

In Deep Water

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Water. Simultaneously enriching, nourishing, and all-annihilating. Water. It gives and takes; it rises and falls. Water. It embraces your body with little, gurgling ripples when you go for a swim, but it can also rise into towering waves that tear everything apart. Water. For millennia it has taken people on journeys, but it can also become their worst enemy—a potent opponent and partner.

In a series of spectacular works, Peter Callesen addresses precisely this ambivalent character of water. Like water itself, these works encompass something tangible and something metaphorical. Like Callesen, they are concerned with the existential, with life, with humanity's basic conditions, but also with feelings such as anxiety, powerlessness, and hope that surface when we stop to think about global warming and the environment.

That Callesen makes the force of water the theme of his works in 2023 is very pertinent, climate crisis taken into consideration. It can be difficult to know what we can do about climate change as individuals, and this at times creates despondency. But, in the small, minimalistic sculpture *Like Rings in Water* (2023), Callesen demonstrates how a seemingly small gesture has the potential to move the masses. When a drop hits the surface, rings spread.

A Fragile Salvation

Ark (2023), which is two-and-a-half metres long, is shaped like a raft. The title itself is ambiguous, referring both to the pieces of paper (a sheet is an *ark* of paper in Danish) and to the ark that Noah built in the Old Testament to save humanity and the animals from the Flood. But at the same time, Callesen found inspiration for the monumental installation in a historical shipwreck and one of the great paintings in the history of art.

In 1816, the French frigate *Méduse* sank several nautical miles off the coast of Senegal. Nearly one hundred and fifty of the passengers were salvaged on a jury-rigged, twenty-metre raft, which was to be secured to the rest of the lifeboats, but the ropes broke and the passengers drifted away, left to their own devices. After twelve days adrift at sea, the shipwrecked were saved by the brig *Argos*, but by then only fifteen survivors remained. The rest had either committed suicide, were washed into the stormy sea—or had been eaten by the others.

Two years after the event, French artist Théodore Géricault (1791–1824) began recording the then-contentious incident for posterity, commencing the painting *La radeau de la Méduse* (*The Raft of the Medusa*) based on interviews with survivors from the raft. The painting was exhibited in 1819 and caused uproar in the French art world.

Géricault depicted in *The Raft of the Medusa* precisely at the moment when the adrift survivors glimpse their salvation in the shape of the *Argos* and gain renewed hope. Callesen's raft is in itself a symbol of hope. It keeps us above water, it can save us from drowning—but like the sea, it is ambiguous. For though the raft is a lifeline, it is at the same time fragile against the force of nature, where we can be washed overboard by nothing more than a wave.

Callesen's raft is made of approximately 3,000 sheets of A4 paper. The sheets carry a printout of a United Nations climate report from 2022, which describes the state of our global environment and the scenarios we will face if we don't change course. It also provides, however, solutions for how we can stop global warming through, for example, new technologies and adjustments in behaviour, and it can thus be seen as a status

report, a lifeline that we can grasp. If we continue regardless, global temperatures will rise by between three and five degrees by 2100. If greenhouse gas emissions continue as they are now, the sea level will rise by up to 0.76 metres by 2100—and if the ice sheets in the Arctic and Antarctic melt faster than expected, there is a risk of sea-level rises of up to two metres.

Water Courses Through Culture, Language, and Thought

Water has a symbolic meaning, as well, and plays a special role in religions and mythologies around the world. In Christianity, you are baptised with water; in Judaism there is the Mikveh, a ritual bath that symbolises cleansing and new beginnings; in Islam the head, hands, and feet are washed before prayer; in Hinduism the River Ganges has a sacred meaning; and in Buddhism you can choose a water burial. Water is so essential that it is not just all-important for life and nature, but courses through our culture and language: you can feel that you are drowning in tasks, that a single added drop makes the cup run over. Things can spread like rings in the water, and you can “follow the current,” “tread water,” “go with the flow”—or “be in deep water.”

In the work that bears this title, *In Deep Waters* (2023), we see a double figure reflected along the horizontal axis of the water. The piece is a classic Callesen work in A4 format, where a part is cut away, but nothing is added. In this case, it is the figure of a man that has been cut out and folded down, so that he hangs under the surface of the water. The figure is a reflection of our own selves, for do we hold ourselves up or pull ourselves down?

Floating Box (2020) was made after Callesen moved from Copenhagen to the Danish island Mors. The conceptual focal point of this small watercolour painting comes from Callesen's attempt to pack up his entire life and take it all with him. The box is, like another Ark of the Covenant, loaded with the most valuable possessions. Everything you can't do without. Perhaps the box of objects will reach harbour safely, or perhaps it will drift in a rough sea. Presumably the memories will sink into oblivion once the box has been soaked through and dissolved in the water.

Little Person, Great Sea

Like the Romantic painters, Callesen is fascinated by the grandeur and power of nature. Some of the painters found their motifs in overwhelming features of nature—steep cliffs, waters filled with ice floes, and mysterious fogs—which are greater than we humans can comprehend and control. During the Romantic period, artists such as Casper David Friedrich (1774–1840) and Johan Christian Dahl (1788–1857) cultivated this fascination with natural phenomena that possess such great forces that we can only stand by in awe. A nature that is on the one hand beautiful, but at the same time catches us unawares with its power, wildness, and unruliness. Callesen shares this fascination with the grandeur, power, and violence of nature. In *Eismeer III* (2017), for example, Callesen has transformed a piece of A4 paper into a miniature drama in three dimensions, where sheets of ice and the wrecked mast of a ship stick up above the water's surface and break the paper's two-dimensional character along with the ship's wrecked mast. Callesen drew inspiration for *Eismeer III* from Friedrich's painting of the same name from 1823–24, which in turn references the great polar expeditions of the time.

Several of Callesen's works revolve around the great forces of nature. This is seen in *Surfer* (2023), which shows a man surfing on a door while his belongings float in the water; in *Flood* (2023), in which Ribe Cathedral's Maria Tower is seen sticking up above the water with a boat tied to the weathervane; and in the monumental work *Wave* (2023), in which we are witness to "the point of no return."

Like the other works mentioned from 2023, *Wave* was created for Callesen's touring solo exhibition *In Deep Waters* at Ribe Art Museum (2023), Sophienholm (2023), and Skive Museum (2023–24). The approximately six-metre-long installation is formed at the one end by single snowflakes, which lie spread on a podium. The snowflakes melt together one by one and form a body of water that rises, breaks, and washes into the space. It is a powerful installation, full of drama: the spume sprays from the crest of the wave, and if you get close enough to the work, it becomes clear that the spume is made up of hundreds of tiny human bodies. This anthropomorphism of the spume opens the work to several readings. One could be that water courses through our bodies, and that like other living organisms we are made of large amounts of water. Another angle, which Callesen has mentioned, is that water moves both objects and people with it, and that *Wave*'s spume can also be interpreted as refugees, who in desperation cross the great sea in the hope of a better life. But the work can also be seen as a comment on the warming of the world created by human beings, and that when the polar ice melts and the resulting waves roll in, it will be difficult to stop.

All in the Same Boat? (2023) can be read as an extension of *Wave*. For when the water causes destruction by rising or falling, it affects people. Climate change is global, but its effects vary. Island states are already preparing for the rising waters, while other parts of the world will dry out. This will probably mean that populations will flee their homelands, and that in the not-too-distant future we will experience the migration of climate refugees. *All in the Same Boat?* consists of approximately 700 human figures cut out of a 3.5 by 4.6 metre piece of paper. The many figures whirl in and out of one another, and together form a boat that drifts without oars on a paper sea. A recess has been cut in the work's podium, so that the boat can be lowered under the "surface." The imprints of the figures lie like silhouettes on the surface of the water, and bear witness to the fact that all sorts of people will need a lifeboat when nature shows its teeth. Some of them haven't quite freed themselves from the paper and have been left lying there. There wasn't enough room.

Dissolution

To build a raft out of paper is paradoxical. To build a metre-long tidal wave in paper is paradoxical. To let the paper transform itself into a water surface with little rings is paradoxical. Paper is a fragile material, the production of which requires a lot of water, but it can also dissolve and disappear when it becomes saturated. This suggests that Callesen would like to show us in his works that, for the moment, we are able to keep ourselves above water, but we can't wait too long—for then the paper will dissolve, the wave will break, and the raft will sink. We are sinking.

