Screening Room no. 15 with Julia O. Bianco, invited by curator Dr. Chandra Frank: *ATLANTA*

Chandra 00:00
Welcome to the screening room. I'm so happy that we're having this conversation. I'm wondering if we could start by having a conversation about your practice, what you're thinking about at the moment and what you're working on. I would love for us to get better acquainted with what you do.

Julia 00:21
Sure. Well, thank you for having me. I am currently working on ideas around urban ecology. And one of my latest questions, or the latest questions that I feel my work aims to answer is, what does it mean to craft spaces for togetherness, not only amongst humans, but interspecies. So at this moment, I'm building a garden. It's a green urban corridor in the neighbourhood of Camp Washington, in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the United States. This neighbourhood was extremely important for the history of Cincinnati during the industrial era, but suffered while it was the capital of the manufacturing industry, and suffered the consequences of deindustrialization in the 1960s and 1970s, driving the population away and leaving a lot of environmental damage that is felt to this day. Thinking about that, and looking at indexes of tree canopy and green spaces, I became really interested in creating this green urban corridor for the neighbourhood and for the neighbours to, and it's a bit of going on a tangent on in terms of being an artist, but I think art has an obligation to address these conundrums, these questions, that's one and then I am working on the third year of my personal garden, which is not mine. It's called Jardin Del Sol, so garden of the sun. And it's kind of a test site. And it's also a reflection. It's a very alive reflection around ideas of migration, belonging and coexistence because the garden holds both native medicinal plants but also plants that have been either naturalised or introduced. So it's a pretty alive reflection of, of movement in a different way. Yeah.

Chandra 02:53
I love that so much. I feel like getting to know you and your work, I've been really interested in how, you know... So often I feel like these complex ecosystems get reduced to like, you know, landscape, nature, but it seems like part of your practice is also very much about collaboration, whether that is with soil, plants or other people. So I wondered if you could speak a little bit about how you see ecosystems as a form of collaboration in your practice?

Julia 03:28
Yeah, so um, I realised a few years ago that in my case, my life and also in my artists practice, my experience of migration had deeply impacted my practice. And at first it was not brought to the surface, or maybe brought to the surface in one layer. But this is a multi layered and very deep experience and very complex. So I understood that in order for me to create a sense of belonging, there has to be a practice of active listening to the place. And also, a few years ago, I really started reading books about nature, whether that is “Braiding Sweetgrass” or some more like politically inclined readings, as well as really working on tree and plant identification. So bringing in the science, but also the sacred, and also the experiential, like the actual being with place, and how that also builds knowledge and understanding. That is very specific. One of the concepts that I use in order to think about my work, especially performance art, but it really extends to my whole practice, is the idea of eco tones. Which are the spaces of intersection between two defined ecosystems and how it has been researched and confirmed that in an ecotone, more biodiversity is found than in each separate ecosystem. So I do this parallel with the migrant experience, the intersection of the migrant body and the land as these spaces for expansion of meaning of understanding and of existence rather than restriction. Restriction, constriction and limit is something that is really associated with this idea of like borders or boundaries. I'm shifting the content of those words, to make space for myself. And for more than me.

Chandra 05:59
I think it's really interesting to think about how land soil... Or the kind of interdependence with the work you do in gardens, how that mirrors or how that speaks to processes of migration. Because obviously, we know in a wider context, that they're not separate from our environment, or climate change, or just the way we move through space. But it's very intentional, or the way that you point our attention to almost these kind of small, everyday acts of gardening, caretaking, and then place this in this wider conversation. I think that really requires us to think about like, the mundane or the every day, and how that speaks to these, like different moments in migration journeys. Whether it speaks about ideas of belonging, like you said, or just kind of configuring what it means to remake home. If you speak about your garden projects, as well as inviting community into these spaces. It seems like it also really offers an opportunity for people to do that with you.

Julia 07:09

Absolutely. I also feel like it's really in those small encounters, as you pointed out, that are happening constantly and almost without thinking. Encounters with the land, encounters with each other, it's in the encounter, where we can really craft meaning and craft space. And my interest in doing this in a city, or engaging in urban spaces at this point has a lot to do with the fact that the majority, or at least half of the world population currently dwell in cities. So there has to be a space for interrogation around also this artificial boundary between nature and the urban or the city, it's all entangled, there's not a hard distinction. So how do we also think about that? How do we reshape the meaning or detangle that tension, because it doesn't actually exist.

Chandra 08:26
Yeah, I'm glad that you brought that up. Because we are screening one of your older works, *ATLANTA*, and I'm really curious whether you could speak to us how it feels to revisit that work. But also, you've spoken to us, so beautifully about, like active listening, and kind of having this relationship with the work that you do in a very embodied way. So I'm curious how it feels or what it felt like for you to place your body in conversation with water, how it feels to revisit that work? And if you could tell us a little bit more about it.

Julia 09:02
Thank you. Um, well, *ATLANTA* is a piece that I can see you then and created back in, I want to say 2020. The experience was rather short, the actual video that came out of it is nine minutes. So it's probably longer than the action itself. It's one of those works, and I think that I was telling you about this, one of those works that remain still a little mysterious to me, and that I still keep finding different meanings. Of course my relationship with, with place and my research around place, has grown and deepened since then. I think *ATLANTA* was one of my first explorations, this was during pandemic times. And there's a couple of references though, that that work addresses. One is the use of cinematic techniques to evoke an emotion. That's why the video was shot at 120 frames per second, which allows in post to create a slow motion that is very seamless, and very soft. And I really, really wanted that. So the use of cinematic language to evoke expected unexpected results. I always found it really curious that these questions that happen when you perform and create a video, so it becomes this, like video performance, if you like, people ask a lot about well, how long did this actually take you? Like there's this questioning of the validity or the reality of the piece, which I find very interesting, because maybe in a different context, those would not be things that you would question. Like, when you're watching a movie, it's understood that it's fiction, but is it and still, you know, it's not real, but you get

in the story. So I think, one of the latest, realisations about this piece is that it's an invitation to partake into an experience, the piece is long enough, and it's slow enough, and it's like, edited in a way that the audience can partake in that experience. Which is, I think, one of the latest and most fascinating realisations that I had. There's a reference to pop culture in the title, which is like something that I enjoy. And it's, it's something that I do kind of for myself. But there's also a sense of redemption, or reconciliation with the ocean, for me from personal history, and a reference to a different kind of trust if you like. So the constrictions that I created for myself, for that piece is not being able to see, and using a mask, a face mask, which was done a lot back then, for obvious reasons. But this idea of like not really, of making things harder, and still trusting that it's going to be okay. Walking without seeing, without being able to breathe very well onto the ocean and go all the way until being completely underwater. I, I put my trust in the ocean. And in that, in that sense, it is where I find that redemption.

Chandra 13:15
Yeah, I feel like that's, that's so moving. Because part of what made me rewatch this piece is not needing those answers to those questions, right. Kind of being pulled into the, I guess the kind of multi sensory experience of water, but also collapsing in this way, the boundaries between land and water, right. So kind of allowing yourself to be taken into this experience, which really makes me reflect on this idea of trust that you brought up as well as the idea of embodiment and how we relate to water, right. And there's obviously there's, I'm sure there's so many conversations about water that we could have in so many different aspects, especially kind of thinking through the politics of water during but also before and after the pandemic, different conversations that are happening around water rights, but then also, you know, the way that water similar to how you work with land and soil and gardening is very much a process, I think, as well. It's like a relationship. And thinking through water as this site in your work, were the materiality of what are like the waves and like the experience that you had, but then also the kind of the the performative qualities of water that you bring out in the piece, that for me are also then tied to some of the historical connotations that water have. Again, that sense of belonging of like how do we kind of think about waves and how they crash and move then how they kind of, you know, renew and arrive and return. And there's so much happening in those nine minutes that I feel like you really open up a different kind of conversation about that. So I was really curious about your kind of embodied experience and how you have become interested in these ideas of process in your work and how you kind of tie that in with, again, whether it's like soil or water. Yeah,

Julia 15:29
Thank you. I feel like when I started creating work directly in relationship with place, which was around that time, that I really started thinking about this idea of the dissolution of boundaries, right. And again, this other idea, which is the artist practice, and more specifically, performance art practice as research method, that creates again, this knowledge and understanding that it's experiential, that is firsthand, and that you cannot really learn by theorising on it. That really opened up a lot of avenues for my practice. I kept doing performance by the water or with bodies of water, understanding that the body, the human body is the vessel through which we experience the world. I think that's not a minor thing. I also feel the migrant body is the example in the world of movement, that actually maybe it's the migrant body, who is marking geography or experiencing the geography, topography, and that these bodies in relationship with the body of the land or bodies of water, which really depending on how you feel them, how you conceptualise them, in which ways you're thinking with them, they become again, something else or someone else. There is a work that I made two years ago, so a little after this one. That's called “Numinous”. And again, is this entrance into a body of water and how going into this body of water can fill us up with the spirit of this body of water, which is specific to this place. And water, this is interesting I think one of my mentors told me this, it's always the same water, but isn't. So to make it a little more complex, because we're artists and and to make it more poetic because we're poets is, it's the same water maybe that has been running for 1000s of years. And it's not because we know that the quality of water is movement. So how much *numen* can water have? It's millennia, we don't even know. So, I think that thinking about the spirit of water and being infused by that spirit by that *numen* became something that I think about in my work in many many ways. Also with soil also with gardening, becoming inoculated by this spirit that it's already there and that it's ancient.

Chandra 18:38
I think that's so beautiful as well, because so often I think these western hierarchies and separations lead us to think that we are like separate from bodies of water or separate from that and think is so interesting in a lot of like black indigenous diasporic cultures, it's like, you know, there's so much beautiful storytelling and writing and art that really is about being water, being off water. I'm thinking of Natalie Diaz as well in her work and kind of speaking about, you know, being the river not like, you know, the river flows through her as part of who she is, as opposed to just kind of thinking about the river as this place that you visit. And so I think that's why it's also so important for black and brown artists in the ways that they place themselves in conversation with the environment, right,

whether it's like water or different sites, depending on geography, of course, to kind of remind of these colonial Western hierarchies that obviously, we're like unpacking and unravelling. But at the same time that are still being reinforced, like, you know, the way you spoke about Cincinnati in the beginning of the conversation, I think about how often in public conversations, there's this emphasis on this word of the urban environment. And, how do we get like, I think people will speak about how do we get, quote unquote marginalised communities into nature or out of the urban environment, you know, not reflecting on the histories of, in Cincinnati, Ohio, at least like the histories of slavery that run through this indigenous people who have lived here. And so you know, there's something really radical about the subtle ways in which you kind of rupture, how those kinds of hierarchies still reverberate. And obviously your work is doing more than just responding to that, obviously. But it's taking into account where those echoes still live. And in some ways, that's very material, of course, and very practical, if we think about access and space. But I think that's so beautiful that you brought that up around, water changing and being the same and kind of thinking about, we are also bodies of water. So I just feel like there's so much there in terms of like embodiment. And having conversations, I also know that you work a lot with students and different kinds of forms of fellowships, so I'm also curious how you extend some of that practice, as it seems also to be very much part of your pedagogy to invite other artists, younger generations are people you work with to kind of go below the surface as a very intentional thing. And I wonder if you could speak to that a little bit?

Julia 21:38
I think my, you can call it teaching practices, not when they teach is it I feel it's a very outdated term, but my teaching practice, my artists practice, I think those two are in conversation. And the intention behind it, or behind those are the same which is to answer questions about generosity and questions about reciprocity, how do we share, I think, as artists, there's a lot that we become interested in. And then we make work. And then there's this idea that there's an audience, and they will receive the work. So I find just thinking about that, and just conceptualising the way that art is experienced. And the way that the experiences are experienced, like It blows my mind, because we are constantly being impacted by each other. And the work changes people and people change the work. And it's in the same way, the way that I approach my teaching practices, it has a lot to do with giving, and leaving a lot of room for co - shaping of meaning. So collective shaping of meaning, and reshaping and receiving, right, because I bring like a very specific set of information. And I have readings as invitations. But ultimately, I'm also being impacted by the presence and the

thinking and the spirit of my students. So I think, this question about how do we share? And how do we acknowledge that we are in a mutualistic relationship, and it's that exchange, and it's that inclination to be humble is what allows for all of us to grow together. And again, you look at the garden, you see that every plant needs some space, and when they have enough space, they can grow next to one another. And I know this kind of a very simple and kind of corny reference, but it's very real. So yeah, there's this poem that I wrote a while ago, where I say that we inhabit each other. And I think this is really what's happening. It's shown in nature. It's shown in human interaction, that we're pretty much breathing the same air. We're close enough. So we're constantly inoculating one another. So how do we create an intentional space for that to happen?

Chandra 24:42
I really love that. I think this kind of relates to my last question. I mean, we obviously could just be speaking for hours. But I think part of why I was also really drawn to your work with water and like how you use performance is because it shifts our understanding of time as well. And so I feel like time and engaging with scale is also such a big part of your practice. And when I'm thinking about *ATLANTA* and this piece about how we learn something from water about time is really interesting to me, right? Because it kind of, as you spoke earlier, it kind of requires a certain kind of trust. So I'm really interested in your engagement of time, thinking about how you shift alongside water and time and how time is such a big part of your practice in terms of how.... There's this interdependence, right? You can't push time if you're working with an ecosystem. So I feel like that your engagement, very deliberate engagement with like slowing down, and letting the water speak to you or learning with the water. I really felt like there was something there about time. And I wondered if you had some final reflections on that.

Julia 26:05
Thank you for that question. Time is interesting. It's such a construct. And it's also so real. I feel more and more that I'm constantly learning about different ways to interpret or to experience time. And human time is fascinating it is this thing that we made, and that we stand by, and my experience in these like eco tonal moments, moments of intersection with my garden, moments of intersection with a body of water, moments of intersection with like deep, vast and small phases, where nature is very present, those notions of time are challenged, if not completely meaningless, and shifted. So time feels, unless it doesn't matter anymore. It's, I'm not looking at the clock, I don't care. I mean, this I'm kind of in the essence of the living. So how sometimes, sometimes time is so counter to the

living to what's alive. Because what's alive is not taking track of time, it doesn't exist. But it's but it's all it's a complex relationship. Because we live in a system that is regulated very heavily by time and deadlines, and neither good nor bad, right. But I do feel like my relationship with time and especially my relationship with ideas around process, have really, really been first very challenged and then expanded quite a bit based on my work in an eco tonal way.

Chandra 28:09
That's so beautiful. Thank you so much for being so open and generous, really. And for this really interesting conversation. I really invite people to sit with the work and kind of watch it multiple times or maybe over, you know, the span of the month that it's up to kind of revisit it because I really feel like it will kind of highlight much of what you've spoken about in this conversation. So thank you so much.

Julia 28:37
Thank you Chandra, thank you for the opportunity.