

ZARIA FORMAN

Maldives #4, 2013
soft pastel on paper, 41 x 60 in



courtesy the artist

CHRISTINE HUFFARD

Octopus Lady Survival Patterns of the Octopoda

In December 2000, North Sulawesi, Indonesia was overwhelmed with floods. Bridges, villages, and mountainsides washed away. Koi overflowed from backyard ponds, careened down rivers, and gulped desperately in the bays, unable to process the brackish water. People carried them in bucketfuls home from the beaches and sautéed them with chiles over kerosene burners, a meal valued at more than a year's pay. At the harbor entrance, the runoff rushed out and erected a double-overhead standing wave. Lurching and bubbling erratically with brown foam, this upsurge shed a rogue wave over the bow of a small wooden boat just trying to make it home to the nearby island of Bunaken. The frightened passengers ran to the stern, tipping the boat on end, and most were washed overboard. Those who were still on board frantically unlashed jerry cans from stow and tossed the buoyant jugs over as life rings. That day, weeks before Christmas, Bunaken lost one of its elders, the month's supply of village generator fuel, and one of the island's only phones connecting people to their distant relatives.

It is a unique quality of humans to attempt to understand someone else's priorities and struggles. And it might seem like an affront to evolution that we should spend energy on things that have no apparent connection to our own survival. On Bunaken my name is "ibu boboca"—"the octopus lady." Off and on for years, all day long, I floated face-down on snorkel, sometimes feet from the beach in inches of water. I had come all the way from America to write down notes on the second-by-second behavior of commercially unimportant pygmy octopuses, which most of my neighbors didn't even know existed. Although I did not speak the language when I first landed, the quizzical looks during introductions asked, "Could there possibly be a bigger waste of time and money for someone with so much opportunity?" People assured me that if they hadn't already known and revered my neighbor who studied mantis shrimps and coelacanths, they would have surely thought I was a spy—or at least not very bright. It was healthy for me to be given potent reminders early in my work that my discoveries could take light-years to make a difference to anyone else, if ever. Likewise, I learned to feel the weight of prior conversations wasted on weather, when I saw a baby lost to diarrhea for lack of understanding about dehydration, a pregnancy and marriage at the