



Title

Under the water, carry the water

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is a writer and artist based in West Yorkshire. She is co-editor of *Excavate: The Wonderful and Frightening World of The Fall* (2021), and is a 2020–21 Jerwood Arts Digital Fellow at FACT, Liverpool.

Cover image: **Fig. 1** Installation view of *Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).

Under the water, carry the water

by Tessa Norton • 25.08.2021

'If you go to where the sun sets, over there in the western sky, all the way to the ends of the earth, you've found the life-giving water' declares the unnamed narrator of Zadie Xa's multimedia installation *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers*. Xa's exhibition at Leeds Art Gallery takes inspiration from a Korean folk tale in which the 'Abandoned Princess Bari' dives deep into the underworld to bring back life-saving water in order to rescue her dying parents. But there is a cruel twist: it was her parents who disowned her, disappointed with yet another daughter. Still, Princess Bari ploughs on, showing kindness and compassion to those who have shown none to her.

The entrance to Xa's ambitious installation is concealed by a painted screen, which the viewer must walk behind to gain access to the main gallery **FIG.1**. The screen depicts the 'critters' who will, it transpires, become our five spiritual guides through the exhibition. This awkward manoeuvre – a conscious step over a barrier – constitutes an act of trespass. Once inside this other realm, the space is suffused with dim, shimmering, coloured light. Blue walls frame a lavish installation comprising five stations, each of which represents a different creature: Conch, Seagull, Cabbage, Fox and Orca. In the centre of the room is a circle of stools resembling tree stumps, sitting on a rug as though waiting for children to gather for story time **FIG.2**.



Fig. 1 Installation view of Zadie Xa: *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy the

artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).

Xa's critters navigate us through what seems at first to be a sinister underworld but is in fact our own world seen from a range of non-human perspectives. The concerns of the work's fifty-five-minute soundtrack are multifaceted, at times poetic but at others deeply alarming. It manifests as a cry for help – one that we become attuned to as we move through this netherworld, like Princess Bari. The five characters are all given voice by the same actor and while this provides a formal consistency, their distinct attributes enable Xa to explore various ecological, moral and folkloric narratives. One by one, each creature's perspective on the earth's plight is revealed. The 'moon poetics' referenced in the exhibition title are explained by Conch: 'every being here and every being before has known the same face [. . .] Greeted every evening by her melancholic brilliance. Forever circling our planet, quietly smiling, even as we slumber and pay her no mind'. The interplay between the moon and the ocean is central to Xa's narrative, although the destructiveness of earth's land dwellers is always present.



Fig. 2 Installation view of *Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).

Five ornate costumes are hung around the room, each one featuring a heavy ceremonial coat crafted from materials that represent the critter in question: shells for Conch **FIG.3**, silver and feather-like fabric strands for Seagull and iridescent marine patchwork for Orca. Hung at varying heights, each station is illuminated with a coloured light, which is activated when the creature takes its turn to address us. There is a kinship between each creature's domain but not an exact symmetry. They each feature different, smaller sculptural components: shoes shaped

like cabbages; an orca headdress [FIG.4](#); a glowing conch shell [FIG.5](#); and carved wooden animal avatars [FIG.6](#). The installation is impressively luxurious; the spangled costumes and sculptures catch the light in a manner that is as seductive as an old Hollywood Busby Berkeley extravaganza. Technology underpins the work, both philosophically and in its production, as the creatures come to make sense of the world as it is now. However, technology never takes over. Instead, we are invited in to a world that seems to be older than time. The interconnectedness of Xa's critters – and the implied connectedness of everything else – is demonstrated visually, as motifs from one costume make an appearance in another: the cabbage on the back of Fox's costume [FIG.7](#), and the fox on the back of Conch's. Faced with this recurring connectivity, we cannot help but wonder: what is it that makes us humans so special?

Although the start of Xa's soundtrack is not explicitly telegraphed, it is carefully structured. The strident Seagull speaks first, inviting us to 'watch as sonic waves filter across the land networks of Cabbage. Millions of root tendrils reaching out like telephone wires, pulsating tiny bits of information, vibrational codes swim up vascular channels'. Cabbage responds, affirming Seagull's observations but adds a quivering melancholy: 'the observational power allows us to listen and record phenomena in ways you have yet to understand. So, the next time you look to the Moon, know it is not the same Moon we know'. Fox, meanwhile, is mercurial and seductive, declaring 'blissful in myriad bodies, even I'm uncertain of what my true form is. A Fox? Gull? Dolphin? Perhaps Vegetable? Or Mollusc?'.

The ocean, like the moon, is a constant presence in Xa's installation. The staging of *Moon Poetics 4* draws us in, presenting us with the ultimate temptation that invites us to succumb. Seduced by the depths of the ocean, we are drawn into a state that superficially resembles relaxation. In fact, our state is more akin to that of a patient, languishing in a sick-bed, forced to examine our own role in the queasy illness of the earth. The critters do not hector us, but they seem to understand the capabilities of humans better than we do ourselves; the varied tones of their narration – from dreamy Orca to twitchy Cabbage – is underpinned by a deep weariness of human nature.

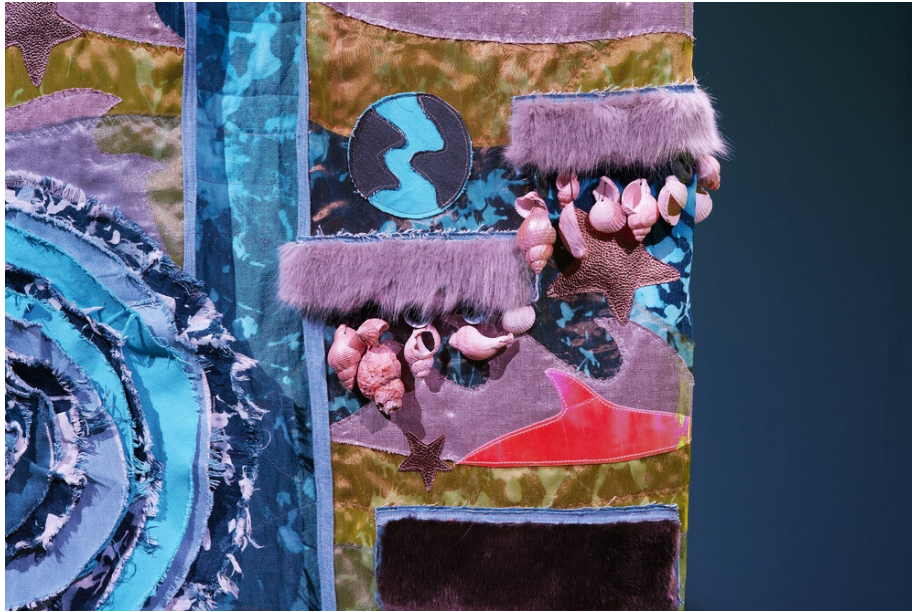


Fig. 3 Detail from *Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers*, by Zadie Xa. 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).

At times *Moon Poetics* resembles a quest, a problem for us to solve. Perhaps this is a result of the human need to always centre ourselves. After all, surely we are always the smartest critter in the room? But the wisdom of Xa's creatures repeatedly punctures these delusions of grandeur. 'I know why you are here', Orca tells us. 'You search for balance, for the thing that might make things right'. Orca is an ethereal, uncanny voice, aware that their watery leaps keep them barely grounded at all: 'though I can't stay here, I'll find you in your dreams'. Partially hidden at the end of *Moon Poetics* is a vibrant painting of Fox riding on Seagull, racing through the cosmos in a spirit of adventure. By the time we encounter it, as the final component of Xa's installation, it is a familiar image, inserted into history as though it had always been there. We believe for a moment that the stories told by Fox, Seagull and their fellow critters, are the only folk tales we have ever known.

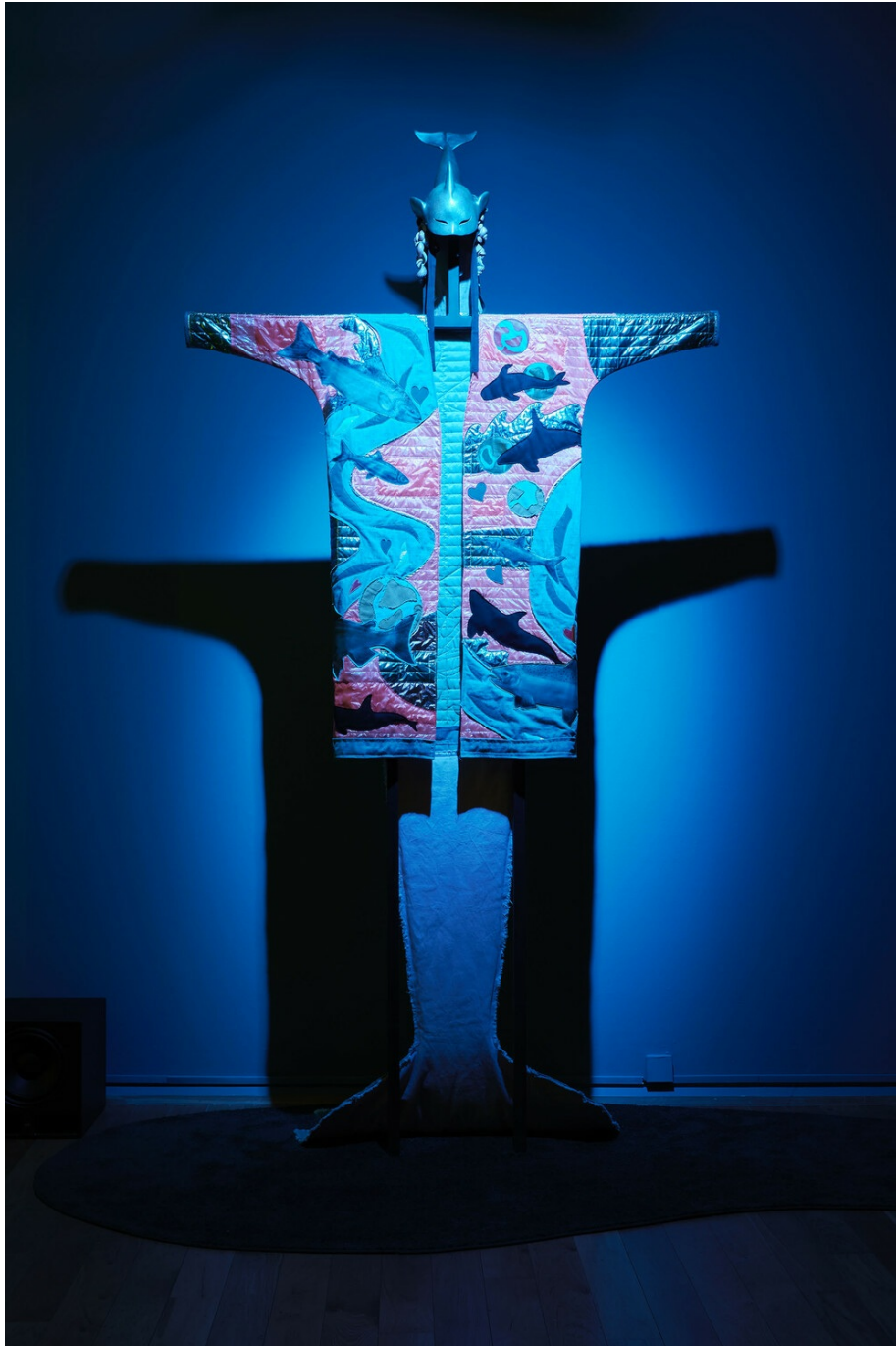


Fig. 4 Installation view of *Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).



Fig. 5 Installation view of *Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).



Fig. 6 Installation view of *Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy the artist; photograph Stuart Whipps).



Fig. 7 Installation view of *Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers* at Leeds Art Gallery, 2021. (Courtesy Zadie Xa; photograph Stuart Whipps).

Exhibition details **Zadie Xa: Moon Poetics 4 Courageous Earth Critters and Dangerous Day Dreamers**
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