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Article / March 14, 2024

'We Are the River' Uses Beauty to Convey a Dire Warning

By [Ilene Dube](#)



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Driving from central New Jersey to the Gallery at Stockton University on a late February day in which the sunshine hinted at spring, I became aware of the changes to the landscape. Trees gave way to tall grasses, the earth seemed sandier, and the Shore was not far away. There were signs for rivers and other bodies of water.

Stockton's logo looks like two trees – or are they bird feet? And banners call out "Home of the Ospreys."

It is no coincidence that the exhibition I'm here to see is titled "We Are the River: Complex narratives, conservation, and committing to New Jersey's waterways." It remains on view through April 9.



"Stockton has a strong commitment to waterways including academic programs in environmental studies, marine science, and sustainability," says Exhibition Coordinator for the Stockton University Gallery and co-curator Ryann Casey, who took classes in these programs while attending Stockton as an art major. Stockton's 1,600 acre Galloway campus is located in the Pinelands National Reserve.

"We were interested in looking at how artists responded to New Jersey rivers through different lenses," continues Casey, whose co-curator was Allie Wilson, collections specialist at the gallery. "We looked for artists inspired by rivers throughout the state but with different materials and with different approaches. Some work focused on personal experiences, some on historical importance, some on community engagement, and to climate change."

Inside the gallery I am greeted by two paintings of a Rainbow Vista by Steve Kuzma. In his statement he writes that nature rewards him with inspiration and peace. "The river and water always flow. We can notice all of the life around it as a metaphor for life."

“Each stream, creek, river, and river basin in New Jersey has a story to tell,” writes Associate Professor of Environmental Sciences Emma L. Witt. “We’ve used these waterways for transportation, fishing, water supply, industry, irrigation, waste disposal, and recreation.”

This is the very world we see in the archival inkjet prints of fine art photographer Michael Chovan Dalton – a father and son are fishing from a rock in the the water, alongside images of industrialization side-by-side with glittering blue water and plant life.

“Even with all that we know about rivers,” continues Witt, “if we see them every day or only occasionally, hopefully we can still capture the sense of adventure we felt as kids.”

And while this exhibition is calling attention to the environmental condition of our waterways, it is doing so with beauty. Photographer Brandon Seidler processes his color film in the chemical pollutants he finds in the rivers that are his subjects, creating the sublime in his watery landscapes.



At the center of the gallery’s lower level are three large sculptural forms encrusted with seashells. On closer inspection their carcasses are made of detritus – industrial waste such as Home Depot plastic buckets, diesel fuel containers, yellow “floor may be slippery when wet” signs, orange-and-white plastic traffic cones, car parts and parts of cabinets and doors. On top of each are jars filled with water.

“The materials have been sourced from Philadelphia’s waste stream,” writes artist Jean Shin, who collaborated with the city’s Recycled Artists in Residency, a program that seeks to challenge the perception of waste culture. Shin, a South Korean native based in Brooklyn, is known for her public art installations transforming such refuse as Mountain Dew bottles and mobile phones into monuments that question our material consumption. “These sculptures are a deathly reminder that commercial excess is an ever present issue, and one in which all Philadelphians are implicated.”

Those jars of water were taken from the local watershed. Feeling thirsty? Shin reminds us that the Delaware River is a major source of drinking water for the region and “how the quality of our water is directly linked to the health of our watershed ecologies.”

It was Rachel Blythe Udell’s social media announcement of the exhibition that first alerted me to it. She is primarily a fiber sculptor who knits and crochets imaginative creatures from colorful yarn. Here, “These Shapes That Permeate Me” is like a colorful waterway wending snakelike across the gallery floor. It suggests sea creatures and seaweed, octopuses and rocks, with details of lace, beads, and ribbon that make it shimmer and sparkle. There is so much detail on this monumental work, it’s hard to imagine it was completed in a single lifetime. Just the installation in the gallery was a major undertaking.



A video on her website shows her collecting salvaged vintage heirloom lace and painting it in bright colors, then stitching it together with beads. She finds the repetitive motion therapeutic, a way to work through emotions. She recently filled an entire vitrine with her fantastical biomorphic forms at the Philadelphia Airport, and a solo exhibition of her work is on view at the Delaware Contemporary in Wilmington, Delaware.

Udell has always felt connected to waterways, reveling in their wildlife and wild ways, she writes in her exhibition statement. "Sometimes, of course, we saw things that were not so pretty – various food wrappers, needles, bottles, a drowned baby doll, a pair of rubber gloves filled partially with water, floating and bobbing and looking like an out-of-place sea creature."

For “We Are the River” she wanted to create an installation that embodied her river experiences. Even the process of cleaning the rocks she incorporated took many steps from clearing off the mud to buffing them with cloth and jojoba oil. “Spending time with the rocks in this way, feeling their textures, the divots and circular indentations... I felt as though I was in some way touching time and connecting with the elemental forces of nature.”

Lauren Rosenthal McManus has drawn a map of the Mullica River (cited by Professor Witt as her favorite river; its 50 miles meander through the swamps and forests of the Pinelands) using local earth pigments. These pigments, derived from rocks collected during the artist’s walks in the woods, “are geographical blueprints layered with artifacts of a human connection to place.”



Alongside the wall-sized map are jars of crushed rock, a mortar and pestle, and samples of rocks to be crushed. The drawing itself, in its earthiness, wateriness, and drippiness, emphasizes the multitudes of tendrils branching off the main riverway.

Nancy Cohen’s works in glass and paper pulp arose from her encounters with the Meadowlands, amid congested highways, outlet malls, water treatment facilities. The former cedar forest has “become a seemingly endless absorption tank for every kind of refuse,” she writes. Including human remains.

Rebecca Schultz creates a river in a mixed media textile – on one side a cyan blue watery pattern is embroidered in marks suggestive of underwater flora. On the reverse are the fauna, printed, collaged, and stitched. Schultz has lived along the Niger River in West Africa as well as along the Delaware, which inspired the life depicted in this textile. She credits dozens of co-creators in making this work. “We took walks in a restored native ecosystem observing, learning, and making art.”

But amid the beauty, there is a reminder that the situation is dire. A paint line on the exterior walls of the gallery is 3.5 feet high – we are warned that failing to curb future emissions could cause a sea level rise of this amount by the end of this century. “Although we often think of climate change and sea level rise in terms of coastal regions, these issues are significant to rivers as well,” says Casey. “This rise will impact low lying regions and have catastrophic consequences for communities living around rivers.”

Other artists in the exhibition include Nancy Agati, Milcah Bassel, Joanie Gagnon San Chirico, Tyrese "Bright Flower" Gould Jacinto, Lawre Stone, Amanda Thackray, Michael Williamson, and Cheryl Patton Wu.

Galloway, NJ | Through April 7, 2024

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