimes interrogative. Her visual descriptions of the drawings and sculptures are precise. In this multi-part tour, as in the videos, sculptures and drawings, fragments of narrative and anecdote drift between inter-related versions. Ideas and figures recur, but never in quite the same form twice. Here, and in asweetsea at large, **access is an ethos: a responsibility shared by every participant in any given social structure.**

Ground floor plan



- 1 Memorabilia (Seastar)
Memorabilia (Light Necklace)
Memorabilia (Shimmering Bubble Column)
Memorabilia (Royal Garden Flower)
Memorabilia (Sprinkling Can)
- 2 Parts 8B, 64, 7, 12G, 19, 12K
Parts 6, 39
Parts H, 13, 63
Parts 7, 60R, 18, DB, 9, HZ
- 3 asweetsea_excerpt_audio
asweetsea_descriptive audio tour
- 4 asweetsea_excerpt_captions
- 5 asweetsea
- 6 flashlightproject_excerpt

Artist Biography

Liza Sylvestre (b.1983) is a multimedia artist who lives and works in Illinois, USA. She is also currently Research Assistant Professor at the College of Fine and Applied Arts, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign, where she has co-founded the initiative ‘Crip*’: Cripistemology and the Arts’. Her work has been shown internationally and was previously included in the group exhibition, ‘Many Voices: all of them loved’ at John Hansard Gallery in 2020.

‘asweetsea’ is Liza Sylvestre’s first solo exhibition outside of the United States and is curated by Dr Sarah Hayden as part of **Voices in the Gallery**, an AHRC funded research project, with additional support from the University of Southampton’s Higher Education Innovation Fund.

Thanks

With special thanks to the following, whose invaluable help has made this exhibition possible: Tim Woolman; Mark Long and Pawel Kaczanowski at the ECS Workshop, University of Southampton; Sebastian Gonzalez Dixon; Christopher Robert Jones and Ellis.

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