

David Bowen

on water



David Bowen—on water

Essay by Christopher Atkins

"[...] the boat is a floating piece of space, a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea." - Michel Foucault

On July 8, 2019 the *Falkor*, a science research vessel operated by the Schmidt Ocean Institute, left Portland Harbor for an 11-day journey to Honolulu, Hawaii. On board were a group of artists who would spend their time working with the Institute's science lab and imaging technology in ways that would contribute to their self-directed art and research projects. David Bowen was one of the artists on the *Falkor* that day and, before the ship even left the harbor, he began working on a project that would chart his journey across the Pacific Ocean.

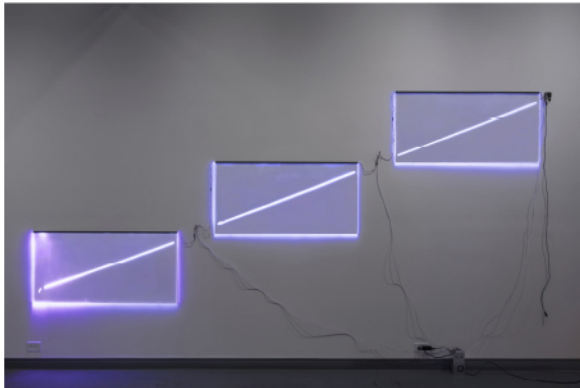
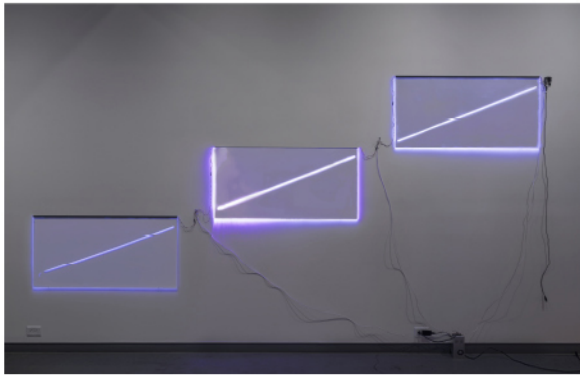
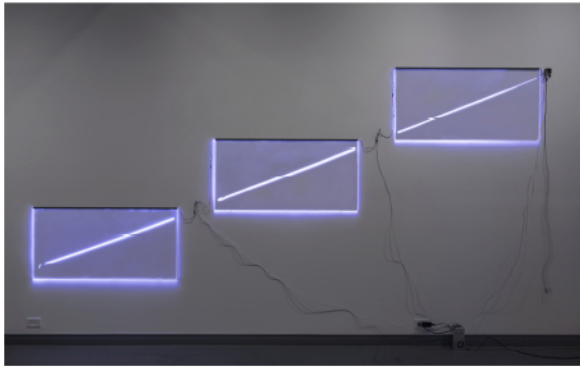
The underside of the *Falkor* is outfitted with a multibeam echo sounder, a sonar device that bounces off the ocean floor, creating remarkably detailed and information-rich images of the underwater topography. Scientists and geographers have been using the technology for years to map the ocean floor and find shipwrecks. Bowen used the echo sounder and some custom software to scan a 2,567-mile-long, 10-mile-wide sliver of the ocean floor, with depths up to 5000 meters. Bowen's installation *the journey* was created after processing the raw sonar data. It was then fed into a CNC-router that carved *the journey* into 3 panels of crystal-clear acrylic. An LED light charts the general northeast to southwest bearing of the ship's journey from Portland to Honolulu. As you watch the LED move from start to finish the project encapsulates the ocean's massive shifts of scale; the amount of detail the echo sounder can capture is remarkable yet the size of the files are massive. But when this project is held up to the scale of the rest of the Pacific Ocean, it revises the irresistible shifts of scale one experiences on the ocean.

the journey, like the other works in the *on water* exhibition, are a continuation of Bowen's project to creatively hack open source data he collects from his own equipment but that he can also stream from public weather nodes and oceanographic buoys. This work, especially, is about capturing fractions of massive fleeting and impermanent moments, transferring and visualizing the earth's subtle meteorological moods at the moment they vanish. The work asks a question that has confounded ocean explorers and pirates for millennia: is it possible to know your location and be lost at the same time?

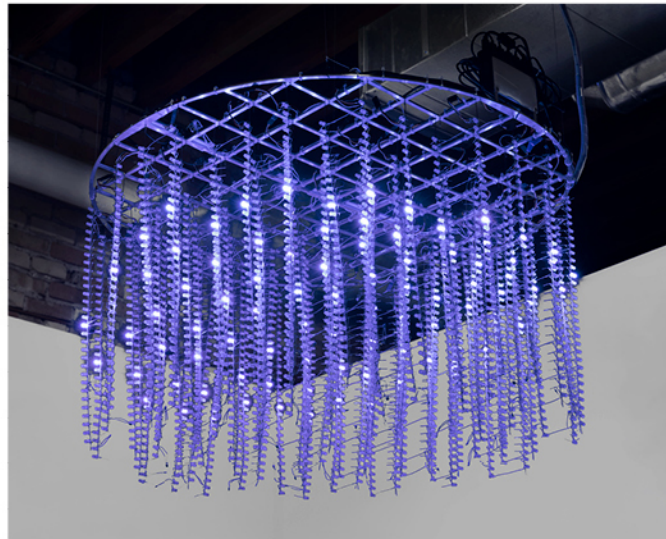
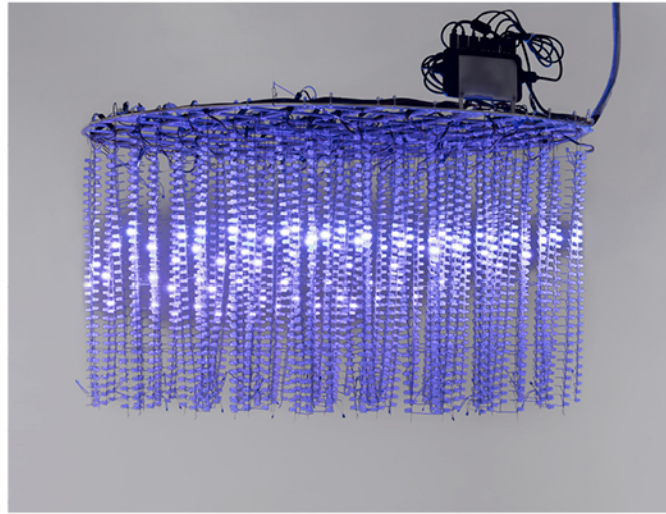
Bowen's five-part series of sculptures entitled *46°41'58.365" lat. -91°59'49.0128" long. @ 30m* is a precursor to the other works in *on water*. There is nothing more enduring than Lake Superior's surface but the waves that animate the water are constantly changing and always disappearing. They are fragments of time from a specific location on the lake. To create this work, Bowen took 'pictures' that were captured from scientific buoys, converted them into digital data files then preserved forever in CNC-carved acrylic. The natural landscape is an eternal inspiration for painters, photographers and media artists like Bowen. What is different about his work is how Bowen taps into and extracts fragments of data that are sent along the NOAA wireless networks. He isn't looking through a camera viewfinder; each piece in the series is a photorealistic image-sculpture of something he hasn't seen and will never see. And since Bowen pulled data from the same location at different times, the five sculptures can be appreciated like a series of portraits. Instead of a person, they capture and preserve the undulating vicissitudes of the lake's surface.

water surface, a ceiling-mounted sculpture with hundreds of LED lights on its tentacles, is reacting to real-time wave data from a NOAA buoy bobbing in the Pacific Ocean 250 miles northeast of Honolulu. As the lights go up and down on each tentacle, so do the waves in that remote location. From a distance *water surface* resembles a lone jellyfish that is swimming through the ocean but up close the array becomes a 3-dimensional data display monitor.

ON THE COVER: *wilderness (tele-present trash)*, dimensions variable, 2020



the journey, each panel 24" x 48", 2020



water surface, 36" x 36" x 36", 2016

SEPTEMBER 19 - DECEMBER 5, 2020



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46°41'58.365" lat. -91°59'49.0128" long. @ 30m, each 6" x 6" x 6", 2015

The subtle but very complex combination of sculptural and digital components comes from Bowen's deep appreciation for the terrible beauty of nature, an ongoing fascination with the ocean's surface, as well as hyper-connected data networks that can transmit instantaneous information across the world.

wilderness (tele-present trash), a brand-new work created for this exhibition, came about when Bowen's journey on the *Falkor* passed near a portion of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, a Texas-sized flotilla of marine debris that slowly spins in the middle of the ocean. Like Bowen's *tele-present wind (2018)*, this installation uses another stream of open source live data to control ceiling-mounted spools that gently pull plastic bags up and down as if they are floating in the ocean. The "Thank You for Shopping with Us" bags mimic how jellyfish and cephalopods push small jets of water to steer their bodies along underwater ocean currents. The installation brings a simultaneous fragment of the Garbage Patch to the gallery and with it, a discourse on how non-biodegradable single-use plastics are being eaten by and supplanting marine life.

When the *Falkor* pulled into Honolulu harbor on July 19, Bowen's work had just begun. The echo sounder data still needed to be exported and compressed so that the massive files could be brought back to his studio and fabrication could begin. Bowen likes to work with crunchy data so he doesn't spend too much time cleaning it up. This means that each installation will inevitably include a few unforeseen yet productive glitches. There are now many different mapping platforms available, much of them for free, so it's easy to forgive the assumption that the world has been completely charted; a quick search will find apps for how to beat traffic on our way home, researching new restaurants, buying a new house or charting voting demographics in the neighborhood. Each of them combines different archives of



46°41'58.365" lat. -91°59'49.0128" long. @ 30m (detail)

information to spatialize and present data. But we know that all maps are constructions not reproductions. And since every map has an author, it will be interesting to watch how artists and scientists continue to place themselves as positioned viewers to push the limits of cartographic tools, translate what can and cannot be charted, visualizing what can and cannot be seen, inspiring belief and casting doubt.

Christopher Atkins is an independent curator, writer, and photographer who lives in Minneapolis. For more than ten years, he has curated dozens of one-person and group exhibitions, site-specific installations, and artist-in-residence programs as Minnesota Artist Exhibition Coordinator at the Minneapolis Institute of Art (2009 - 2015), as Curator of Exhibitions at the Minnesota Museum of American Art, (2015 - 2019), and as guest curator at other local and national venues.