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

Variations of 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 tourists. Participants disrupt the usual structure surrounding the practice. In Cold Hole, participation is not mandated but instead must be sought out, shifting the impetus of the artwork to the individual. In this installation, Simon activizes the ancient rite of cold-water immersion, which means in contexts from Russian Orthodox Epiphany celebrations to Shinto Kusatsu Onsen baths to Apache leader Geronimo’s use of cold water to train boys for mankind 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 communal performance that reinforces social and cultural norms.

In photography, the click of the shutter has historically defined the moment of the photograph. In the ‘decisive moment’ described by Henri Cartier-Bresson, the shutter is triggered at precisely the right moment. In 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 viewer? Is space of both intense external pressure and sharp awareness of one’s own body, where does performance end and reality begin?

— ALEXANDRA PORADAS, 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 extended, like a child, preserving a wavery sense of balance. Colors look different in the cold light, the skin looks more clinical, the body exposed in a sage green slip dress and overpowered by the surrounding white, blackness and the walls robs of confidence. At the edge of the hole, the steps look down and up again slowly, the picture of someone who could change their mind. Suddenly, 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 hand, the plunge is no feeling at all. The figure vanishes into the ground. The plunge is no feeling at all? I sometimes describe the feeling of being in the plunge is no feeling at all? I sometimes describe the feeling of being in. The figure vanishes into the ground. There is no trace of me at all.

3. In interviews, artist Taryn Simon has referred to this experience 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 unobtrusive hole, I want submergence and the chilling, indefinable presence of water, 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 essence of a human presence, a dark and amnesiac tunnel downward, a powerful anti-phallic care offering a cold embrace and the mingled pleasures of self-submersion. When I jump in, I feel around my mind pushed out of my mind, the sketched notion of my self that I carry around as 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 child air into my lungs, I’m someone once again—a new, uncertain sort of someone, my nerves tender and exposed and tensing 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. Proponents of baptismal souls, shark attack victims and near-drowners, creatures from black lagoons, monstrous and sharp-eyed with vapors—all 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 sliding off me. But as I stand on the ice dripping, freezing, I feel myself more sharply a pulseless heart, a cold hole still churning somewhere 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 a ‘auto-portrait’? A bright, achingly drawn self-portrait, a one-to-one etching done right on your body. It’s an inverse magic trick, a transformation with no apparent change, no illusions and no reveal.

4. For this reason, A Cold Hole is an incredibly personal 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, an incredibly private experience, the most intimate immersion in that it 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 isolation, the pressure does 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’d been waiting for. And so I give everybody what they want. I jump down into the dark sub-zero hole, where the subterranean black fumes me from view, impossibly cold but warm in its isolation. Over a long lifetime of captivity, a zoos 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 cold to the touch. Under a humid summer sun, I am covered in goosebumps. I shiver in the hot car. Against the insistence 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 skin swells 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 beat, a cold hole still churning somewhere beneath the surface.