

MICHEL VARISCO

Artist Michel Varisco has dedicated her career to exploring the tenuous relationship between organic and engineered environments. Through a deep immersion in our wetlands, swamps, rivers and cultures, Varisco's large-scale projects in photography, assemblage, installation and sculpture tell universal stories of loss and regeneration. Spellbound by the uncanny truth that the water surrounding us mutually sustains and destroys, Varisco's current project, "Below Sea Level", aims to unpack the intimate, subterranean experiences of life as an endangered community. How do we survive in this nature, how do we stay grounded on a land that's vanishing? "Below Sea Level" imagines a poetic, metaphorical response to these urgent questions – we create a new world below the surface of the water.

A collection of staged, magical realist photographs in which Varisco imagines Louisiana as a modern-day Atlantis with residents adapting to life underwater, "Below Sea Level", is an artistic investigation of place, subject, and the emotionally rich narrative of befriending our predicted fate. Unconventionally shot while submerged underwater, "Below Sea Level" also functions as a performative collaboration. Varisco gets in the water with a diverse group of residents, gently coaching them away from playful swimming toward a somber state of acceptance, guiding them to *be* versus *perform*. Being underwater imbues the images with a poetic beauty Varisco identifies as a particularly spiritual relationship with impermanence. It is Varisco's hope that "Below Sea Level" will inspire important dialogue about our fragile environment and our symbiotic relationship to it.

Varisco received a Bachelor of Arts from Loyola University, her MFA from Tulane University, studied in France and Italy, and is an artist/mentor at NOCCA|Riverfront in New Orleans. Her work is included in public, private and corporate collections including the National Library of Paris, The Ogden Museum of Southern Art, and the Surdna Foundation collection. Her exhibition history includes galleries and museums worldwide. Varisco was honored most recently with a commission from the City of New Orleans "Percent for Art" program and the Arts Council of New Orleans, which led to the public sculpture *Turning: prayer wheels for the Mississippi River*, a permanent installation that was featured in this year's Prospect.4 Biennial. *Below Sea Level* is shown in conjunction with New Orleans' premier photography festival, PhotoNOLA.

