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 **Drowned worlds**

Gwyneth Jones

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**In lieu of** an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

## Drowned worlds

*Gwyneth Jones (bio)*

Initially, there's just something unplaceably uncanny about the portraits that won Emma Critchley her first major awards, back in 2004. Each subject wears a white shirt that appears translucent; each face is intently still; serene, yet full of tension. Strange things happen when you ask your

collaborators to stand in a tank of water, lungs bursting to exhale: to have their photos taken in an environment where human beings cannot survive.

The underwater art began with a passion for diving (she is a certified commercial diver). She took a cheap underwater camera with her on a Marine Conservation Project in Indonesia (a trip financed by a sponsored 'shark dive' in Brighton Sea Life Centre); shot many rolls of film and got little in return except snowstorms of back-scatter. But thereafter – since her degree course, when her tutor pushed her to keep going, inventing her own ways to explore this *other space*, where everything has to be re-imagined – her works (squid-like human bodies; a study, *They*, of people on the Somerset Levels, feeling abandoned by the authorities, after the floods of 2013–14; a luminously beautiful collaboration, *Passage*, with sound artist John Roach, celebrating the ancient, alien living processes of rock and water), have drifted to and fro, on the blurred border between sf, environmentalism and contemporary art.

When China started expanding its territories by shifting living seabed up onto reefs in the South China Sea, Emma's response was a moving-image and photographic study of an artefactual island that seems, in turn, a bizarre eruption, a shipwreck or the aftermath of a Ballardian cataclysm. *Frontiers* featured in 'Slow Violence', an exhibition and symposium on the long-term effects of environmental damage, in 2017. Her latest project will take her even further into the science/fiction narrative Mary Shelley created, 200 years ago, when she combined the eerie claims of galvanism with a nightmare vision of the new century's scientific genius.

In 'Common Heritage' (originally, Human/Nature) there are two critical frontiers, the ocean deeps and outer space: worlds of riches where we cannot survive naturally, but which we claim as our own ... (the ambiguous title refers to the twentieth-century designation of both these realms as 'the common heritage of mankind'). A pristine landscape flows under the camera's eye, while human voices argue passionately for an equitable division of the loot. The speeches are eloquent and moving, but it is clear

that exploitation is inevitable. And then what? Is that Mars, or the ocean bed? Will the natives of these **[End Page 168]** territories find defenders? I don't yet know. Perhaps the story is still changing. The day I saw her, Emma had been in Margate, working on an installation in a half-desolate Grand Hotel. 'I'm making it look as if the sea comes into one of the third-floor rooms at high tide', she told me. 'But someone's still living there, hanging on'. Humans have a fascinating ability to adapt, no matter what happens. (For more information, see [www.emmacritchley.com](http://www.emmacritchley.com)).

Gwyneth Jones  
*sf author*

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### **Gwyneth Jones**

**Gwyneth Jones** is a writer and critic of genre fiction, who has an interest in contemporary art and art history (see the novel *Phoenix Café* (1997)). She has won the Tiptree award, two World Fantasy awards, the Arthur C. Clarke award, the British Science Fiction Association short story award, the Dracula Society's Children of the Night award, the P.K. Dick award and the SFRA Pilgrim award for lifetime achievement in sf criticism. She has also written for teenagers, usually as 'Ann Halam'. She lives in Brighton, UK, with her husband and two cats; curating assorted pondlife in season. She is a member of the Soil Association, the Sussex Wildlife Trust, Frack Free Sussex and the Green Party; and an Amnesty International volunteer.

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**Drowned worlds***Gwyneth Jones, sf author*

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