



CONTINENTAL DRIFT

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I was crossing the Queensborough bridge on my bike one morning when I looked down at the East River. Way below on the water two large barges moved slowly side by side with several tug boats pushing their load. The barges balanced the weight of a new bridge, fully constructed on the shore in upstate New York and now en route to its final destination: to replace the Willis Avenue bridge between Manhattan and the Bronx. I stopped pedaling and stared down at what would soon be a massive structure carrying four lanes of traffic. From my viewpoint on the much bigger bridge the new bridge below seemed dwarfed. Instead of being a solid landmark spanning the river for the water to flow under, the future bridge was oriented parallel to the shoreline, slowly moving with the stream.

This unusual vision offered me a shift in perception like the one we make when we imagine the continental drift. Step outside of the continent on which you stand and look at the contour of the continents from above. Now forget the notion that these are stationary land masses between which the oceans flow. Instead, accept them as big Islands, slowly floating across the water:



The theory of continental drift has fascinated me ever since I learned about it in elementary school. One look at a map and you feel an impulse to join together the jigsaw puzzle shapes of Africa and South America. But while it's easy to trust the story of Pangea as part of our planet's history, it is much harder to imagine the continents are still moving towards a future where the world map will have no resemblance to what we are so familiar with today. Around the same age I also worried about the implications of a new peace treaty between Israel and one of its neighbors as I would have to learn to draw a new shape for my country.

In some respects Israel is like an Island. You can't simply get in your car and drive across the border to another country. It is located at the intersection of three continents - Asia, Europe and Africa - but it doesn't seem to belong to any one of them. I wonder if today, after living in New York for almost a decade, part of my appeal towards continental drift is the prospect of shortening the gap between myself and my homeland, bringing North America and the Middle East a little closer together.



Tortoises seem to be a perfect vehicle for re-choreographing continental drift. Their hard, round shell resembles the surface of the earth. With a reputation for moving slowly, they are well-suited to demonstrate a geological phenomenon. During its long lifetime a tortoise may have witnessed events of past generations and will live through future ones. As a species, tortoises are a link all the way back to the time of the dinosaurs.

These attributes might explain why turtles and tortoises were repeatedly cast as a foundation for the creation of the world. Chinese, Hindu and Native American cultures recount how the world was successfully formed on top of a turtle. Often in these myths, elements of water, sky, earth, plants, animals and people already existed separately but something was lacking. The solid anatomy of a turtle-shell allowed them to coexist and become the present world.

In my installation I collage together the universe, associatively rearranging common knowledge. The tortoise's enclosure is shaped like a globe. Inside the globe is a habitat fashioned like a museum diorama where a visitor can "look through" the artwork



into nature. It is not aimed to capture a specific place and time, but rather every place and every time. The landscape transitions seamlessly from woods to desert and only half of this world is lit, while the other half is in shadow. Light and dark slowly rotate, simulating the cycle of day and night. To view the entire panoramic painting one must circle the perimeter of the diorama - like a moon orbiting a planet. In this universe the audience becomes a celestial body.

Whenever someone learns that I make sculptures the next question is - what is your medium? I struggle to answer this question as my material list changes from one piece to the next. In *Continental Drift* I utilize live tortoises in my artwork for the first time. To source this "art supply" I joined the New York Turtle and Tortoise Society and visited their annual turtle show. There I learned about a variety of species and met Sara Ramos, also known as the Turtle Lady of Williamsburg. Ramos shares her one bedroom apartment with sixty turtles. She plays cartoons on TV for them and plans a landscape mural in the living room above their pond. The six tortoises in the installation are on loan from her collection.

In the summer of 2005 I was herding sheep in the Catskill mountains. I often climbed to the top of the hill to take in the view of many more hills stretching around me. Thick luscious green woods, patched with bright green fields. I had never seen so much green before. As I sat on top of the hill, the pasture below me dotted with grazing sheep, I wondered - do these sheep ever stop eating, pick up their heads, look around and think "bahh... it's so beautiful"?

We can't help but see ourselves when we look at other animals, projecting onto them a narrative of wills, emotions and morals. I now wonder - do the tortoises in Continental Drift enjoy the landscape I painted around them? Is this scenery branded in their DNA as the place their ancestors and relatives roam? Watching the tortoises move around, their gestures seem familiar yet puzzling. Perhaps that's the reason we can't take our eyes off of animals in nature shows, zoos or in the wild*. The tortoises go about their tortoise way and we affix human sense to their interactions, developing a story. With the continents on their backs they assume characters. Rather than abstract shapes, the continents are geographic symbols pieced together from knowledge we learn in school, fears fed by the news or fantasies of travel. Without intending to, the tortoises create new configurations of the world map. And so we find ourselves reading into these arbitrary geographies, rearranging our ideas and preconceptions of the world.

- Einat Imber, 2012

*John Berger, "Why Look at Animals?" (1977; reprint, London: Penguin Books, 2009)