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WATER COLOUR



FREE

WATER MUSIC

Shannon Denny meets Danielle Eubank, the American painter whose paintings of water from her epic adventure circumnavigating Africa in an ancient vessel are showing in Marylebone

Water is a handy substance made from two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. It covers well over half the Earth's surface and a human body needs around two litres of the stuff per day. When the summer skies open up to dump quantities of raindrops on us unsuspecting Londoners, it's easy to forget that in some parts of the world this life-giving liquid – especially the clean, fresh kind – is in notably short supply.

For LA-based artist Danielle Eubank, though, water is constantly in the thoughts. Known for her contemplative waterscapes, Danielle says her affinity is thanks to a California upbringing. "I grew up on the coast, so I've always had a very

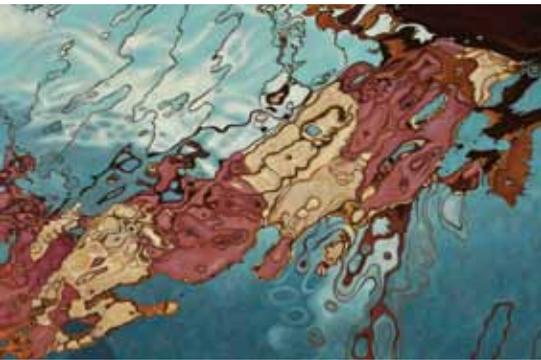
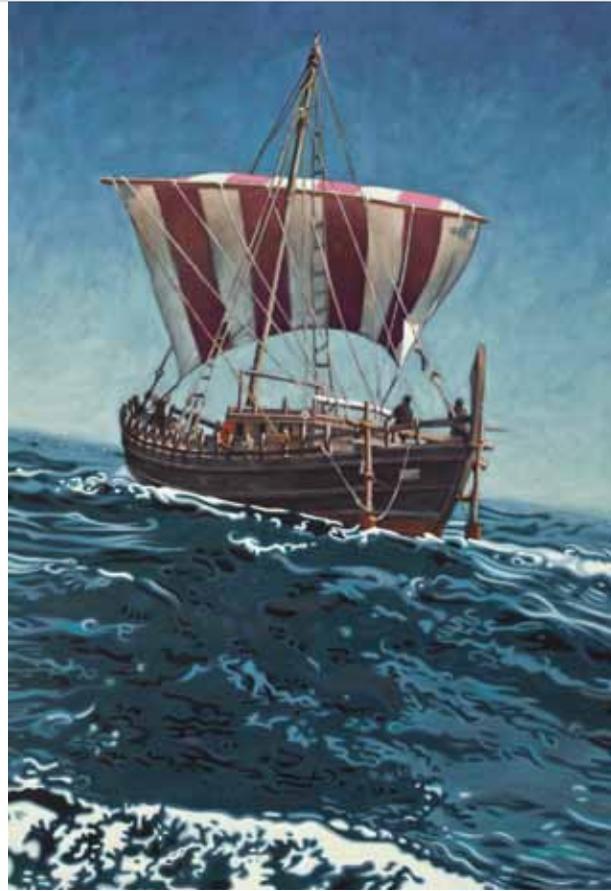
close relationship with water, and of course water is a very important topic in California. It's always on people's minds." In spite of its extensive coastline, shortages are common throughout the state, so residents get plenty of experience in water rationing. "Talking about water, conservation and the environment is permanently ingrained in the culture where I'm from."

She's enjoyed an exceptional opportunity to appreciate the stuff at close range over the past two years, having served as expedition artist for an unusual sea voyage. Inspired by the claim of the ancient Greek historian Herodotus that a group of Phoenician mariners were the first to achieve a circumnavigation of Africa in 600BC, former British Royal Navy officer Philip Beale set out to recreate their sailing vessel and journey. As captain of Phoenicia, he invited Danielle to join the adventure.

The 20,000 mile voyage started in Syria in August 2008, continued through the Suez Canal, around the Cape of Good Hope, through the Straits of Gibraltar, and ended back in Syria in October 2010. Danielle's role was similar to that of an artist in residence, although the residence in question was in constant motion.

The capacity of the boat was about 16, but at any given time there were around a dozen individuals on board. Danielle's tours of duty lasted about three weeks at a stretch, and in addition to recording and visually describing the journey she also served as crew member and adhered to the shift system of four hours on, four hours off, four hours on, six hours off and six hours on. At the outset, the list of potential challenges ranged from piracy in the notorious Gulf of Aden to rough seas along the devastating Skeleton Coast, not to mention day-to-day trials like





seasickness, the absence of loos and a lack of refrigeration. “I like to think of it as camping with 11 other people that you don’t know – and you’re not allowed to leave the campsite,” she laughs. “I find it immensely enjoyable.”

Danielle also had to navigate the tricky question of how to actually accomplish her job as an artist while at sea. “I tried painting on the boat, but it proved to be technically and physically impossible,” she says. “Canvas is essentially sailcloth, so if you’re sitting on the foredeck with a big sail in your lap, that doesn’t work so well on a sailboat. And the second thing is it’s quite narrow and people are walking around everywhere, so I was very conscious of being in people’s way with tubes of cobalt blue and things.”

Constant sketching and taking “a million photos” became Danielle’s onboard method. She then returned

to her LA studio with these records to complete canvases measuring up to five feet by six feet in order to capture the personality of the water she observed off the shores of Syria, Mozambique, South Africa, Gibraltar and Tunisia, including the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

For anyone who has tried to artistically depict a fixed object while working on dry land, you can only imagine the difficulty in Danielle’s unique line of work. “You’re on a moving object trying to capture another moving object,” she affirms. “You’re tilting and yawing as well. There’s a lot of movement going on. It isn’t like modern boats or gigantic yachts where you’re cutting through the water. It’s more like rocking in your mother’s arms while she’s skipping rope!” she laughs.

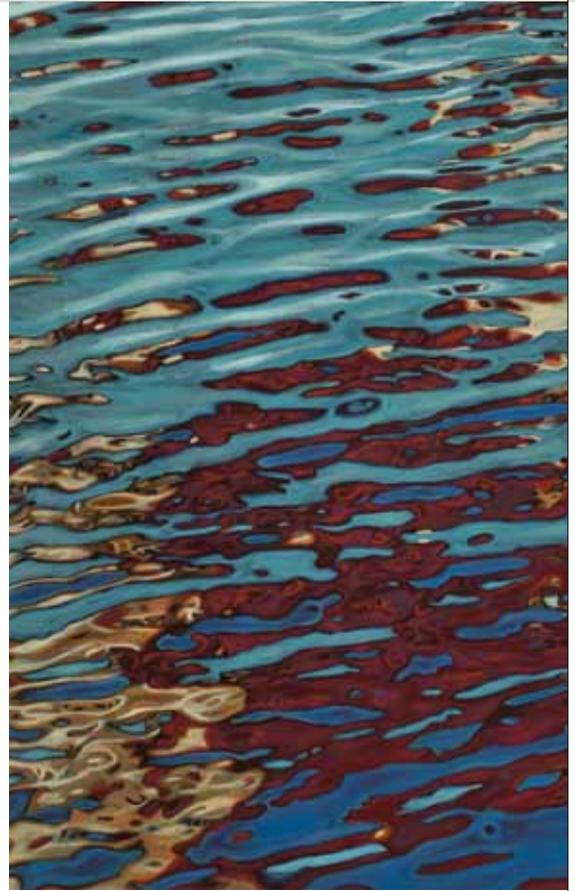
Nevertheless, the artist seems to have handled all these obstacles with abundant skill. “Her paintings

LINKS

Danielle Eubank: Phoenicia
6 – 24 July

Thompson’s Gallery
15 New Cavendish Street
020 7935 3595
thompsonsgallery.co.uk

WATER MUSIC



vividly and colourfully bring to life the extraordinary story of this voyage – in a way that the written word simply cannot,” says Captain Beale. “The artwork that she has produced is critical to this project, because it allows viewers to participate in the voyage and experience the travel themselves through her interpretation of the water that surrounded us every day.”

It’s not the first time Danielle has risen to Beale’s challenge. She also acted as expedition artist on his 2003 trip covering the 16,000 miles from Indonesia to the Seychelles to Madagascar to the Cape of Good Hope to Ghana. That expedition proved that such a journey would have been possible for traditionally built double outrigger vessels dating back to the early 8th century, as depicted at the Borobudur Temple in Indonesia.

While the two adventures illustrate that she is now a virtuoso

in interpreting water, it is only been in the last decade that Danielle has embraced it as a focus for her artistic attentions. What took her so long to come around to tackling a subject she so clearly loves? “Growing up on the seaside I was exposed to a lot of pictures of water – crashing waves, dolphins – that I couldn’t relate to,” she explains. “Also painting water is really, really difficult. It’s really hard to paint water that has any kind of atmosphere, emotion or motion.”

A trip in 2001 shifted her thinking toward the possibilities of the wet stuff. “My friend and I travelled around for a year. At one point we found ourselves in La Doñana in Spain. It’s a very, very protected park so you’re not allowed to go a certain number of metres inland from the water,” she remembers. “So I spent all my time sitting on the beach with my back to the beautiful ocean painting the dunes! But after several days of this I got really bored, and

I turned around. And the very first picture just had this little corner of water in it. Then the next one had a little more water, and then the next one had a little more. Pretty soon, they were all water.”

The body of work from Phoenicia re-imagines the ripples, reflections, bouncing colours, shifting light and liquid movement of the epic journey, inviting the eye to dive in. Without setting foot on a 6th century sailing ship, the viewer can get a glimpse of how Tunisian or Syrian seas might appear. “It’s something that all humans have in common,” Danielle says. “We all need water and we all need to look after our resources, so it’s something that everyone can relate to.” Now that this expedition is finished and the art has gone on show, does she have further waterborne adventures in her sights? “Oh definitely! Are you kidding? Absolutely, I can’t wait. Watch this space.”