

## COLLEEN

## MULLINS

Colleen Mullins had a commanding sense of irony when titling her series *The Floating World*. Translated from the Japanese phrase *ukiyo-e*, it references an ethereal, idealized realm of mannered calm as depicted in 17th-century prints. What Mullins found ten years ago while taking six-star cruises with her widowed mother was less a scene of courtly elegance, than a hedonic geriatric carnival where the affluent (and others with the means to act as though they were) partied without limit.



*The Floating World* describes both the literal milieu of luxury cruises, and Mullins' detachment from the extremely rich. Today's ocean liners are less a conveyance to exotic destinations than a closed universe that is a destination unto itself. Mullins discussed cruising and her role aboard ship as akin to "the pleasures of the geisha and the shogun, and I'm floating above them...well, infiltrating. I was just the one with the flash, like the one that was flirting with the bartender, (or) the one that's had one too many surgeries." Armed with preloaded Holgas, and later a Mamiya 6, she began documenting liquor-fueled parties, bored youngsters taken along for the ride, and the mingling of a highly-trained, obsequious staff with their pampered clientele.

Over a period of seven years, Mullins would see many of the same people, "aging, de-aging, and getting more buxom." She found it strange

"being around a community that largely talks about the last cruise they were on or the next cruise they were going to be on but rarely anything of substance." Once at sea, "frequent floaters" (an assignation on one participant's calling card) cohered into a strange surrogate family—one that, while shallow, required little compromise or commitment. Mullins noted that many passengers were "travelling by themselves even though they have families, because their relationship with the cruise line is more stable, they understand it better. No one ever says 'no' to them, there's never an argument."

Mullins' father had been a San Francisco civil servant, and left her mother sufficient means to set sail with a caste they had been excluded from their entire life. While at sea, her mother's motivations for taking her daughter became more apparent: she had aspirations for both of them.

"She wanted me to be one of these women, and I was never going to be that. (Cruising) was all about her unfulfilled fantasies for herself and for her place in society." There is a trace of bitterness when Mullins relates the reception they met: "Passengers could sniff out an interloper pretty quick. They didn't like my mom much, but I fit in okay. They would know who [her mother] was, though they always assumed she was crazy wealthy, like one of these eccentric wealthy women, and she completely fostered that notion. She had been an actress in her early life and that was the persona she wanted on the ship." Mullins' mother encouraged these misconceptions as a means of integrating into an otherwise closed society.

While Mullins' photographs have apparent parallels with Martin Parr's depictions of New Brightonites on holiday, or to Larry Fink's series *Social Graces*, her characters seem even less self-aware. Bauble-laden, sequined, they were frequently intoxicated and incognizant of more than their own gratification, then flash-frozen by Mullins in various rictuses of frivolity that devolved as hours passed. *The Floating World* is a departure from her larger body of work, which had focused on typographic American landscapes, and the loss of trees in post-Katrina New Orleans. While depicting the spectacle of wealthy people's over-determined celebrations, there is an awareness of the festive atmosphere's vacuity, and vast grief over the ultimate hollowness of

her now-deceased mother's pursuit of such insubstantial connections. There exists simultaneously in this body of work an antipathy towards, and an attraction to, its subjects. It is an indictment of its subject's indifference to pain, even as it's an empathetic portrait of people of a certain caste enjoying themselves. Discussing the disconnection between this reality and that of most persons, Mullins said: "They're not affected because they don't have to be around it (the experiences of common people). I think what's interesting or important about it is that this is happening in spite of your suffering, and maybe today it's even more hurtful."

Mullins explained her goal as wanting to illuminate the hermetic, tenuous, and, superficial nature of interacting in an atmosphere of privilege. She aimed "to see some of those connections, those things like the false relationships—the 'oh dear, it's so great to see you/ I don't really know you' facades of the world that she and her mother launched themselves into. One image illustrates this dichotomy especially well; in it an elderly woman's head collapses into her hands—a penitential gesture of depletion of the sort that the painter Kathe Kollwitz universalized—while a younger man (her son?) remains poised, and wryly smiling while looking away.

—Tim White

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