

TARYN SIMON



A COLD HOLE

In a series of works documenting her installation at MASS MoCA, artist Taryn Simon photographs men as they plunge into a shaft of freezing water in an ice-floored gallery.

Visitors to *A Cold Hole* enter a cavernous, black room and approach a broad aperture in the wall. The aperture frames a bright white space, with a frozen body of water where the floor should be. A square hole cut through the center shows darkness beneath. The installation is activated by participants—a mix of members of the public who reserve appointments in advance and regular performers—who walk across the ice and plunge into the hole, emerging with a gasp. By transporting the ritual of cold-water immersion into the museum, Taryn Simon disrupts the usual structures surrounding the practice. In *A Cold Hole*, participation is not mandated but instead must be sought out, shifting the impetus from cultural to individual.

In this installation, Simon activates the ancient rite of cold-water immersion, which recurs in contexts from Russian Orthodox Epiphany celebrations to Shinto Kanchu Misogi baths to Apache leader Geronimo's use of cold water to train boys for manhood and battle. Ritual cold-water immersion is often employed as a

“quick fix,” an immediate reset, a symbolic rebirth and purification, shocking the participant out of their capacity for thought. In these rituals, participation is often mandated by social pressure or religious tradition: Individual action is subsumed into a ceremonial performance that reinforces systemic power relations.

In photography, the click of the shutter has historically defined the moment of the artwork's creation, when the photographer decides which subjects to include within the frame. Henri Cartier-Bresson described this as “the decisive moment.” In *A Cold Hole*, the decisive moment rests with the subject, who knows why and when they will take the plunge. However, this decision is not made privately but publicly, within a frame dictated by the artist, as eager viewers observe from the safety and anonymity of the darkened room. They comment on the participant's actions, laughing, clapping, and occasionally voicing threats to push them into the hole. Where does power lie: with the artist, the participant, or the viewers? In a space of both intense external scrutiny and sharp awareness of one's own body, where does performance end and reality begin?

— ALEXANDRA FORADAS, ASSOCIATE CURATOR, MASS MOCA

FIVE VIEWS OF MY BODY IN FREEZING WATER

by ALEXANDRA KLEEMAN

1. In the pocket-size video filmed as my body fell into the column of near-freezing water, it looks startlingly easy: The figure makes her way around the perimeter of the room, one foot in front of the other, walking with her arms out like a child, preserving a wavery sense of balance. Colors look different in the cold light, the skin pale and clinical, the body exposed in a sage green slip dress and overpowered by the surrounding white, like a soundless vote of no confidence. At the edge of the hole she stops, looks down and up again slowly, the picture of someone who could change their mind. Suddenly then, without warning, the figure jumps into the air, tucks its knees up close to the body, and falls in. The figure vanishes into the ground. There is no trace of me at all.

2. How can I explain that the feeling of being in the plunge is no feeling at all? I sometimes describe the feeling of having feelings in this way: On one day, you're like a person watching TV, sitting at a comfortable distance and tracking the images unfolding onscreen, stories that tumble into one another or are severed with sharp, nonsensical breaks in narrative. On another, you yourself are the TV set, coursing with energy and color, seeing what is happening inside you only by the hues and shadows cast on the wall. But inside the ice-cold hole, there is no TV at all, and no watcher—just a wide-open black space pulled tight and close, a jolt in the darkness, like electricity or a car crash, and the galloping, like a wild herd of something that you would no longer call your heart. In the cold hole, the frigid water gives a sense of place rather than substance. The cold water is water-like, but unlike the water you've encountered before. It has no comfort to register, no communion with the passive stuff you drink from a glass, which doesn't even put up a fight as it slides down your gullet. Sunk in the colder-than-cold, it's impossible to tell whether you are heavy or light, pressed up against death or just a cosmonaut navigating an alien planet. Trying to think within the experience is like walking against an extremely strong wind, where you have a better chance of gaining ground if you simply lean in, letting your mind grow silent and cold.

3. In interviews, artist Taryn Simon has referred to this piece as “a self-portrait,” a description too perplexing to be taken literally but too interesting to be merely a joke. Standing at the edge of the perfect square, the perfectly unwelcoming hole, I scent saltwater and the chilly, indefinable presence of ice, which doesn't so much give off an odor as amplify the clean, crisp traces of water churning gently below. The frigid gap before me is the inverse of a human presence, a dark and amnesiac tunnel downward, a powerful anti-phallic cave offering a cold embrace and the mixed pleasure of self-subtraction. When I jump in, I feel erased: my mind pushed out of my mind, the sketched notion of my self that I carry around in some back pocket of memory violently struck out. But as I rise toward the surface gasping, as I break the water's plane and pull the chill air into my lungs, I'm someone once again—a newer, uncertain sort of someone, my nerves tender and exposed and teeming with stimulation. We associate water with birth and rebirth for good reason: To be submerged in water is the closest thing to nonexistence that we can tolerate, tourists at the outskirts of death, and you have to voyage if you ever want to experience return.

Processions of baptized souls, shark attack victims and near-drowners, creatures from black lagoons, monstrous and shaggy with swamp weeds—you never know what will crawl out from a body of water, only that it may not be quite the same thing that went in. When I pull myself out of the hole, at first all I feel is the heavy cold sheeting off me. But as I stand on the ice dripping, freezing, I feel myself more sharply than before—in precise, tingling detail, like my every feature has been outlined by a pen made of light. Could this be a fragment of what the artist means when she describes *A Cold Hole* as auto-portraiture? A bright, aching sketch of yourself; a one-to-one etching done right on your body. It's an inverted magic trick, a transformation with no apparent change, no illusions and no reveal.

4. For this reason, *A Cold Hole* is an incredibly private experience. Though each plunge is visible to the museum's visitors through the large square window set at the end of a viewing chamber and filmed by a

camera embedded in the wall just above the viewing station, it's also solitary—in the sense that there is only a sliver of overlap between what the audience sees and what the subject experiences. It is intimate insofar as it is isolating, and the most potent intimacy is that which happens between a single person, as they press up against themselves. Standing at the edge of the dark square hole, I gaze straight forward into a second dark square hole crowded with the faces and bodies of the people on the other side of the glass, piercing the solitude of my cold vacuum. Through the viewing window, they are rendered shadowy and monochromatic, children and adults and teenagers in summer wear, pushing toward the membrane, holding their phones up to the glass. They fill the space of the window completely. Though I'm in a completely separate environment, set apart from the crowd by layers of glass, darkness, and temperature and sound insulation, the pressure to do something interesting with my body for the viewing interest of the public is palpable—a sort of weight at my temples. It's hard to imagine anyone ever turning back from the edge of the hole without giving the audience the thing that they're waiting for. And so I give everybody what they want. I jump down into the dark saltwater hole, where the subterranean black hides me from view, intolerably cold but warm in its seclusion. Over a long lifetime of captivity, can a zoo animal ever learn to forget that it's being watched?

5. For hours afterward, the hair stands at attention on my arms, my skin feels cool to the touch. Under a humid summer sun, I am covered in goosebumps. I shiver in the hot car. Against the perimeter of my body, the air feels 10 degrees cooler. Of course, there is always the American hunger for self-transformation, self-transcendence, urging us to imagine ourselves as beings constantly improving, moving closer to achieving our true selves—but still, it feels as though something objective has shifted within me. A muscle memory of my own utter solitude in the water. I lay my palm against my shoulder. When I close my eyes and let my mind go cold, I think I can feel it there like a pulseless heart, a cold hole still churning somewhere beneath the surface. **G**



















