

WATER COLUMN

by Loring Knoblauch
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Several years ago, the Swiss artistic duo of Taiyo Onorato and Nico Krebs embarked on a daring photographic project. Over the course of what might amount to five or six quickly published books, the pair planned to explore aspects of the future as they saw it unfolding. Given the inherent limitations photography has for documenting the present (and the past, over time), this would require extending the medium in unlikely directions, embracing lesser known technologies, and generally breaking the established rules for how photographs might function.

The first book in the series, *Future Memories*, came out in 2021, and conceptually wrestled with the idea that it's almost inevitable that we will build our conception of the future on what we know of the past. Using bright light laser technologies, large screens/projections, long exposures, and various other less identifiable techniques, the artists created cityscapes and urban evolutions that visually layered on top of existing worlds, mixing futuristic optimism and a hint of black sun dread.

The second book, *Water Column*, was published this past year, and takes as its central subject the undersea world of life in the oceans. Given our current climate change fears about rapidly rising sea levels, as seen from our position on land, the duo have boldly reversed that perspective and tried to understand and embrace the wonders underwater. *Water Column* is a photobook filled with reaching artistic experimentation, in a sense, following along as the artists reimagine their artmaking within the constraints of an undersea environment. Its message seems to be that the waters will come, so we might as well start thinking about how we're going to artistically define ourselves in that future reality. Their photographic results are oblique and puzzling in many cases, but with a thought-provoking sense of grasping for new modes of expression.

There isn't much explanatory background text in *Water Column*, so all we really know about these mysterious works is that Onorato and Krebs visited various Red Sea research labs over a period of a couple of years, and collaborated with the scientists there to make their photographs, both in the workspaces themselves and out in the sea with underwater cameras and scuba gear. Several images make the associated equipment and experimental tests their subject, with tanks, wet labs, diving probes, robotic arms, submersibles, and inexplicable arrangements of canisters and wires creating a sense of intense technological specificity that is almost beyond our comprehension. The pictures show us the almost abstract colors and patterns of corals colonizing flat plates like stains, lab tanks filled with controlled environments and ecosystems, and air bubbles drifting through tubes and cloudy agglomerations of growth. Like Thomas Struth's monumental images of sites of technological research, these more intimate pictures are perplexing, but steeped in a sense of understated respect and astonishment, documenting scientific amazements (and futures, in this case) normally beyond the reach of the everyday.

Underneath the water, light and color seem to behave differently than on land, and Onorato and Krebs lean into the idea of playing with these properties in unexpected ways. In some cases, their images of brightly luminescent floating jellyfish or the glowing tendrils of other unidentified reaching creatures seem plausibly "straight", but when the seething reds and electric whites arrive, it's hard to know how much the duo have deliberately tweaked, amplified, or magnified the reality. Slightly more obvious are the billows of pigment that have been introduced to various coral reefs (or lab tanks), where drifting clouds of green, pink, orange, and red filter through the water like wispy fogs. The colors are surprisingly vibrant and the effect is eerily dreamy, especially when the tints transform a whole bed of coral or seem to emerge from a yawning opening like a smoky magic potion.

In another group of underwater images, Onorato and Krebs have added to the shadowy black-and-white scenes with photograms. As light trickles down from above the surface, they alter the scenarios, adding floating transparent jellyfish, reaching hands, sparkling water distortions, tangled nests of seaweed, shafts of light, fishing nets, and less identifiable tentacled and squid-like forms that rise up menacingly toward swimmers above. Many of these objects aren't just flat opaque blackness or silhouettes, but have shifting flares of textured light inside, so perhaps they were made of glass or something else that allowed the light to bounce around and create depth and roundness. In these works,

Onorato and Krebs are clearly improvising, seemingly facing their own fears about what might surface to meet us from deepest darkness, injecting a sense of danger into otherwise mundane underwater scenes; we might also think of these pictures as tests of how photography can be used to document our own imaginings and misconceptions about these hidden worlds.

Still other images reach back to a classic Onorato and Krebs technique, one they have used with more cleverness and panache than almost anyone else – an object placed atop a photograph and then illusionistically rephotographed. Here the pair use this technique to explore contrasts of texture between white corals (and other shell forms) and rocky deserts, including canyons, sand dunes, mesas, and wider views. Fractal patterns, wavy lines, densely striated radial forms, and spiky branching thickets are placed in dialogue with the dusty land, making connections that we might not ordinarily see or understand about life underwater. These ideas are then taken one step further in a spread later in the book, where a white coral is set against an apartment block facade covered with air conditioners, creating an unexpected interplay between the natural and the man made.

In a strange twist of logic, part of what has drawn me to *Water Column* is its incomprehensibility; few photobooks I have encountered this year have left me as puzzled and confused, and yet, it is that indirectness and obscurity that has kept me looking and thinking. What's intriguing here is the idea of balancing fact and fiction, or grafting expressive artistic creation to a scientific undercarriage. What emerges is something alien and mysterious, which asks us to see the oceans (and a future where they are even more important) through two separate lenses at once.

Sadly, this kind of inventive photographic exploration seems to have come to an abrupt end. A note on the artists' website explains that the duo has parted ways after some two decades of collaboration, and their multi-part future project seems to have been repackaged as just two volumes. In this way, *Water Column* provides an unintended bookend to a long and productive joint artistic career, leaving us wondering "what might have been" had this brashly expressive envisioning of the future continued.