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From botanics to blockchain — how Joelle McTigue became one of web3's most established artists

MARIQUITA DE BOISSIÈRE

DECEMBER 28, 2022

"IN WEB3, YOU CAN GO THROUGH THE PROCESS A LOT FASTER" — JOELLE MCTIGUE

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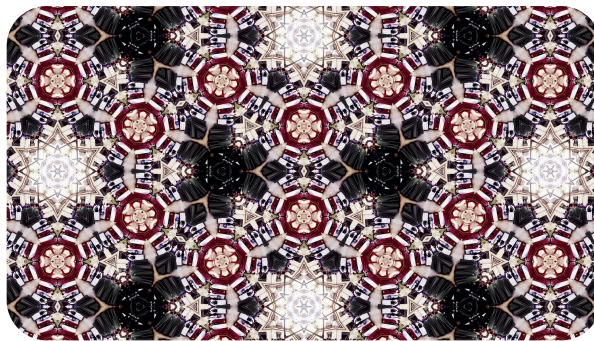
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Joelle McTigue's flare for travel has, quite literally, lead her down many roads. One of the most esteemed artists in web3, she tells Mariquita de Bossière how she bloomed into a visual artist collected by gallerists and museums across the world, inspired by the power of travel and botanicals.

Joelle McTigue has never been one to take things at face value. Born in New York and raised in the Caribbean, the artist grew up surrounded by plush palm trees, crystalline waters, and white beaches. While the scores of tourists who flock to the US Virgin Islands year after year are swayed by the promise of sun, sea, and sand, for Joelle, it is the underlying crisscross of cultures and postcolonial histories that have instilled a sense of 'home'.

"My island has had seven flags and is a mixture of all of the empires that have ruled here", she explains. Despite being several thousand miles apart and on the other side of the world, Joelle discovered a familiar echo, years later, in the rich and varied cultural landscape of Montenegro's Bay of Kotor. She cites this resemblance as "the main reason why, even though you wouldn't think there would be a lot in common with the Caribbean and the Bay of Kotor, it's the first place that I felt truly at home travelling to."

Shuttling between Los Angeles and Chicago, it was during Joelle's time as a student that she first picked up a camera and started exploring photography as a creative outlet. What she discovered was a means for interrogating her relationship with a particular place. Drawing upon the Situationist practice of the 'dérive', made popular in the 1950s by the French philosopher, Guy Debord, Joelle would explore her surroundings through random wanderings. "It's about picking a place and not having a destination, or learning how to navigate a city according to how it has been built over time, not how it is set up today," she explains.



Placa de les Escoles Pies; photographed in Gandia, Spain; from Joelle McTigue's Control and Cooperation collection.

From the US, Joelle moved to Europe, where she spent the next four years travelling from city to city, spending no more than three months in any one of them. From Paris to Vienna, passing through Gandia and Belgrade, Joelle's unstructured walks continued to uncover the layers of subtext encoded within a city's architecture and across its urban planning.

Uncovering military history or quiet corners hidden within tourist traps, Joelle revelled in chancing across unexpected juxtapositions within well-known places. Paris' Luxembourg gardens is a favourite for Joelle. Beneath the meticulously kept tree-lined promenades, verdant lawns, and fountain spots, the garden — considered to be the epitome of leisure — occults military origins. "When you research these places, more often than not, you discover it's a military site, a war spot," she divulges.

“You can go from saying ‘I want to do a show’, to the show being up in ten days compared to, say, six months.”

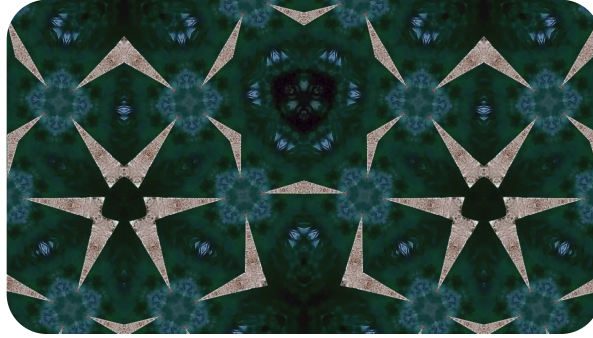
— Joelle McTigue

It is these contrasting themes of political and secular tourism that are central to her 2022 Foundation collection, *Control and Cooperation*. It also marks a creative turn for the Caribbean artist, who, inspired by Eames' 1977 mini-documentary *Powers of Ten*, began manipulating her images to explore scale and dimension. "Each piece is one of my street

photos that I have stripped apart and put back together," Joelle explains. "I'm focusing on how to flatten a space, and change both the literal perspective of it and the shapes that emerge as you work with the image."

The result is a kaleidoscopic reimagining of space folded in on itself. By incorporating "documentative remnants" snapped within sites of worship and civic governance, and refracting them into geometric forms, Joelle invites the viewer to engage with the familiar in unconventional ways. Digitised and minted on the blockchain, spectators are invited to explore the pieces up close.

"Most of them are rather large photos," Joelle says. "You can zoom in and see the details. The photo taken in Gandia, Spain, really pulls together the botanicals in that series because, from far away, it looks like a flower bed seen from above. When you zoom in, however, you can see that it's actually a Roman Catholic brotherhood ritual taking place in the town square".



Submarine Tunnel: Mid-Starboard; photographed in the Lustica Peninsula, Montenegro; from Joelle McTigue's Submarine Tunnels collection.

Whereas Europe's architectural halls of power form the basis for *Control and Cooperation*, it is the Bay of Kotor's varied and vibrant plant life that stars as the subject of her *Mediterranean Botanicals Collection*. The recurring botanical theme, initially inspired by European gardening rituals, is not coincidental: it threads each of her series together into "one big collection".

The Covid-19 pandemic brought Joelle's travelling plans to an abrupt end while in the Bay of Kotor. Unperturbed, she responded by turning her attention to her local surroundings and its horticulture. "I became really curious about botanicals because, just outside my door, there are Cyprus palm trees. It got me asking, 'why are there so many different plants here that are not inherently from Montenegro?'"

"It would normally take you months to figure out what is what. In web3, you can go through that process a lot faster."

— Joelle McTigue

While *Submarine Tunnels* and *Control and Cooperation* address the unstable identities of nations transitioning from war to peace, the *Mediterranean Botanicals Collection*, featuring plants and flowers whose origins trace back to five different continents, tells a story of competing political powers, battling and collaborating with one another through invasion and trade. *Mediterranean Botanicals* narrates the horticultural imprints left by successive waves of empire as they swept through the bay over the centuries.

"My favourite is the 'Bengal Rose'," McTigue confesses. "The Bengal rose, being from the Bay of Bengal, was brought by the Ottomans and sold in the bay to the Venetians. It is antiseptic, but was also used by rich Venetians to make rose oil gloves, because it was more chic to have those than a bath at the time," she laughs, adding, "you can almost guarantee that the rose bush ended up in the Bay of Kotor because two empires needed to trade in order to sustain their own war, wealth, and luxury."

Bengal Rose, Origin China, photographed in the Bay of Kotor, Montenegro; from Joelle McTigue's Mediterranean Botanicals Collection.

Inspired by her love for horticulture, Joelle began to dive into the Montenegro-inspired travelogues of the 17th century Turkish travel writer, Evliya Çelebi, allowing her to connect the varied plant life seen during her local walks to the country's rich history. At the same time, she was also connecting with communities in other geographical locations and time zones, through a burgeoning shared interest in web3.

Fascinated by how NFTs, made programmable through smart contract functions, can be considered "essentially dynamic paper", it was the sense of community and punk-ish, DIY ethic found in web3 that reignited her creativity as an interdisciplinary artist. "Web3 reminds me a lot of LA when I first moved there. There was a very small art community. Even though it's a massive city, the big galleries hadn't moved in. It was just a scrappy indie art scene and I loved it."

For artists looking to find their feet in web3, Joelle has the following words of advice: "I think almost everyone has their own little subculture pockets within web3. It might take a while to pinpoint your group, but you will find your fellow 'obsession-people'. I feel like all artists have a really deep obsession with something and that's so cool."

“Web3 reminds me a lot of LA when I first moved there.”

— Joelle McTigue

Joelle's art can be said to reflect an obsession with time and space. Contrasting with the slow-shifting, century-spanning power dynamics captured through her reconstructed photography, the artist is excited by the accelerated learning and cultural expression that she sees in web3. Breaking it down through the familiar lens of travel, she elaborates, "if you think of web3 as a new city that you move to in order to find your art group, it would normally take you months to attend all of the shows and figure out what is what. In web3, you can go through that process a lot faster. Absolutely everything's online. You can go from saying 'I want to do a show', to the show being up in ten days compared to, say, six months. And that's wild to me."

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Written by
Mariquita de Boissière

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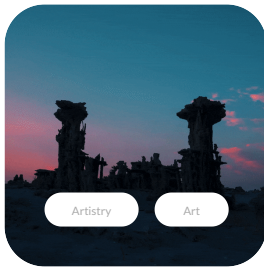
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Mariquita (she/they) is a freelance writer who lives in La Paz, Bolivia. A late-dx autistic with ADHD, they are in an ongoing process of (re)discovery and self-expression. Originally from Brighton, UK, over the past decade, she amplifies movements for environmental justice and coordinates campaigns to resist the criminalisation of protest.

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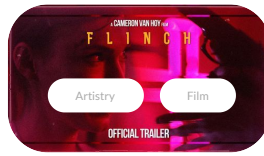


HOW REUBEN WU IS USING DRONES AND WEB3 TO PIONEER A NEW ARTFORM

Whilst touring the world as a musician, Reuben Wu found himself a new passion: photography. The multidisciplinary artist uses the concepts of time and space to tell compelling stories about the vast world that we inhabit. He speaks to Nina Knaack about making art with drones and his search for ideas that have never been done before.

NINA KNAACK

JANUARY 17, 2023



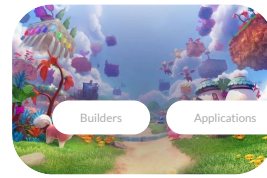
“GOOD THINGS HAPPEN WHEN YOU PUSH THE BOUNDARIES”

— CAMERON VAN HOY ON DEMOCRATISING FILM

Flinch is more than a film franchise: it is also a virtual film studio and film3 community. Producer, writer, and director of Flinch, Cameron Van Hoy, is innovating the film-making process. His platform will give filmmakers and audiences alike the tools to build their own, unique stories. Mark Fielding asks, is Flinch the prototype for the democratisation of film-making?

MARK FIELDING

JANUARY 9, 2023



HOW PLAY-TO-EARN GAMING CAN THRIVE IN WEB3

Few sectors have experienced as much volatility in the past 12 months as web3 gaming. The sector became particularly associated with scams and speculation, and has a long way back to regain the trust, participation, and wallets of gamers. Greg Larson explains what needs to change.

GREG LARSON

JANUARY 9, 2023

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— Noortje Stortelder

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We exhibit the creativity of web3 artistry, the use cases developed by web3 builders, and the communities augmented by and built on blockchain.

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