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A Conversation with Danielle Eubank, Expedition Artist, On Her Upcoming Trip to the Arctic Circle

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Recipient of a 2014-15 Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, Danielle Eubank paints bodies of water. She also paints water as if it were a body. The way light plays on its surface, the way it reveals its depths to show actual and emotional ripples, waves, and tides. All at once you see reflections of what's above as well as things on and below the surface. She punctuates her surfaces with prismatic facets of color. Sometimes the surfaces are placid, sometimes they're turbulent. Always active, always in motion, the images are hypnotic and captivating. Besides documenting what she encounters, she captures the rhythms and moods of her subject. No piece can be the same because, like snowflakes, each maritime moment is a once in a lifetime phenomenon.

It would be one thing if she made these pieces in the studio. She doesn't. She's an expedition artist. That means that she works while she participates as a member of vigorous if not potentially dangerous trips. Now she's about to embark on a painting voyage that will take her to the Arctic Circle. Her goal is to paint every major body of water on Earth. After she completes the Arctic Circle Expedition, all that will remain is Antarctica. Prior expeditions include The Phoenician Ship Expedition and The Borobudur Ship Expedition.

Like artists that accompanied explorers before the invention of the camera, she records what she sees. She also paints what she experiences. The result is not so much a visual diary as a visual novel or epic poem. She paints and sketches on-site, with all the challenges that entails. She works from immediate impressions. That's what makes the work so vibrant and alive. As with earlier trips, she will have to deal with atmospheric conditions. These include frostbite, for instance, and the effect that the temperature has on her materials.

Below is a conversation about her upcoming trip to the Arctic Circle.

JS: When and how did you come up with the idea to paint all the Earth's bodies of water? Did it flow out of the work you were doing at the time?

DE: Yes, it flowed quite naturally. When I joined The Borobudur Ship Expedition as Expedition Artist I had been painting water for three years. The Borobudur Ship is a replica 8th century Indonesian trading vessel. You can visit her inside the Borobudur museum complex in central Java. She has two masts shaped like upside down "V's" instead of the usual single bit of wood sticking up into the air. Also, there are double outriggers and galleries on each side - plenty of areas for sketching water. The boat sailed across the Indian Ocean, around the Cape of Good Hope, and up the Atlantic to Ghana. I got the idea for painting all the major bodies of water in the world while on this voyage, and it really got cemented in my brain on my second expedition, The Phoenicia Ship Expedition.

Phoenicia is a replica 6th century BCE Phoenician vessel. The Greek historian Herodotus said the Phoenicians were the first to circumnavigate Africa. This would have been 2,000 years before the Portuguese explorer Vasco de Gama did it. Both the Phoenicia and Borobudur expeditions were conceived by Captain Philip Beale. Philip had the inspired idea to circumnavigate Africa with a Phoenician ship as Herodotus claimed - it's a kind of living history, showing that it would have been possible for the Phoenicians to do it.

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As expedition artist, Philip asked me where on the route I would like to paint. Well this was just perfect for me. I quickly decided on Syria where the boat was built, in order to help with the boat building and also to paint that part of the Mediterranean. Additionally I chose Mozambique and northern South Africa since I hadn't painted water in that part of the Indian Ocean before. Finally, I wanted to have the experience of what it would have been like to sail in the waters from where the Phoenicians were from. I was compelled to go to Gibraltar, which marks the end of the Mediterranean Sea and the beginning of the Atlantic Ocean. The famous Rock of Gibraltar is the northern pillar of "The Pillars of Hercules" - these are the 'gates' that were purportedly the farthestmost limits reached by the Greek divine hero Heracles, and the end of the known world.

For me the centerpiece of The Phoenician Ship Expedition was sailing into the Bay of Tunis, to Carthage, as the Romans did when they sacked and destroyed Carthage during the Third Punic War in 149-146 BCE. There is nothing left of Carthage (because the Romans were exceptionally thorough), but you can still see where the Carthage naval port was, where boats like ours would have been moored back then. I felt a tingling feeling on my skin when entering the bay. I could imagine exactly what it was like 2,200 years ago. It was the look of the water and the bay that brought on this inordinate sensation.

It was at this time that the idea of painting all the oceans became firm in my mind. Traveling back in history and seeing the 'end of the known world' made the world seem smaller somehow. I sketched out on a piece of paper, just for fun, how many places I had painted and was pleasantly surprised. I knew that my next two oceans would have to be the Arctic and the Antarctic.

JS: Of the 150 bodies of water you've painted so far, which one do you remember the most? Which one was the most challenging? Which one was the most magical?

DE: The scariest painting of water ever created was my first one, and for this reason it is the most memorable. My friend Valerie Baptista and I took a year to travel in 2001. She suggested Doñana National Park in southern Spain as a place to camp. It was a great suggestion; a gorgeous biodiverse World Heritage Site home to five threatened bird species, Iberian Lynx, and many others. In order to protect the endangered species we weren't allowed in the interior unless on a bus, so I was stuck on the beach. I spent my time sitting on the beach with my back to the ocean, painting the dunes. I loathed the idea of painting the ocean - growing up in northern California on the coast my only experience of ocean paintings were crashing waves and dolphins with rainbows. I couldn't relate to those images. And painting moving water is really hard. So I just sat there, just me and the dunes and crashing waves. After several days I got the courage to turn around, to face the water. The challenge of painting water was like incessant call I could no longer ignore. I remember staring at it for a long time, looking for a way to represent it using my own voice. The first painting is almost all dunes with a small triangle of water in the corner.

The next painting had a little more water in it. Over the next several days I began to close in on details of the behavior of the water, its patterns and rhythms. A couple weeks later I got into a bike accident and was forced to recuperate, so I spent the remainder of the summer months in Asturias, Spain, painting on the dock of a small fishing village. It was glorious. I found a way to express the water in the harbor that was unique to me. I particularly remember painting "Aguas Asturianas I," which is the first water painting truly conveying my own voice. I discovered how to paint the patterns and reflections in a way that looked like water but represented its abstract lines, shapes, colors, textures, and rhythms at the same time. It was, and remains, very exciting.

JS: How did you connect with The Arctic Circle expedition? Was it hard to sell them on the idea of your joining up? Have the logistics been hard on prior trips?

DE: I spoke on a panel in 2012 as an expedition artist and I mentioned that I was planning to paint all the oceans on the planet. By joyful serendipity, one of the panelists let me know about The Arctic Circle organization because her husband was joining the expedition as a writer. I applied the following year, and to my delight, they accepted my application.

The logistics of the Borobudur and Phoenicia Ship Expeditions were more complex because the expeditions were much longer, had multiple destinations and required building the ships. For example, on The Borobudur Ship Expedition, I had to pack all the canvas, paint, chemicals, brushes, and film that I would need for 6 months, in a way that would be protected on a leaky boat. I ran out of white paint in Cape Town (the biggest city on the voyage) and, after visiting every art store in town, discovered Cape Town was completely out

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of white oil paint. By good fortune a fellow shopper in one of the stores overheard my story and offered me all of her oil paints - a testament to the generosity of the people there. The challenge of The Arctic Circle expedition is preparing for the harsh climate. Fortunately, I have had some time to research what I will need and can make the necessary preparations prior to leaving.

JS: What sort of vessel will you sail on? What's the ship's mission? It's itinerary? And who's joining you?

DE: I am really excited to be part of The Arctic Circle expedition. I am one of 28 international artists, scientists, and educators selected to board a 3-masted barquentine tall ship, the Antigua, that will sail around the international territory of Svalbard, an arctic archipelago, north of Norway and 10 degrees latitude from the North Pole. What sets this expedition apart is that its mission is to serve as a hothouse for ideas, to provide a shared experience for thinkers to engage in issues and develop interdisciplinary collaborations.

Each day we will have the opportunity to explore the land and ice on the archipelago. My goal is to get as far north as we can, making use of the relative warmth of October when the passageways are the most clear of ice.

JS: What kind of relationships have you had in the past with the rest of the crew? I'm thinking of the ship's captain and the various scientist and other personnel.

DE: I've made really great friends on the expeditions. I didn't know Captain Philip Beale before the first one but he is now a lifelong friend. In fact, he graciously hosted my husband Fletcher Beasley and my wedding reception at his house in England in 2007.

Being on a boat is like camping with 15 other people where you are not allowed to leave the campsite. Fortunately I love camping! [laughs]. On Borobudur and Phoenicia everyone slept in bunks in one room, and shared all the other spaces so it's impossible not to make friends. Being on a boat is one of the only times that we have the luxury to delve more thoroughly into topics, share ideas, and find out about others. Additionally, being on an expedition together is a unique shared experience that creates enduring bonds. I count everyone I've sailed with as a friend.

JS: Do you participate in the day-to-day activities on the ship, or are you left to your own devices for the duration?

DE: On the Borobudur and Phoenicia, I was a crew member like any other, helping with all the regular duties like pumping the bilge, keeping a lookout, minding the tiller, and cooking and cleaning, as well as any other duties asked of me by the captain, such as acting as a liaison on shore. Still, there was plenty of 'free' time. This was when I sketched and painted.

The Arctic Circle's Antigua will be luxurious by comparison. For a start there are lavatories on the ship and a staff that will cook so no one will get poisoned by my cooking (there was one incidence of salmonella poisoning on Phoenicia after a meal I prepared). I will spend every available minute sketching and painting. On land I plan to sketch as much as the weather conditions allow. I plan to strap cardboard and paper to my lap and prepare the paper so that I can sketch with gloves on. Polar bears are a danger in this region, so we have to stay in safe areas. To venture away we must have an armed escort.

JS: I'm sure you prepare for it mentally and emotionally. But if painting is hard work in a studio, it has to be exponentially harder on a boat on the open sea. Do you prepare for it physically, as well? Also, what are your specific preparations for frigid cold conditions?

DE: The biggest physical challenge in the Arctic will be dealing with the cold. I have to acquire some pretty heavy-duty clothing, primarily to keep from getting wet while getting on and off the boat and in the sloshy ice on land. I need 3 layers of 'high tech' clothing as well as some type of non-fur ushanka, two or three pair of gloves (that I can draw with while wearing), and some kind of contraption for sketching while in the wind and snow. I plan to strap paper to my legs and fit my jacket with sketching utensils for easy access. Apart from these practicalities I always make sure I've read several books on the area, its history, wildlife, and cultures.

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JS: What will happen to the work when you return? Will you sell it? Will it become part of a book?

DE: I'm planning on an exhibition and I would love to create a book of paintings. I also have a series of works I am creating as part of my Kickstarter campaign.

JS: Your last body of water is the Antarctic. Are plans for that in the works?

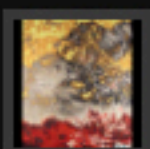
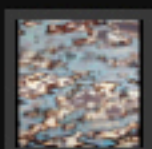
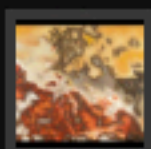
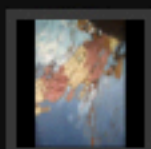
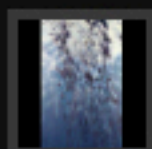
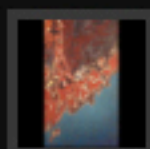
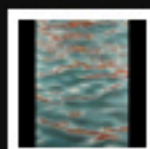
DE: I'm concentrating on getting to the Arctic and creating a solid body of work from my experience there. I know the Antarctic is looming and I think plans for getting there are likely to come out of the Arctic expedition.

JS: Finally, let's pretend that you were chosen to be the first artist to accompany a mission to Mars? Would you go? Why?

DE: How long does it take to get to Mars? Six to twelve months, right? And to paint the ice there? Hmmm. That's a good question. The space helmet and heavy gloves might hinder my ability to paint. I'll have to think about it and let you know when I return from the Arctic.

 *Danielle Eubank*

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