

Roni Horn: *A dream dreamt in a dreaming world is not really a dream ...but a dream not dreamt is.*

July/August 2023 | By Charles Schultz

Page 1 of 7



Roni Horn, *The Selected Gifts* (1974–2015) (detail), 2015. Sixty-seven inkjet prints.

© Roni Horn. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Roni Horn brought the arctic circle to southern China. She'd planned to do it three years ago, but Horn's exhibition at the brand-new HE Art Museum (HEM) kept being postponed due to pandemic restrictions. At last, on June 7, the American artist took a seat on stage beside the curator of her show, Shao Shu, and Christopher Ho of the Asia Art Archive. A gigantic print of Fred Flintstone and Barney Rubble hung behind them. Horn's satisfaction at having reached the opening of this grand exhibition was palpable. Her radiant smile needed no translation. Horn, Shu, and Ho talked about the work on view and how the artist and curator collaborated on transforming the galleries to realize Horn's vision. There would be no right angles. There would be almost no artificial light. There would be nothing on the walls to explain the work. For Horn's biggest exhibition in Asia she wanted her audience to do more looking than reading, to engage with the heart as much as the mind. Towards the end of their conversation I understood how affective Horn's energy could be: everyone in the room was smiling.

Designed by Tadao Ando, the HE Art Museum can be imagined as a set of circular galleries stacked around a central spiral. As one ascends the galleries they become larger. It's a stunning feat of design with more sloping curves than corners. There is much to commend, but what really defines the interior are the floor-to-ceiling glass walls that allow light to stream into the galleries. Illuminated principally by the sun, Horn's objects respond according to the time of day or the weather. It's not a stretch to say the weather participates in one's experience, because if it's raining—as it was on the days I visited—the light will be soft and the artwork imbued with a gentle radiance.



Installation view: *Roni Horn: A Dream dreamt in a dreaming world is not really a dream ... but a dream not dreamt is*, HE Art Museum, Guangdong, China, 2023. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth. © He Art Museum. Photo: JJYPHOTO.

An Icelandic farmer once told Horn, "The weather always matters. And the weather currents also affect your dreams." For the farmer, dreaming meant night visions that foretold events yet to occur, but as he explained to Horn, "nobody believes you if they've never noticed it, they think it's just fantasy and nonsense." For Anne Carson, from whom Horn borrowed the title of her exhibition, it's not only people who dream; the world dreams. In her poem Carson acknowledges this idea comes from "classical Chinese wisdom." In fact the idea is so saturated in the fabric of Chinese culture that it was sloganized for the 2008 Olympics in Beijing, "One World One Dream," to which Horn might have added, "One Weather."

Notably, Anne Carson's poem is from the book *Plainwater*. Water is a constant theme for Horn and her exhibition opens with a set of four incredible glass sculptures called *Water Doubles*. Each work is made up of a pair, and although they are five imperial tons apiece, they seem weightless. In the gigantic trapezoidal gallery with light coming through the walls, Horn's cast glass cylinders are luminous. It's as if light emanates from within them. Their outer walls are opaque, but their tops—what the artist calls the "oculus"—are transparent. Depending on where one stands the oculus either reflects what's near or permits a glimpse into the interior of the sculpture. At this scale it takes months for the glass to cool, but you don't feel that time. You feel the nowness—the immediacy—of the objects' presence.

There are more than fifty works on display, but only one type transmits time through the hand of Horn. These are her drawings and they are large enough to get lost in. Each consists of the same material—powdered pigment, graphite, charcoal, color pencil, and varnish on paper—but the composition never repeats. To create these works smaller drawings are sliced up with razors and puzzled together to generate intertwining forms, or tangles. Six of these drawings hang on the walls beside Horn's *Water Doubles* and the result is a gallery with bivalent time scales. On the walls, time is laid out through myriad choices a viewer can trace and examine; on the floor the *Water Doubles* are simply, profoundly present.



Roni Horn, *Or 7*, 2013-2015. Powdered pigment, graphite, charcoal, colored pencil, and varnish on paper, 278 × 257 cm. Courtesy of Glenstone Museum. © Roni Horn. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Tom Powel.

One definition of tangle is essentially edible seaweed, from the Old Norse *thöngull*. This is notable because it connects Horn's drawings to an environment of water. In 2012, the artist recorded a video of herself reading the text to her book *Another Water*, as the sun set behind her. Watching the video in a dark room after being in the sun-soaked gallery is a powerful contrast. Narrative time is fully at play. The text Horn reads blends a variety of sources, alternately humorous, tragic, and matter-of-fact. It's the moment in the show when the viewer can see the artist, can hear her voice, how it trembles and becomes excited. At one point Horn asks, "When you look at your reflection in the water, do you see the water in you?" The museum is surrounded by water, and in this setting, it feels as if Horn is addressing Ando's building.

Horn's photography is well accounted for in the exhibition, and in one series, "A.K.A." (2008–2009), it could be argued the viewer has another opportunity to see the artist. After all, it's a series in which Horn pairs photographs of herself with photographs of herself. But what I realized as I spent time with these images in the low light of the curving room is that Horn is demonstrating that a person is a process like fire is a process. We are always changing, every moment; it's the illusion of consistency that lets a person hold on to the notion of a fixed identity. As Horn's work makes evident over and over again, identity is amorphous—like glass.

Identity is also a matter of perspective. For example, how would you define yourself based on the gifts you've received? This is the question at the heart of *The Selected Gifts* (1974–2015) (2015–2016). One arrives in the chamber showcasing Horn's Gifts after passing a gridded set of fuzzed-out clown faces, *Cabinet Of* (2001), that doubly obscure identity: once by painting the face and then by blurring its representation. Emphasizing difference by proximity, Horn placed the straight-forward and unemotional photos of *Gifts* (forty-three on view) in the room adjacent to the grid of clowns, and lined them up cheek to jowl. There are meatballs, artworks, books, rocks; Fred and Barney are here. Almost all her gifts are intended for the hand, the eye, or the mouth. It makes you wonder what Horn hears when she wants to really listen. And also, if we are what we're given, what do we make of what we perceive to be missing?



Roni Horn, *The Selected Gifts (1974–2015)* (detail), 2015. Sixty-seven inkjet prints.
© Roni Horn. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

Towards the end of the exhibition I began to notice how much Horn keeps her eyes on the earth. I felt this because of how much time I spent looking down, not only at objects on the floor, but at photographs of the ground. Even her drawings bear traces of footprints. Horn may have been born a New Yorker, but she's rooted in Iceland, and when I imagine her there, I see her moving. I see her on a motorcycle, and because the way ahead is through uneven terrain, she gives her attention to what will pass beneath her wheels. She keeps her eyes on the earth because that's where information she cares about is kept.

Horn's long and loving relationship with Iceland is brought home in the last rooms of the exhibition. Here the viewer encounters three distinct bodies of photography that portray water in Iceland. One room contains suites of photographs showing geothermal pools where people swim, another focuses on geysers, and the third represents Horn's effort to photograph the arctic circle. Of course, the arctic circle isn't visible. But Horn makes it so with a series of images hung about two meters high, so that the viewer is pushed into the center of the room to observe the work. From that vantage, one stands in place and rotates to take in photographs of the horizon over the ocean alongside portraits of people and animals and a room and bird's eggs. The work encircles the room, and eventually you notice that the horizon lines meet the eye lines of the people. You see that the same room is empty in one picture and full of something in another. Similarly, in one image the bird's nest is barren, in another it's cradling eggs. In the center of Horn's circle you get the sense of cycles—harvest cycles, life cycles, cycles of a day—occurring all at once, a tangle of cycles.

The final room of the exhibition contains the artist's books, which function like an index. This is as close as Horn gets to giving the viewer any background information on anything in the exhibition. It becomes clear looking at the books how Horn always works in sets, in pairs, in serialized effort. The exhibition closes with a photolithograph of a wave crashing on a rock from 1997. It's called *Untitled (A Brink of Infinity)* and is part of Horn's book, *To Place, Verne's Journey*. The place is Iceland, where Jules Verne determined the center of the Earth to be. The physical memory of standing in the center of Horn's circle returns and pairs with Verne's fictional vision of Iceland: a splash of time; a brink of infinity.