



Joey Holder, *Semelparous*, 2020, still from the 7-minute, 47-second 4K video component of a mixed-media installation additionally comprising digital prints, wood, MDF, and paint.

Joey Holder

SPRINGHEALTH LEISURE CENTER

By the time female European eels complete their three-thousand-mile, one-to-two-year-long swim from the continent's rivers back to the Sargasso Sea to spawn, they've devoured most of their own skeletons and muscle mass and basically resemble mobile sacks of eggs. Eels are semelparous, meaning they reproduce only once during their lifetime, investing all their energy, body weight, and existential drive (so to speak) in that single journey.

Although European eels are critically endangered (their population is down by roughly 90 percent since the 1970s in great part due to illegal overfishing), Joey Holder's 2020 video installation *Semelparous*—housed in the empty swimming pool of an abandoned North London health club—shows huge quantities of the slimy, restless creatures. Whether filmed at a South Korean fish farm or rendered in naturalistic computer graphics, the eels push forward unstopably, limbless and determined, proceeding rapidly in their distinctive slithering S-shaped motions. This pattern has been stylized by the artist in a drawn motif that was repeated in fence-like structures surrounding the screen and superimposed on the on-screen footage like a recurring—if unexplained—transparent blueprint.

The nearly eight-minute *Semelparous* opens with a digitally rendered close-up shot of the lunar surface, soon superimposed with a night-sky constellation map (on-screen text later informs viewers that eel migrations are synchronized with weather and planetary systems); vertical serpentine symbols resembling the medical profession's caduceus; moon phases; and more. A curling trail of smoke retraces the now-familiar S curve. Things quickly turn weirder, with a rapid-fire sequence that juxtaposes footage of eels with Google image-search pages featuring items ranging from Egyptian sun symbols to religious emblems and pentagrams, illustrations of lizard-faced shamans, Warhammer plastic figurines with hybrid bodies combining bat wings and Viking horns, Scandinavian drum markings, and a \$300,000 blown-glass bong whose tangle of tubing faintly recalls the eels' smooth cylindrical bodies. Creepiest of all, a blinking, bedridden, female AI creature (possibly an ailing sex doll, given her blond-maned youthfulness and implausibly wide "blow-job mouth") is inexplicably recovering in a hospital bed. What follows again features predominantly aquatic motifs: a 3D computer rendering of gulper eels, monstrous deep-sea creatures also possessing rubbery visages and impossibly wide mouths and a pair of hyperactive octopuses attempting to escape a plastic crate, their ceaselessly wriggling tentacles recalling—you guessed it—crawling eels.

In previous projects, Holder (who studied biology and chemistry before earning her MFA from Goldsmiths, University of London) explored the unique yet thriving ecosystems of deep volcanic ocean trenches or drew connections between pharmaceutical companies and secret societies, both of which attempt to unlock the mysteries of the universe using rarefied knowledge. Her unusual editing style favors morphing and overlapping imagery that suddenly vanishes into an all-black screen, then recommences as if beginning a new life cycle. A deliriously pounding soundtrack (remixed from a track by Indonesian hardcore duo Gabber Modus Operandi) combines a primal heartbeat with witchy chanting and a dramatic cinematic score suggesting some epic climax.

Holder is talented at making so many contradictions successfully coexist, as demonstrated by her setting a video teeming with slippery life in a dark, empty, now-dry spa. Everything here is in flux, not unlike the Sargasso Sea, itself just a shifting patch of Atlantic Ocean defined only by moving currents. Holder's worldview equates multiple hidden corners of earthly life, from the eels' migrating, shape-shifting bodies to bioluminescent ocean-bottom beasts, from hospitalized robots to wealthy potheads selecting from a thriving subspecies of multicolored, gold-encrusted "super expensive bongs" online. Every niche is equal in the desperate endeavor to cope and mutate, to adapt to wherever the hell the earth is headed next. Holder's survivalist, high-tech vision is as valid as any, and more compelling than most.

— Gilda Williams