

Cade Tompkins Projects

ALLISON BIANCO, *Atlantic Time* Exhibition Catalogue

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Forward by Michele L'Heureux

Essay by Britany Salsbury

Wheaton College sits less than 30 miles from the Rhode Island coastline, which features prominently in Allison Bianco's exhibition *Atlantic Time*. Moreover, Wheaton's students hail from many coastal communities around the globe—including California, Maine, and Florida, and as far away as Venezuela, Argentina, and the United Arab Emirates. For most of these students, returning home after short or long periods of time is fraught with emotion, possibility, and nostalgia.

It is this kind of nostalgia—inspired by her own Rhode Island homecoming after living in Hawai'i for a time—that informs Allison Bianco's prints. Exquisitely drawn coastal panoramas recede into richly colored, dreamy landscapes that evoke childhood memories and the passage of time. Who better to understand the cycles of change that people and their environments undergo over time than the college student who returns home year after year to find familiar landscapes—and themselves—changed forever? Furthermore, Bianco's impeccable craftsmanship and innovative layering of printmaking techniques is not only an inspiration to Wheaton's budding artists but is also the ideal vehicle for a nuanced and textured examination of nostalgia, a sentiment familiar to most.

Wheaton College's philosophy is predicated on collaboration, and in that spirit, this exhibition allowed me to collaborate with Cade Tompkins Projects of Providence, RI, for which I am grateful. Cade Tompkins has been a superb advocate for Allison Bianco's work, as well as for dozens of other emerging and established contemporary artists, through her gallery exhibitions and collaborations with leading institutions throughout the United States, and I am thankful for her hard work and generosity.

—Michele L'Heureux, Gallery Director

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Theorist Svetlana Boym described nostalgia as “a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed...a romance with one’s own phantasy.” Rather than familiarity, the past is tinged with an uncanny sense of recognition, as much about us as it is about the places we recall. This notion of nostalgia as at once present and forever lost is embodied in the work of Allison Bianco, who approaches the theme from a perspective that is both personal and meditative. In her collective portrait of her native Rhode Island, Bianco combines various printmaking techniques to depict recognizable landscapes from her own past with both sentimentality and displacement.

Although long interested in the topic, Bianco think more theoretically about nostalgia—including Boym’s writing on the topic, as well as that of public intellectual Susan Sontag—after returning to Rhode Island after time away. A native of the northern part of the state, where her family has lived for several generations, Bianco was drawn away initially as a college student and then, after a brief return, to Hawai’i for graduate studies. There, she grappled with her desire to return to a place that was familiar despite living somewhere so deeply idyllic. Around this time, the death of her father also fundamentally altered her experience of home, further complicating her emotional connection to it.

Upon her return, Bianco was struck by the changed experience of the familiar, now foreign through the passage of time. During these years, she depicted locations of personal and biographical significance. Rendered in bright, appealing colors, the sites appear non-naturalistic, reflecting the rosiness and awkwardness of the past. Recognizable places, such as Jamestown, Matunuck, and Narragansett are dotted with sunny details such as rainbows and fantastic creatures juxtaposed with foreboding themes, such as storms and sinking ships. Despite the specificity of the locales, many of which would have little significance to a viewer unfamiliar with Rhode Island, these places are represented on a large scale, sometimes involving several sheets of paper, visually reflecting their importance within Bianco’s memory.

The Sinking of Matunuck (2012), for example, is dominated by a fluorescent rainbow arching across a white, expansive sky with waves of bright pink below. Bianco frequently visited her maternal grandmother at her beach cottage in the town shown. Upon closer examination, however, the image focuses not only on a warm remembrance, but on the seascape’s gradual and inevitable degradation over time, with the pink sections representing the projected rise in sea level. Rather than overwhelming Bianco’s nostalgic view, this threatening detail instead suggests the very real physical transformation that accompanied that within her memory as she returned to this place each summer over the course of many years.

In addition to these biographical details, Bianco’s work is defined by her aptitude for translation using printmaking. Given their scale and small edition sizes, many of her prints might have more immediately been realized using an autographic medium such as drawing or painting. Bianco has consistently favored experimentation in printmaking, however, producing works that are formally and technically innovative. She often juxtaposes intaglio with screen printing, combining her academic training as a printmaker and her experiences working in a commercial

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screen printing shop after graduating from college. Bianco embraces the element of chance characteristic of these processes, highlighting rather than effacing what might initially seem a mistake—such as the linear markings at far right in *The Sinking of Matunuck*, which unintentionally appeared while preparing her printing plate. In such works, there is a clear and poignant correspondence between the personal struggle of recreating a remembered place and the indirect process of deciphering an imagined image at a degree of remove.

Most recently, Bianco has extended this interest in technical experimentation by working with new processes and in an expanded scale. *Pouring on Jamestown* (2016) features the Rhode Island landscape from a distance, defined by its historic architecture. Remnants of a time past, the buildings are dwarfed by the churning blue sea that fills most of the print and becomes threatening in its scale. Its size required the use of an unusually large sheet of roofing copper and a monumental, ten-foot press owned by AS220 Community Printshop in Providence, Rhode Island.

A similar technical departure from Bianco's earlier work, *The Old Jamestown Bridge* (2016) features the same local landscape, shifted to focus on the demolition of a connecting bridge the decade before. While these details are rendered in traditional etching, the bright rainbow of clouds that rises from the destroyed bridge is overlaid using mokuhanga, a traditional Japanese style of woodblock printing using water-based ink. The resulting transparency allows for an intense gradation, with tones becoming more saturated and violent as the clouds rise. Bianco's innovative exploration in these recent works suggests her poignant view of printmaking as an analogue for personal experience, embracing chance and unpredictability to translate the contrasting warmth and frustration of nostalgia.

—Britany Salsbury, Ph.D., Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow, Department of Prints, Drawings and Photographs, RISD Museum