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Julia Felsenthal *Thalassomania*

JDJ Tribeca
373 Broadway, B11
New York, NY 10013

June 8 - July 21, 2023
Opening Thursday June 8th, 6-8pm

JDJ is thrilled to present Julia Felsenthal's debut solo exhibition in New York at JDJ Tribeca.

Felsenthal's intimately-scaled watercolor paintings evoke the quiet profundity of the ocean as witnessed from the beaches near her studio on Cape Cod. Informed by her keen skills of reportage—honed during the artist's decade and a half working as an arts and culture journalist—each painting offers a distinct, devotional meditation on the meeting of sky and sea, and on the varied color and texture effects created by the Cape's ever-shifting atmospheric conditions.

In *Sun or Moon*, 2022, light from an ambiguous orb scatters across the mirrored, rippling surface of the water; in *Ghost Sea in Azurite and Terre Verte*, 2023, a spectral horizon line dissolves into the ether; in *Far, Far Away*, 2022, thunderclouds part to cast a gloomy sea in an intensely electric glow.

At once rigidly simple in their compositional constraints and obsessively dense in their mark-making, Felsenthal's paintings toe a central fault-line: they celebrate and chronicle the protean nature of water and air while indulging and interrogating the all-too-human desire to halt time, to screenshot a view, or to crystallize the fleeting emotions we experience while viewing it.

About this new series of paintings, Felsenthal writes:

This body of work emerged from the fretful, uncharted territory of that first Covid spring. We were all talking all the time back then about breathing: *bated breath*, and *breathing tubes* and—if you were privileged and not particularly useful—a newfound, guilt-inducing abundance of *space to breathe*. I spent many hours that spring sitting on the sand, watching the ocean and thinking about the way that its rhythms were respiratory: the exhalation of waves breaking, the inhalation of the tide being sucked back, an automatic process like the contraction and relaxation of the human diaphragm. In March 2020, we were told to test our lungs for signs of infection by inhaling deeply and holding our breath. These paintings began as the same sort of exercise: suspending the motion of the sea mid-gasp, a manual override of a process that wasn't really mine to control.

In my experience interviewing painters, I have always been interested in the way they talk about the impulse to make images, the need to flatten, to recreate, to encapsulate, to distill. My paintings are as much about that compulsion to paint as they are about the sea itself: about my own need to compress something vast down to a miniature scale, to bottle it up and share it, a portal to a place and a feeling. The term *Thalassomania*—its root from Thalassa, Greek goddess and embodiment of the sea—refers to an abnormal love of the ocean, identifying something aberrant in the natural tendency to gravitate toward water, especially during times of emotional tumult. Where, it makes me wonder, is the line between interest and obsession, between what is healthy and what is not?

A few months before lockdown, I went to the Met Breuer to see the Vija Celmins show and was enraptured by her intricate pencil drawings, made without the aid of an eraser, that “redescribe” photographs of the textured surface of water. On the Cape, I began looking at the late Provincetown

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painter Pat de Groot's lucid, minimalist palette knife oil paintings of the sky and bay as observed from her studio window. Like de Groot's paintings, mine are fed by a certain thalassomania, an atypical fascination with the mutability of water, the capacity of one substance to appear in seemingly infinite ways. Water is mercurial and complex, and I embrace the foibles of my hand and eye in trying to capture it. Erasure is my tool of choice. I scrub, blot and sometimes even carve pigment away to draw out shapes from initial loose washes of color, to articulate areas of opacity and transparency. Watercolor and paper aren't particularly forgiving materials, but I find poetry in using water to make water. These are paintings of the effects of atmosphere and light that react to atmosphere and light—products both literal and figurative of their environment.

Julia Felsenthal (b. 1983) is a painter and writer working in Brooklyn and Cape Cod. Born and raised in Chicago, she studied English at Yale University and has written extensively about art and culture for *T: the New York Times Style Magazine* and *Vogue*. A lifelong painter, Felsenthal turned her focus to making art full time while living on Cape Cod during the Covid pandemic. Her series of water paintings emerged from the eeriness and anxiety of that time, and have evolved to reflect the ways that small permutations of the quotidian can become endlessly captivating and sublime. Her work has been exhibited in New York City and across the outer Cape, as well as on Block Island, in Woodstock, NY, and in Seattle, Washington.