

Duke Riley
The Repatriation of King Skellig Mór

May 23 to June 30, 2024

Opening Reception
Wednesday, May 22 from 6-8 pm

(Brookline, MA – April 17, 2024) Leave it to artist Duke Riley to weave together a narrative involving an Irish goat, a talking seal, battleships, Boston history, and lots of plastic trash. These are the elements of discovery in his upcoming solo exhibition at Praise Shadows titled *The Repatriation of King Skellig Mór*. Riley, a Boston native based in Brooklyn, will broaden the repertoire of work shown in his recent Brooklyn Museum solo exhibition *Death to the Living: Long Live Trash*. The presentation will include new iterations of his acclaimed scrimshaws, sailor's valentines, and the debut of a new type of work inspired by Victorian-era ruby glass.

The exhibition's namesake, Skellig Mór, was a real-life celebrity goat that was brought to Boston from Killorglin, in County Kerry, Ireland. The animal was the subject of headlines across *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* in the early 1900s. Riley, known for his layered visual chronicles of the entwined and often absurd interplays of institutional power and the natural world, became fascinated with the fate of Skellig Mór. The goat was exhibited and crowned at the 1905 Puck Fair in Killorglin before being purchased and brought to Boston by the Knights of St. Brendan with the intention of starting their own puck fair. After the organization splintered, a contentious dispute over the ownership and possession of Skellig Mór dragged out over the next four years and was highly publicized in *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. Ultimately, the courts ruled in 1909 that Skellig Mór was to be donated to the U.S. Navy and live aboard the USS Vermont, a battleship built in Quincy, Massachusetts. Skellig Mór's time aboard the navy vessel was cut tragically short as he died on July 4th, 1909. According to press clippings, his body was stuffed and displayed in the main hall of a Boston museum.

This exhibition is the beginning of Riley's attempt to locate the remains of the goat and repatriate it to Killorglin, Ireland. The centerpiece is a scrimshaw (*No. 418 of the Poly S, Tyrene Memorial Maritime Museum*) made from a liquid detergent bottle found in the coastal waters of the U.S. eastern seaboard. The front of the bottle depicts a Naval officer kneeling and weeping at the gravestone of Skellig Mór. The surface of the salvaged plastic is treated to mimic the grains and coloration of the whale bone typical of traditional scrimshaw.

A new sailor's valentine mosaic measuring 8x8 feet towers over the show. Its overwhelming stature and meticulous assemblage of multicolored shells and found plastic trash from local waterways (plastic syringes, buoy parts, tampon applicators, disposable lighters, to name a few) immerse the viewer into the reality of the ocean's pollution crisis. While traditional sailor's valentines—popular between the 1830 and 1890s—were gifted by sailors to their wives as sentimental keepsakes during their voyage away from home, this contemporary work is a striking and profound message addressing our climate emergency.

The debut of Riley's "ruby glass" bottle sculptures is another career milestone, the first new artistic genre he has introduced since the Brooklyn Museum exhibition. Inspired by a piece of ruby glass in his grandmother's Cape Cod home, this set of "ruby glass" bottles (made from discarded single use plastic) recall a time in the late 1800s and early 1900s when ruby glass was a popular souvenir sold at beachside

tourist destinations. Riley uses nostalgia for this material to connect the dots between this moment during the Industrial Era—when leisure time became more common among working Americans—and the United States' strident flexing of its Imperialist muscle on nations following the Spanish-American War. Riley's "ruby glass" bottles are encased together, and each is engraved with depictions of the four destroyers built at the Quincy shipyard that participated in Theodore Roosevelt's 1907-1909 global tour de force known as The Great White Fleet, a showcase of American naval domination.

While Skellig Mór's posthumous repatriation is the primary source of inspiration to Riley, he dedicates a scrimshaw bottle to another Boston-area celebrity: a harbor seal at the New England Aquarium named Hoover, who became a public sensation in the 1980s for its ability to "speak" with what sounded like a Boston accent. Hoover was able to imitate basic human speech, and he was renowned for his guttural exclamations of, "Hello, there!" and "Come over here!" For an exhibition like this, from a mind like Riley's, it's only fitting that *another* local animal hero should have the last word.

About the Artist

Duke Riley is a Boston-born artist based in Brooklyn, NY. A former tattoo artist, he lived in a pigeon coop while attending RISD in the early 1990s before earning his MFA from Pratt Institute. He taught art in underserved communities and domestic violence shelters in Boston and New York City in the late 1990s and early 2000s while continuing to pursue his art practice.

Over the past two decades, he has produced critically acclaimed works that explore the interface of institutional power and the natural world. Along with his highly intricate drawings, mosaics, and scrimshaw made from maritime detritus, he has carried out a litany of complex subversive projects including being arrested for piloting a homemade submarine into the security zone of the Queen Mary 2 in New York Harbor, trained pigeons smuggling cigars from Cuba to Key West, a suitcase of bed bugs that appeared in a Trump hotel, flying 2000 pigeons wearing LED lights over the East River from an aircraft carrier, and an action movie written and filmed by inmates in a Somali pirate detention center.

Duke Riley has had solo exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum, Queens Museum of Art, MOCA Cleveland, Havana Biennale, the Sydney Biennale, Mercosul Biennial, and Philigraphica. His work is in the permanent collections of the National Gallery of Art, The Whitney Museum, the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, the Boston Public Library, and more. Riley divides the year between his studio in the Brooklyn Navy Yard where he still keeps pigeons, and a studio on a boat in Rhode Island where he collects ocean plastic.

About Praise Shadows Art Gallery

Praise Shadows Art Gallery is a contemporary art program based in the Boston area with a focus on exceptional artists working in all artistic disciplines. Our worldview is informed by the notion that the artworld's untapped and unrecognized potential is worth cultivating, supporting, and championing. Since our founding in December 2020, the gallery has placed artworks by our artists in esteemed public collections, and our exhibitions have been covered widely in major international media outlets. Our work is grounded by partnering closely with artists to develop opportunities in traditional and emerging models of creativity and entrepreneurship—exhibitions, commissions, brand partnerships, new technologies, and original concepts that no one has ever tried before. www.praiseshadows.com

**PRAISE
SHADOWS**
ART GALLERY

PRESS CONTACT:

gallery@praiseshadows.com