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LOS ANGELES + VISUAL ARTS Expedition Painter Danielle Eubank's Body of Water Works

by Shana Nys Dambrot

Danielle Eubank's gets closer to her goal of painting all the world's oceans as she prepares to leave for a month-long voyage to the Arctic Circle north of Norway.

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LOS ANGELES

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Expedition Painter Danielle Eubank's Body of Water Works

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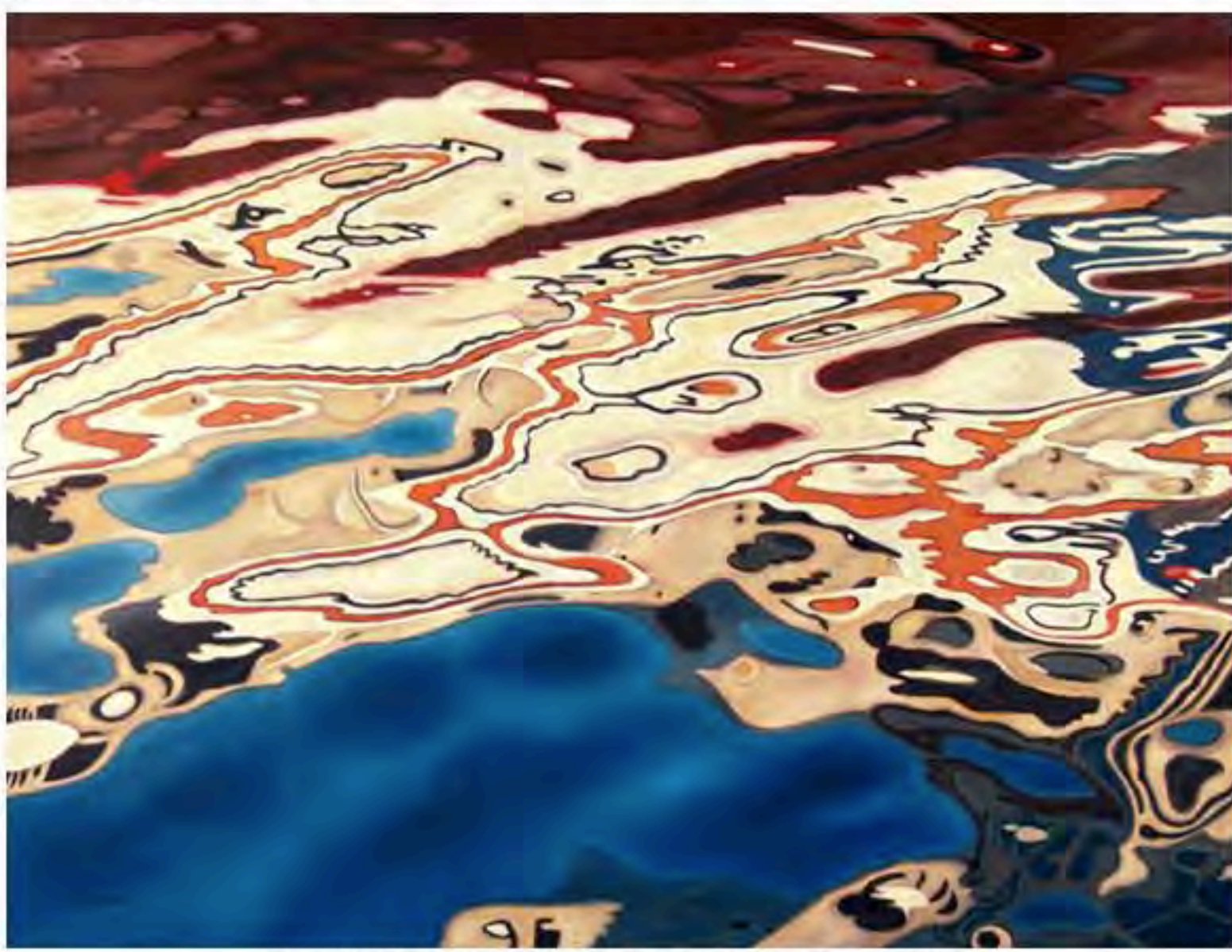


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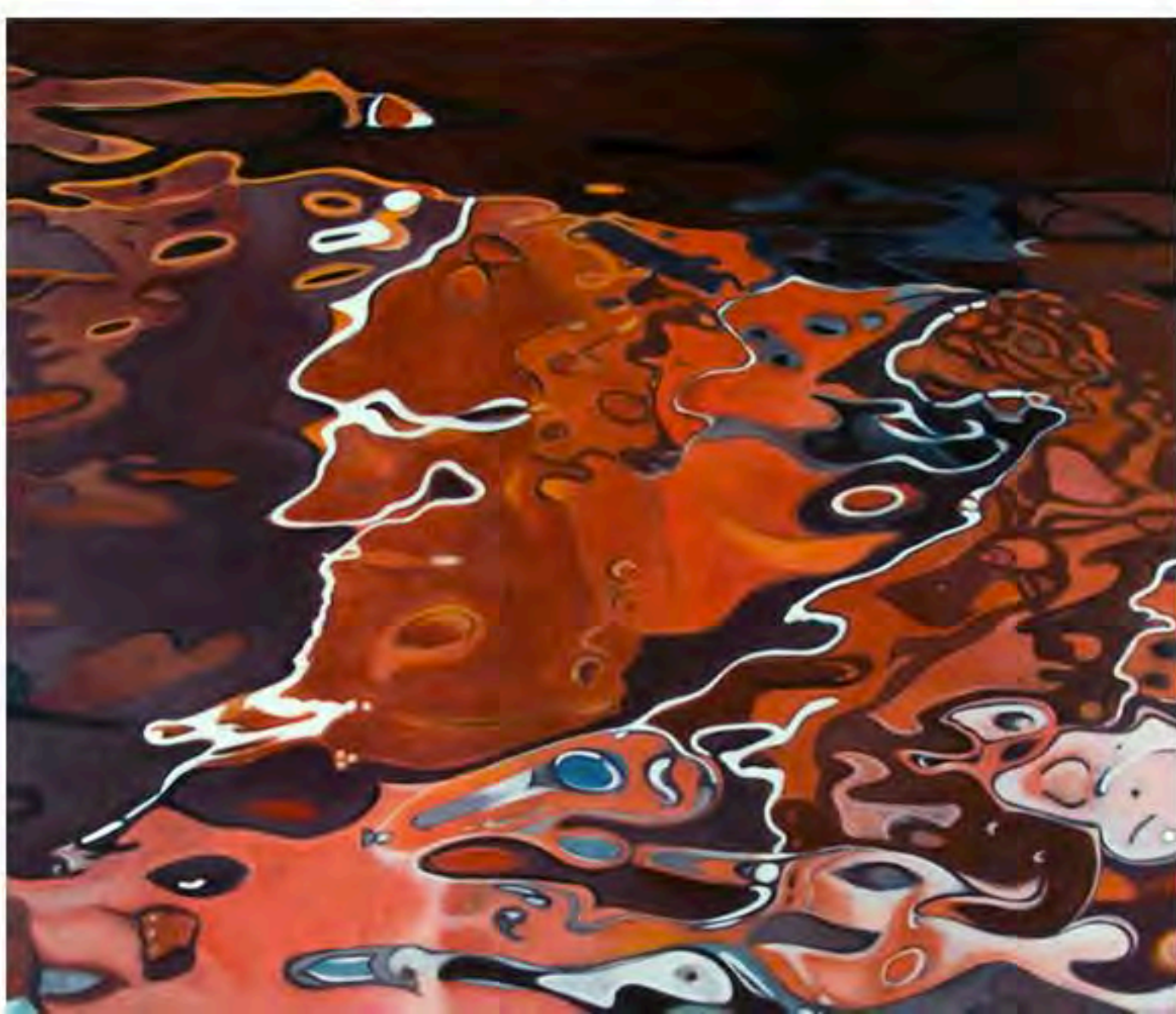
To paraphrase Greek philosopher Heraclitus, "No one ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and they are not the same person." For painter Danielle Eubank, the goal is more like stepping into every body of water at least once. With something like 150 important lakes, streams, seas, bays, and rivers in her archive, she's about to get closer to her specific goal of painting all the world's oceans as well. She leaves September 30 for a month-long voyage to the Arctic Circle north of Norway, and when she's done, that will just leave the waters of Antarctica. But for now, she's got enough to do preparing to approach the North Pole -- a trip requiring a level of detailed preparation that would make a less adventurous soul consider staying home.

But for Eubank, showing up is the most important part of her art-making. Though the larger scale works are finished patiently and painstakingly in her studio at home, the undertaking of the voyages themselves are a performative, experiential aspect of her over overall practice and commitment to working on site. "There are different kinds of waters like there are different mountain ranges," she explains. "Each individual mountain maybe is not as distinguishable, but as a whole the range has individual, recognizable character." Sure, but how much is water really all that different as a formal matter? It seems like such a universal thing, familiar in every way. Yet over the years since starting this project, Eubank has discovered untold variations of color, surface, motion, geography, atmosphere, reflection, and other kinds of formal nuances -- variations which absolutely manifest in the works and thus edge the abstraction back toward the landscape. "I think of the paintings as portraits of the bodies of water, which, like people, are both all the same and all different." And that's part of the reason it's so important to actually go and be in the full presence of her subjects. This abstract/figurative push/pull paradox is at the heart of her signature style and the mystery that attracts her fans and collectors -- but it is also something that makes galleries uncomfortable because it's intentionally unresolvable and thus hard to characterize.

That said, the idea of a modern-day plein air painter with such an outbound spirit is very much something the public understands and responds to as a narrative -- perhaps even more so when it's a woman, since sailing the globe on tall ships in search of buried treasure has traditionally been kind of a guy thing. For her Arctic adventure, Eubank is joining a program that brings scientists, writers, and artists together to explore the High Arctic, on a three-masted barquentine tall ship, the Antigua. As part of The Arctic Circle 2014 Autumn Expedition, Eubank is one of 28 participants who applied to sail around the international waters of Svalbard, an arctic archipelago north of Norway and only 10 degrees latitude from the North Pole. She had a very successful [Kickstarter](#) campaign raising money for the canvas, brushes, pencils, paper, ink, participation fee, airfare, technical equipment, and a pile of special clothing for the temperatures and conditions. If her painting kit seems impossibly compact, her clothing kit is overwhelming. There's a jacket like kevlar, dozens of dry-bags, handwarmer batteries, a three-layer system for everything and no natural fibers because it absorbs your sweat that then freezes solid, industrial overgarments, offshore sailing gear like on *Deadliest Catch* or something, and wader boots. She is meticulous but sanguine, saying, "I mean, you have to get from the boat to the land somehow. These heavy gloves might affect finger agility, so I'm using just the innermost layer by itself. Like that, you can work for about 20 minutes before your fingers start to freeze, so that's your sketch time!" Oh and she's got glacier goggles so her eyeballs don't freeze solid. At least there's a plan.



Danielle Eubank, "Arwad III," Oil on linen canvas, 32x42 inches, 2009



So it will be in 20-minute increments that she fills the pages of her handmade books, several of which are already festooned with oil-paint sketches and copious notes. She's got a new one for this trip; her plan is to strap it to herself so she can work more quickly and in case of high winds or needing her hands for balance and such. She brings a proper camera, but for more than one reason, the most important work is of course needing to happen in the moment. "Drawing is like thinking through my hands. It's different than photos, though of course I take those too. Way more figurative details make it into the finished paintings when I sketch on site. Like all artists, I'm trying to communicate in a language that is not like words. Emotion is its own language; what is that feeling when the inorganic punctuates the organic, when colors take on aspects of storytelling?" Abstraction is often called a language in art historical texts. And while hers flirts with camouflage and interference patterns, it remains playful without ever being a joke -- beautiful but not decorative, approachable but not simple.

"The water is so precious and individual, even personal, and that's why I call it portraiture," she affirms. "Environmental portraiture." During previous trips on the replica 6th-century BC vessel Phoenicia, the replica 8th-century Indonesian vessel Borobudur, and smaller more modern treks, she's made works portraying the waters in Syria's Mediterranean; a frozen fountain in the Alps; Mozambique's equatorial heat signature; Jakarta's reflection of a smoggy sky; the placidity of the Henley Regatta in CITY, and a series of city lights at night reflecting on black waters. Each individual work is as unique as it can be. And furthermore, tiny details sometimes make their way into the abstraction -- like with Carthage, where the green water reflects the familiar earth; or the white plastic tarps floating in the river off the Brooklyn Bridge. "I think of myself as a kind of scientist, and everything is an experiment. I work along this continuum that is almost a triangle: A) formalism and the abstract/figurative issue; B) the homage that must be paid to reality; and C) the evidence of my presence in the place and the moment, which affect the work, both deliberately and subconsciously."



Danielle Eubank, "Mozambique VI," Oil on linen canvas, 24x36 inches, 2010



Danielle Eubank, "Mozambique IX," Oil on linen canvas, 60x72 inches, 2011

As compelling as the formal issues are, to questions of imagery must be added questions of meaning. For example, whether she has come to view water as a subject narrative differently since embarking on this project in 2001, considering the heightened awareness of global resource shortages and now the California drought in particular. It's scarce, growing more scarce all the time. But then, at the Poles there's too much of it, with melting ice caps and rising sea levels. So it figures politics, drought, and climate change, must be intruding with increasing urgency into her practice alongside her formalist, art historical and materialist

concerns. Her response is both surprising and not surprising at all. "Geopolitics have absolutely, positively been at the forefront of my mind since childhood. I grew up in western Sonoma County, and things like climate, organic farming, and sustainability have always been important to me. I'm excited more people are aware and talking about these things, and I sincerely hope my own lifetime of work will only further bring attention to them. Political art can be problematic, but we need to have a real conversation about water! I just prefer the carrot to the stick when it comes to starting it. Just by seeing the pictures and using the word and idea of water as a topic can trigger thought, without having to accuse anyone of anything." So in the end, she's just after what all art is after -- finding a path of seeing the familiar world in fresh a new way.



Danielle Eubank, "Holiday on the Marina III," Oil on linen canvas, 24x34 inches, 2008



Danielle Eubank, "Isle of Mull," Oil on linen canvas, 28x44 inches, 2014





Danielle Eubank, Phoenicia Reflection, Oil on linen canvas, 60x72 inches, 2009



Danielle Eubank, "Santa Monica," Oil on linen canvas, 44x28 inches, 2010



Danielle Eubank, "South Africa," Oil on linen canvas, 46x42 inches, 2011



Danielle Eubank, "The Brooklyn Bridge II," Oil on linen canvas, 32x42 inches, 2012

Top Image: Danielle Eubank, "Val d'Isère Fountain V," Oil on linen canvas, 20x30 inches, 2008



About the Author

Shana Nys Dambrot is an art critic, curator, and author based in Los Angeles. [MORE](#)

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