

Pasatiempo

At the mercy of the tides: Matthew and Julie Chase-Daniel on Loggerhead Key

by Michael Abatemarco



Matthew Chase-Daniel: *Gorgonians*, 2017, archival inkjet print

Each year in September, the National Parks Arts Foundation offers a monthlong residency on a small, remote islet in Dry Tortugas National Park. The residency is located at Loggerhead Key, 70 miles west of Key West and only reachable by boat or plane. Local artist Matthew Chase-Daniel and his wife, Julie Chase-Daniel, a writer and poet, were awarded the residency in 2017 and looked forward to spending September off-grid on the island to work together on a potential book project. But Mother Nature had other plans.

The Chase-Daniels had been in the Florida Keys, awaiting transport to Loggerhead Key, when they were forced to evacuate due to the approach of Hurricane Irma, a Category 5 storm

You Want to Tell Them Things

So you reach with your grass,
stroking their feet, you say
this is a long story,
the unfolding of it
or its end
is up to you.
Listen.
Listen, you say,
while they look and look.
Casting your gentle touch
to the wind
you drive them away
by hurricane
you fling your sand
from one side to the other
you pull the fruit from the trees
scorch every leaf
rip out the lilies.
You raise the tide
suck them in a little too deep.
Again and again
you pull down the dock
but they return nonetheless
their looking never stops.
You summon the clouds
you shower them
you tear at their clothes.
The air is thick with your voice
guttural, howling,
whistling, you call the raptors to
feast on the songbirds, a ritual
of carnage. By full moon
at perigee you hammer all night
glaring, you stoke the sun,
burn their round faces.
Eventually they go, melting
back into their blue fold,
the way of all the others.
You don't know if they
learned your language or if
they could even hear you.
On to the next guests,
you'll never hear them
say: our island
is a shuddering microcosm,
speaking for the earth,
you'll never see this,
the fruit of
all that looking,
with its hopeful stone,
what's come of them
now, in the flesh
after you.

— Julie Chase-Daniel

that swept over the Atlantic, leaving more than 130 people dead by the time it dissipated in mid-September. After being sent back to Key West, the husband-and-wife team spent the night in Park Service housing and then were given a truck, which they drove inland to the vicinity of Orlando. The devastation didn't spare inland Florida, however, as Matthew Chase-Daniel's photos of downed trees and flooded parking lots attest. The couple spoke to Pasatiempo on Sept. 11 from a Holiday Inn, where they were hunkered down without power. "The storm came fairly close to here last night, but by that time it had diminished a lot. But we're not near the ocean, so it's much less than it was in the Keys or Miami or Fort Myers and those places," Matthew said. "It's a dark little hotel room at the moment. No HBO. No Weather Channel. No refrigerator. No lights. But the water is on."

When or if they would be able stay at Loggerhead Key and complete the residency was an open question. But they took advantage of being inland to continue their collaborative project, which would include Matthew's photographs and Julie's writing. "Obviously, the nature of the project has changed a lot," he said. "Rather than being isolated on a remote island, just the two of us, it's now in the middle of floods and retirement communities. What comes out of it is really unclear at this point."

Park Service volunteers were slated to occupy the island in October, and for a while, the residency seemed unlikely, at least for the full term of their award. "There's a possibility we can get back there before the end of the month," Matthew said in September. "The roads on the Florida Keys are pretty bad. It got hit pretty hard. So we may not be able to get back through there. There is a possibility of the Park Service chartering a boat or plane to bring staff back to the islands." Before they could find out, they had to wait for FEMA to complete its damage assessments.

Matthew and Julie lucked out when, because of the hurricane, the volunteers slated to come in October changed their plans. The Chase-Daniels' monthlong adventure turned into two when the National Parks Arts Foundation agreed to extend their stay. They met with Pasatiempo in early November, after the residency had ended. "We came home with a lot of material, and now we're in the process of editing and culling, and I'm still writing new material," said Julie, whose writing is in dialogue with her husband's photo-montages of the plant and marine life they encountered. "There was a lot to absorb while we were there."

Loggerhead Key is small enough that one can walk its circumference in less than an hour and a half, and the couple walked it two or three times per day. Two sea-grape bushes and an interior thicket of thorny shrubs and prickly pears are among its

limited vegetation, but the island attracts various species of migratory birds, including swallows, egrets, and raptors. "One day the swallows came, and there were maybe 40 swallows flying around," Matthew said. "Then the peregrine falcons and the kestrels came in and started eating the swallows. Then we gradually saw less and less of the swallows and more of the raptors."

"Everything that's there is countable: six egrets, four peregrines, one osprey," Julie added. "Then, of course, there's the marine sanctuary." Loggerhead is located in the midst of one of the world's largest coral reefs. "It's a living reef, which is why it's so protected, and visitation is so controlled by the National Park Service," she said. "The island is this microcosm of the equilibrium of land and sea. The sea life is very abundant, but less knowable than what you see on land." Their daily circumambulations were meditative, the landscape marked only by small changes like something new brought ashore by the currents. "You see something go by, and you know you're going to see that same thing go by tomorrow, and the next day, and that's even on the level of seashells or sponges that wash up," Matthew said. "It creates an intimate relationship with those things."

Part of their time was spent cleaning up after Irma, since they were the island's only occupants. Doors from an outhouse disappeared, the crumbling walls of an old boathouse were washed away, and boards from the dock were blown off, scattered and half-buried in the sand. A 200-pound air conditioner was blown 100 yards down the beach, attesting to the severity of the storm's winds. "Luckily, the buildings weren't damaged," Julie said. "The lighthouse has been there since 1858. At the little caretaker's cottage we stayed in, one shutter had ripped off, but there was not a lot of building repair work needed, just a lot of green-debris cleanup to do."

The result of Matthew's photographic project is something akin to old marine and botanical illustrations of the 16th through 19th centuries, cataloging different parts of specimens. It's still taking shape at his home studio in Santa Fe. He arranged several of the images in grids, each showing views of similar types of objects such as coconut-fruit stems, sea urchins, and gorgonians, also known as sea-fan coral. One image shows the stages of a coconut's development from young and green to its hard, dried, and cracked-open husk. Each grid is set against a white background from which the images stand out in sharp detail.

"I sort of built a natural-light studio where we were staying," he said. "I'd collect stuff and bring it back." But there might be only a handful of a specific specimen available on any given day. "The tide would come in and wash them away and they'd be gone, and something else would show up," he said. "One day a piece of broccoli showed up. I don't know how it got there. One day I needed some white paint to make some little stands to hold things to photograph. There was a workshop there to maintain the buildings, but there was no white paint. The next day, I was walking the beach and a fresh can of white spray paint had just washed up. So that was perfect. It was an interesting relationship, and we began seeing the island as an extension of us."

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