

An interview with Joey Holder

by [Augie March](#) on 29/09/2015

Joey Holder used to be a diving instructor, and has spent a correspondingly long time under the water. In retrospect, scuba diving is the scariest thing I've done. At the time it was great; a zero-gravity experience in a wholly foreign environment, with a 360 degree field of vision above and below. Plus the colours, and the warmth of the water (it was in the Caribbean, naturally), and the otherness of the fauna, and even strange things like the invasive but also comforting breathing apparatus. The trailing plumes of visible exhalation following each diver were all very powerful and evocative and at the time totally intoxicating.

But then: fear. The weight of the sea above, the alien-ness of the environment may be actually unwelcoming, the little technical dangers that only occur to anxious people. The technical integrity of the breathing apparatus, **[the bends](#)**.

Having spent some time under the water, it's kind of hard not to let the knowledge of Holder's previous career colour readings of her art; a preoccupation with the synthesis of nature and technology, an aesthetic palette and visual language of fluidity, digitally realised amorphous shapes, an indifference to the conventions of stasis manifesting in a thorough and ongoing exploration of digital space and the weightlessness it affords. Her practice is simultaneously broad and refined; broad in the sense that it spans **[group](#)** and **[solo](#)** exhibitions (she's prolific), a legion of regularly-updated **[Tumblr pages](#)** (her email signature lists 11 separate links) and **[various residencies](#)** (she's this year completed one at Wysing, and has work in their upcoming group show **[The Uncanny Valley](#)**).

Holder's work's refinement lies in its clear agenda. Her exhibitions support an expansive network of investigation, the Tumblr pages functioning as mood-boards, sketchbooks and image banks, useful to her but also to her audience for whom they provide a visual dictionary of context. Through them Holder archives images that shed light on both her aesthetic and conceptual preoccupations: bio-technologies, improbable creatures and environments, the uneasy proximity of the realization of science fiction into usable technology.

At the core of Holder's practice lies a fascination with the natural world, and humanity's interface with it. Her imagery is slick with bio-mucus and circuit-board coolant. The uncanny bleeds into the outright unsettling as she brings to light the alien in the terrestrial.

In an unusually anonymous pub in London's Soho, we met up to discuss her work and upcoming exhibitions. This autumn she's in three group shows –the aforementioned *The Uncanny Valley*, *Exta* at Deptford's [Res.](#) gallery (running during [Art Licks Weekend](#), October 2 to 4) and a joint exhibition with [Viktor Timofeev](#) called *Lament of Ur* at [Karst](#).

Our conversation is illuminating and hallucinatory, the setting and her enthusiasm lightens Holder's visions of Ballardian techno-human interfaces, aquatic molecular life that calmly and dispassionately adapts to the spoiled seas, and biologically engineered organisms with their inbuilt killswitches. I am left with visions of opaque jellyfish, floating through the seas of a de-populated earth. Through her online presence, as well as exhibiting, Joey Holder highlights the interlinked networks of organisms that exist in the world, with the digital analogous to the weightlessness of the deep sea.



Joey Holder, 'Multifunctional Gel Fertilizer' (2015) @ *Plague of Diagrams*. Installation view. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: Can you tell me a little bit about your upcoming exhibitions?

Joey Holder: The show at Res. is a show called *Exta*. It's quite an abstract

and theory-heavy... it's kind of like slime-aesthetics, alien sort of stuff. But it sounds quite clever. It's about slime, and weird shit; for this one they want me to do something with [Dark Creatures](#), which is one of my Tumblrs, so I won't be under my actual name, I'll just be called that. I'm making a sort of trailer for the show; they're doing a bigger show next spring, and I guess I see it as some sort of film-trailer or something for this bigger project.

Then I'm in a group show that's happening at Wysing, called *The Uncanny Valley*. I'm basically doing a big floor piece for that.

I do a lot of shows, and I feel like my work is this continual process and output. I don't think of my works as finished pieces, like static works within a gallery or something, so it's quite nice to be invited to do lots of things. To somehow compartmentalize, or conceptualise or sort of seal off certain parts of my thinking, somehow.

aqnb: I find the [‘Uncanny Valley’](#) as a concept so arresting, through it's almost recursive description of a kind of human-engineered state where the proximity to flawless human-ness is what actually inspires negative feelings in humans...

JH: It's really relevant. What's happening now, with AI and robotics and stuff, how it starts to simulate life, I guess, becomes really fucking weird.

That's something that I always think about in my own work, how we used to always separate humans from nature, or what we do from nature, when it's actually part of the same thing.

aqnb: I saw a quote in an [interview with Dazed](#), “what we produce as humans is actually part of nature’s whole”. It sounded quite new-agey

JH: It is a bit like [Gaia theory](#) or something! But it is ultimately true, we

are part of a bigger system. I'm not saying that it's happy and balanced, but whatever happens in the world has a knock on effect. And we take resources from the earth, and are connected to other animals or something – not in a hippy-ish way at all, but like, I guess it's like in a [Timothy Morton](#) sense as well.

I kind of always think about how everything we have as our technology ultimately comes from nature, although it's not separate from us if that makes sense. You could think of any example, it comes from something that exists in nature. With what I'm interested in these days it becomes even weirder, because with stuff like synthetic biology we can ultimately not just take the wings of a bird and then replicate that, create an aeroplane wing or something, but actually take pieces of genetic code, and life, and essentially put that together -programme that into a new form of life. It's actually using the stuff, using nature, for want of a better word, itself. It gets really fucking weird then.



Joey Holder, 'Dark Creatures' (2015). Video still. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: Your engagement with these ideas goes beyond the

superficial: it doesn't seem like you just like these ideas, it seems like you understand them. Like you've researched them, you know how they work, and you can talk fluently about them.

JH: I wouldn't say I can talk like a scientist about them in any respect, but some of my projects involve collaborations with scientists, and I have a lot of conversations with them. I did a big solo show called [Hydrozoan](#), which came off a research residency I did. They paired me up with a couple of scientists from Nottingham university, they were plant scientists. I was researching aquaponics which is where you grow food from fish-waste, so you create a system where the fish are kind of providing the nutrients, the nitrates then gets kind of fed into the plants roots and then they grow. So I kind of simulated an aquaponics system within this show.

So yeah, it's not just, I guess, appropriating the aesthetics of science. I guess I do do that, I don't actually use, like I'm not a bio-artist as in, using scientific techniques within my work, I'm not actually doing stuff with live-tissues or anything like that, but...

aqnb: I'm trying to understand why you would use the kind of imprecise tool of visual art to engage with the rational objectivity of science.

JH: I think that's where the interest lies, really, because science is supposed to be this logical truth. And then scientists kind of build up to that. And I think that with science, or with any kind of system that we take up as a culture that then gets believed and then written down, that stuff is always subject to change, right? And so the next thing we find out, I mean it might not overthrow the whole thing, but there've been times when it has.

I guess maybe it's like critiquing that static structure of that logic, or of language or something, and saying that it is quite malleable. Hopefully art can open something out within science, or question or critique it, in a way

that gives people a different way of looking at it, whether it's through this kind of Sci-Fi aesthetic, or anything else.

I'm kind of interested in very specialist research as well, and how that almost becomes its own system of logic. Maybe like contemporary art does; it starts referencing itself, and then you kind of have to be 'in the know' to be able to get into it or something.



Joey Holder, 'Dark Creatures' (2015) @ The Uncanny Valley. Installation view. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: You maintain a huge number of different Tumblrs accounts; how do they fit in to your practice?

JH: I was doing this job, I won't tell you what but it was office-work stuff. I could get the job done really quickly, it was just a couple of hours in the

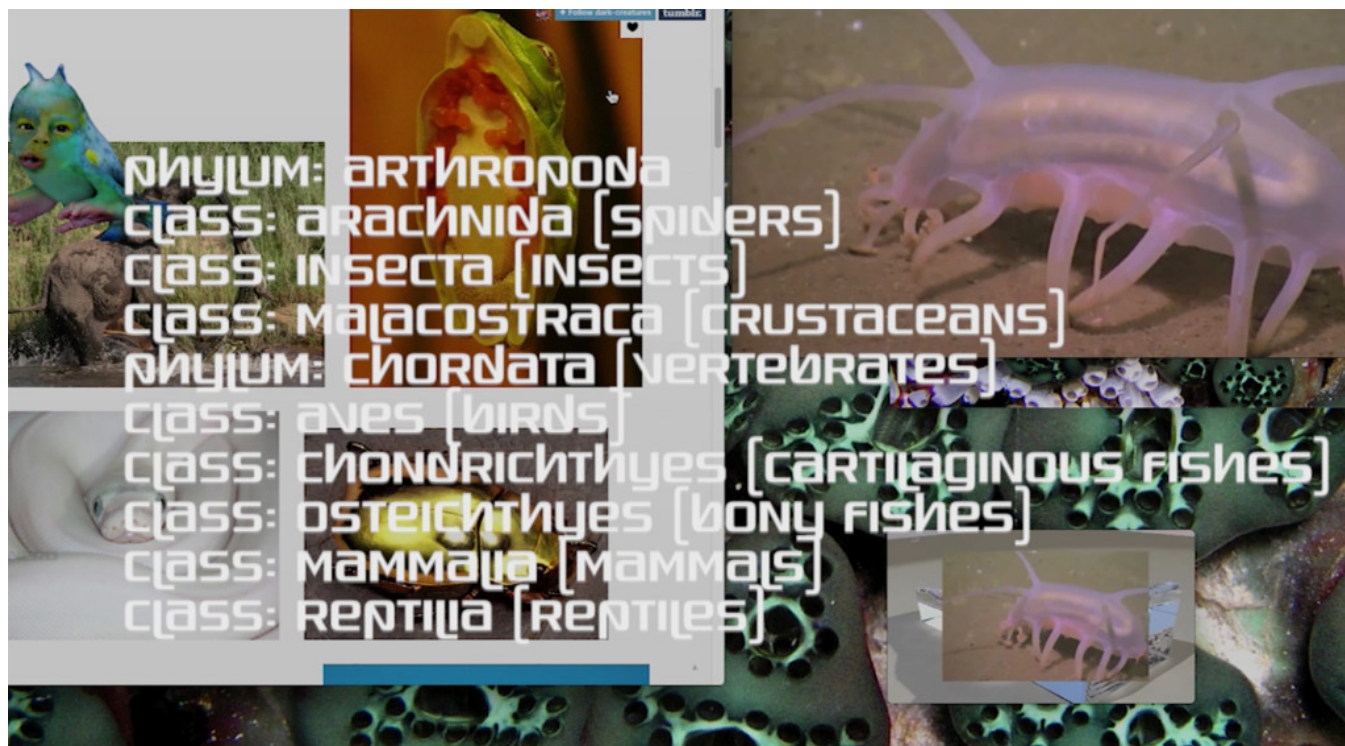
day; it's probably when I started to make more screen-based stuff. I'd got into net art, I guess, when I was just seriously bored at work, and wanted to find some way of breaking the screen. Breaking the monotony of the screen. That was when I really started to get into net art. Not post-internet art, but net art. I just started to make all these Tumblrs. I see them as mood boards, image collections that I can gain access to very quickly, and get ideas from or a feeling about something, or a project about something that's a lot easier to access than putting stuff in folders.

I think when people started to become interested in my work was when I started sharing lots of images, and using these Tumblrs and stuff as a research tool. I think when people could see where I was coming from through this stream of research and through this process, that's when they started to understand more about what the work was about. I guess I always kind of had a problem with the finished art object in the gallery. I always wanted to show that thing in motion or something. Show its progress. It's just a moment in time of a continual process or way of working. The Tumblrs are more the sum, or the constellation of all these things and all these kind of strings, rather than this finished piece of work, if that makes sense.

aqnb: Before I turned the Dictaphone on you mentioned that you used to be a scuba instructor; I find diving terrifying, I'd never do it again.

JH: I was really interested in why people were so scared, and I think there's two main things. One is the equipment –it feels really alien and claustrophobic. And second, the main thing, is people's fear of the –it's the fear of the unknown. It's not knowing what the fuck is down there. Because nine times out of ten, if you could get people calmed down to go down, and get them to look around, and show them a fish, or an octopus or something, then they'd be away. Suddenly because the world had opened up and they could see around them. It's the fact that they have this idea

that there's this pitch black or something below them, or the abyss, something like that, where there are all these things that they don't understand. Which is what, like within my work as well, I guess I'm drawn to; really odd things that are kind of beyond our comprehension. As humans we think of them as these alien things, 'so outside of us, or things that look like they're made of some other alien material or something; something that we just can't comprehend.



Joey Holder, 'Dark Creatures' (2015). Video still. Courtesy the artist.

aqnb: What do you find compelling about this idea of the incomprehensible other?

JH: My interest in strange life-forms is about the limitations of our understanding, or language; that is about something that's outside of the human system of reference, that we can't get to grips with. I was talking about synthetic biology earlier; I'm also really interested in things that transcend our understanding of how nature operates.

I guess because we think as humans, which we are, we're destroying

thousands of habitats, and we're killing millions of species, but then I'm interested in the other side of that as well, in quite an optimistic way what will happen when humans become extinct, something will take over. For example, we always thought about plastic as being this inert material that can't biodegrade or rot; it doesn't go back into the earth and become part of the cycle again. But now they've found that these microbes exist in the sea that are **eating plastic**. You know, so that kind of transcends our whole understanding. And these creatures might have come into being because of our direct action. Jellyfish are another example; **jellyfish thrive in polluted waters**, water dirtied by us. It's kind of like this alien thing that we've got no idea about, but actually our actions are kind of creating these fucking odd lifeforms as well.

aqnb: Do you think spending all that time underwater has influenced your practice?

JH: I've thought about that a lot. When you get used to scuba diving it's like you're weightless; with your buoyancy, you don't go up and you don't go down. So it's a completely different space that you're dealing with. You're not walking on land, on gravity. I guess in terms of thinking about a gallery space though, I think it's really helped me in terms of not... I mean going back to that thing about fixed objects in a gallery? The boring thing about post-internet art is a lot of it got taken off the internet and then put into this really clean, white gallery space and really cleaned up.

I kind of think that with the digital realm you can think about scuba diving as something that anything could happen within this space, or within a digital space. With the digital there is so much possibility for what can happen in there; you can be in a gaming environment, where it's like you're moving around a completely alien, different space, and I guess I think about that a lot in terms of creating this kind of liquid space, a space where things aren't set by gravity.

Then between diving and the internet there's a metaphor for the world, or

something, as well. There's all this crazy shit out there, these strange networks of creatures, all their communication, the way that they exist. It's all here. We don't have to go to outer space to find that, all of that stuff is here on earth. **

Joey Holder is a UK-based artist participating in the *Exta* group exhibition at London's Res., part of Art Licks Weekend, running October 2 to 4, 2015.

Header image: Joey Holder, Nematode (2015) @ Wysing Arts Centre. Installation view. Courtesy the artist.