



ONE ARTIST, FIVE OCEANS: MICHIGAN MEDICINE EXHIBITION EXPLORES ART AND THE ENVIRONMENT

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By Alana Valko



A new Michigan Medicine exhibition by Danielle Eubank promotes serenity as much as it does urgency. On view until December 6th, “Oil on Water: Painting on Linen,” features emotive abstract portraits of bodies of water and makes an eye-opening declaration about water and the environment.

When Danielle Eubank finished her Master of Fine Arts at the University of California, Los Angeles, California in 1994, she was on the fast track for a career as an interactive media artist. As one of the first students studying interactivity and digital art, Eubank was well-prepared for the incoming explosion of the world-wide-web. “Non-linear digital storytelling,” as Eubank puts it, or the act of “clicking” we now know so well, became the artist’s playground—that is, before she fell in love with painting.

Thriving in the early beginnings of the world-wide-web, Eubank became one of the first website designers, even designing the first corporation-wide website for the BBC. However, the artist’s increasing affinity for the physical, tactile experience of canvas pushed her to paint.

“At a certain point, I really missed canvas and getting my hands dirty,” recalls Eubank. “I gave up my career in digital media in order to get some paint under my fingernails.”

Despite working completely on canvas, digital media still fascinated Eubank and remained present in her work.

“I’m lucky in that the medium that I was involved with originally is just part of our everyday lives now,” said Eubank, who says that she still approaches her work from the perspective of a graphic designer. “My work is non-linear—and what I mean by that is that I don’t paint narratives or stories. It’s more about the formal, non-linear emotive expression, which is similar to how a graphic designer might think about it.”

But Eubank doesn’t just paint for fun—she’s spent twenty years sailing across the world on expeditions with one overarching goal: to capture and paint every single ocean on earth. She started the project, titled “One Artist Five Oceans,” in 2001 and is currently in the process of painting her final ocean, the Southern Ocean surrounding Antarctica.

“My project is about the relationship between oceans, people, the historical background of this relationship, and the personal history of it,” said Eubank. “I want to get people to observe, to stop and think about the world around them—and then I hope they will be more likely to act.”

Eubank did not begin painting water. When she traveled through Spain with a friend in 2001, Eubank set out to paint the Doñana National Park. Determined to paint the Iberian lynxes and well-protected flora and fauna, the artist was disappointed to find out that the area was protected and inaccessible to public hikers. She found herself stuck on the beach, unable to go inland.

“I sat on the beach for days with my back to the ocean, just painting the dunes,” she remembered. “I could not bear painting water. It seemed trite, and it seemed cliché, and really just very hard since it’s constantly moving.”

After three days of solely painting dunes, the artist finally decided to turn around towards the ocean. Reluctant to do so, she started painting the water, eventually learning how to abstract it.



Arctic V. Oil on linen. 72x116 inches. 2017. Featured in Michigan Medicine's Gifts of Art Gallery.



"I finally confronted the ocean and had a little conversation with it," she recalled. "My first painting was basically dunes with just a very little corner of the ocean in it."

After her first painting of the water in Spain, Eubank got in a bad bike accident, falling down a mountain. Unable to carry on with her friends, she found herself convalescing in a little fishing village for the next two months.

"It was just me and the water. I was by myself for two months, so that's when I really got into the idea of painting water," she said.

Two years later, Eubank was asked to join the Borobudur Ship Expedition as the expedition's artist. Under Phillip Beale, the expedition's leader and sailor, researchers and artisans reenacted an ancient maritime trade route of 8th-century ancient Java. Onboard she painted the Indian and Atlantic Oceans and began her project "One Artist Five Oceans." She has since been on three more expeditions: the Phoenician Ship Expedition, an expedition in the High Arctic, and most recently an expedition to Antarctica.

Eubank employs the formal elements of abstraction while painting her works, yet for her, the paintings also look to consider humanity's tangible history with water.

"We need to take responsibility for what we have done to the water," said Eubank, who identifies as an environmentalist as much as she does an artist. "We have created an awful mass of pollution in water all over the world."

Eubank says through her work, she hopes to promote action.

"There are little things that can be done every day to help save our oceans—like washing clothes in cold water, which is just as clean as warm water and uses less energy," she said. "By hang drying clothes, your clothes will actually last longer and look better, as well as use less gas and electricity."

"I want people to know they can affect change. We can each make a difference."

Four of Eubank's paintings are currently on view as part of "Oil on Water: Painting on Linen," presented by Michigan Medicine's Gifts of Art program, until December 6th. You can view her works inside the Gifts of Art Gallery in the University Hospital's Main Lobby on Floor 1, at 1500 E. Medical Center Drive, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. The gallery is open from 8 am-8 pm.

The Gifts of Art program brings the world of art & music to Michigan Medicine. During times of stress and illness, these programs utilize the arts to assist and enhance the healing process amongst hospital patients and visitors. Other exhibitions also on view currently include "The Un-Quarium: Mixed Media Unruly Arts," "Pen & Ink Queens," and "Michigan Sports Galore: Oil on Canvas".

More Information

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Contact | Michigan News
Office of the Vice President for Communications
412 Maynard St. Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1399
734-615-8765

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