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GRIMANESA AMORÓS
LIGHT BETWEEN THE ISLANDS

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Inside image: *Light between the Islands* (detail), 2013, light installation

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Grimanesa Amorós' *Light between the Islands* / Jane Farver

The sea near Lima, Peru, where artist Grimanesa Amorós grew up, is not always as calm as its name “Pacífico” might suggest. The ocean’s strong winds can churn up huge waves and cast out large quantities of sea foam onto the shoreline. This natural phenomenon (caused by turbulent winds picking up the decaying remains of colonies of single-celled algae called *Phaeocysti*) held great fascination for Amorós as a child. She loved to watch the foam move with the wind and to play with its bubbles. These early memories strongly influenced her, and they would find their way into the production of her art.

Amorós moved from Peru to the United States in 1984 and studied painting and printmaking at the Art Students League of New York. However, when she took a trip to Iceland in 2001, she was astonished by that country’s otherworldly geography and its spectacular aurora borealis. Both reminded her of the Andean landscape she had left behind in Peru, and she knew she wanted somehow to share her experiences of them with others. It also was then that she knew that her real medium was to be not paint but light.

Trips back to her Peruvian homeland have provided Amorós with additional memorable images. These include the majestic Incan ruins high in the Andes as well as the floating islands of Lake Titicaca, another kind of cultural monument that also is ancient but extremely perishable. The lake, which is the world’s highest navigable body of water, is situated between Peru and Bolivia and is famous for floating islands that the Uros people made entirely from thick layers of cut *totora*, a reed that grows abundantly in the lake’s icy fresh water.

What drove the Uros to construct and inhabit these migratory islands is unclear; perhaps they were driven there by the Incas around the 13th century or by the Spanish in the 16th century. Others say the Uros may have settled there several thousand years ago seeking relief from a severe drought. In any case, the Uros have lived on these islands for centuries, by fishing, hunting for birds and growing a few crops.

The Uros used the totora reeds not only to construct the islands and to make their boats, houses and furniture, but as a food and fuel source as well. Each of these buoyant islands, up to 12 feet (about 3.6 meters) thick, supports several thatched dwellings, usually housing members of a single extended family. The largest island has a watchtower built entirely from totora reeds. However, the islands require constant maintenance to survive. New layers of cut totora repeatedly must be added to replace those rotting beneath the surface of the water. The islands are kept afloat by the gases caused by this decay.

Grimanesa Amorós often has drawn upon these important Peruvian cultural legacies for inspiration for her large-scale light-based installations, which she has presented around the globe from Mexico and Beijing to New York’s Times Square. A joyful and generous spirit, Amorós views her art as a gift to others and in *Light between the Islands*, her first exhibition at the Litvak Gallery (as well as in Israel), the artist is sharing her passion for the Uros islands.

Amorós has stated that “We all live in bubbles” and can never fully know one another. Isolated throughout the gallery are islands she has created using polycarbonate bubble forms that also refer to the sea foam the artist loved as a child. Imagery reminiscent of totora reeds is silkscreened onto the spherical forms, which are illuminated from within. These glowing orbs change throughout the day and into the night.

An important component of *Light between the Islands* is Amorós’ new video work, *MIRANDA*, which mixes images ancient of Incan monuments, animations of the artist’s face transformed with imagery derived from Incan sun masks, and shots of sea foam washed up on the Peruvian coastline. It also features a beautiful soundtrack commissioned from Ivri Lider of the Young Professionals, one of Israel’s best-known young pop musicians. Amorós often collaborates with highly respected contemporary musicians from the areas where she is exhibiting.

The Uros people have had to cope with an evolving world. Over time, the Uros mixed with the Aymara, another indigenous population, and the last speaker of the original Uros language died in 1970. For centuries, they lived on islands they had constructed approximately nine miles (about 14 kilometers) out onto the lake. A severe storm in 1986 devastated the area and compelled the Uros to rebuild their island homes closer to shore. Today a string of approximately 60 floating islands attracts more than 200,000 tourists annually.

This exposure to the outside world has brought change. Pollution in the lake has taken a toll on the fish and birds that once were plentiful there. The islanders use solar panels and motorboats and have a radio station and an elementary school. Many younger members of the community seeking new opportunities have moved to the mainland. A few hundred people still live as fishermen on less accessible islands further out on the lake. However, there also are new islands closer to shore that have been built specifically as tourist attractions, with “inhabitants” who are on the islands only during the day to sell souvenirs to tourists. In the past, the totora watchtowers were used for surveillance and protection from enemies; currently they offer tourists a better vantage point for taking photos. As with so many other world heritage sites, tourism is endangering the very thing it seeks to preserve.¹

Grimanesa Amorós continues to mine images from Peru’s history for her art but she does not hold an essentialist or nostalgic view of her subject. She is completely comfortable using the latest technologies and materials, and she often gives talks at universities where her lectures not only attract future artists but students and faculty engaged with science and technology as well. And Amorós’ bubbles are a current hot topic: there is intensive study of these mysterious, insubstantial objects going on in the disciplines of physics, medicine, environmental studies, architecture and economics. Nanobubbles may help to advance cancer treatments and to clean up water pollution, one cause of the algae blooms that give birth to sea foam.² It feels to me as though, somewhere in the art of Grimanesa Amorós, the past is meeting the future.

Jane Farver is an independent curator and a lecturer at Cornell University’s College of Architecture, Art and Planning in Ithaca, New York.

1 Joshua Foer, “The Island People: The seventh hidden wonder of South America,” *Slate Magazine* (Feb. 25, 2011).
www.slate.com/authors/joshua_foer.html

2 Michael Brooks, “The wonder-working bubbles that physics can’t explain,” *New Scientist* (July 11, 2012).
www.newscientist.com/article/mg21528721.900-the-wonderworking-bubbles-that-physics-cant-explain.html?full=true&print=true