

“Our coastline is intimately wrapped up in how we identify ourselves – as Rhode Islanders and as New Englanders,” photographer Kathie Florsheim tells us. Her sentiment regarding geography and culture was one of the sparks for this inaugural art exhibit in the Hale House Gallery. All five artists represented – Jeffrey Marshall, Olivia McCullough, Kim Salerno, Susan Schultz, and Kathie Florsheim – are New Englanders living close to the sea not only in geographical but also in metaphysical orientation. Also, each one is a recipient of a Rhode Island Visual Arts Sea Grant, a program that began in 1988 as a collaboration between Rhode Island Sea Grant and the University of Rhode Island Department of Art and Art History. The grant supports New England visual artists whose works are influenced by the marine environment. In its wisdom, the Sea Grant encourages artists and scientists to explore and document the mysteries and great powers of the sea in the belief that the artistic process and the emotional connections it engenders allow us to see the sea with insights that mere technical data alone cannot.

A little over one hundred years ago in this gallery, the former “gray parlor” of the summer

Curator’s Foreword

home of Edward Everett Hale and his family, a similar artistic exploration was going on. The family’s creative engagement with this coastal landscape – beyond the normal recreational pursuits – included botanizing, writing, and painting. These combined disciplines represented a natural confluence between art and science. The patriarch Edward Everett Hale had grown up fascinated by botany and had instilled in his own children his love of nature, careful observation, and exploration. Drawing botanical specimens could lead naturally into painting, so it is no surprise that family members Susan Hale, Ellen Day Hale, and Philip Leslie Hale went on to become notable painters. We can imagine their still-damp plein air paintings leaning against these same walls after their afternoon excursions to the coastline, the salt ponds, or nearby farms.

As we prepared this exhibition, we were conscious of Edward Everett Hale watching from his portrait hanging in his study. The portrait was painted by Philip Leslie Hale circa 1903,

when his father was called to serve as chaplain to the U. S. Senate. Six years later, E.E. Hale would testify for the Weeks Act and help pass legislation to protect many of our national forests, creating national parks including the White Mountains of New Hampshire where he loved to hike and botanize. We believe he would have been very interested in the work of these five artists. By looking closely at their work he would have understood how dramatically our perception of the sea has changed since the early twentieth century. In Hale's time, the sea, unlike the forests, was still boundless. We were still a whaling nation, and our fisheries inexhaustible.

First, he might have been drawn to the porcelains of Susan Schultz, rendered tenderly in still life form, recognizing a suggestion to 16th and 17th century European still life compositions that displayed the wealth of patrons: the richness of their diets, the exotic flowers in their gardens. On closer inspection, Schultz would have surprised him as she does us. Her work draws attention to the abundance of trash along our coastlines. By eliminating coloration, she makes us ponder the purity and complexity of each artifact, natural or man-made, so that we see the marvels of nature's designs. Her bleached forms are suggestive of skulls found in the desert, but the desert here becomes the dead zones we are creating with pollution in the sea.

Kim Salerno's paper constructions also forego color, so we can focus on form and repeating pattern. Trained originally as an architect and inspired by a spouse who is a marine biologist, she deconstructs the geometry of tiny marine animals such as cephalopods and cnidarians to arrive at her own vocabulary of paper forms. "This body of work builds on principles from other disciplines to create a novel, organic growth of artistic forms simultaneously governed by plan and chance," she tells us. Feeding into her appreciation and knowledge of forms is the development of a century of oceanographic research and photographic technology that allow us to explore the sea at depths as difficult to reach as outer space.

Photography is the chosen medium for Kathie Florsheim to document the dramatic changes taking place only a few miles from Hale House. These photographs are selected from her series entitled "Living on the Edge," which focuses on the unique community at Roy Carpenter's Beach. Her images capture the seasonal patterns of residents enjoying the pleasures of summer at the shore while watching their beach erode as the sea level rises and the severity of ocean storms increases. Florsheim considers Roy Carpenter's typical of many coastal communities

in New England; as photographer she observes and documents, and even attends community meetings to take the pulse of the place.

The challenges of sea level rise, severe storms, and their consequences are at the heart of Jeffrey Marshall's poignant field drawings from New Orleans. He lived in New Orleans from 1991 to 1997 and fell in love with it. When Katrina hit the city he returned, to try to viscerally understand the human and ecological trauma by drawing. Drawing in the field was new for him but he found the process of working in public revelatory. Strangers approached him with their stories, and these conversations became gifts to him. He has returned every year since. We could consider Marshall's still-life drawings like Schultz's but in color. He has chosen to depict the randomness of composition that happens under the powerful hand of nature, when in a few moments' time our human constructions are deconstructed and our sense of order is forever changed.

Fragments of debris discarded by humans and found along the shoreline are also the inspiration for multimedia artist Olivia McCullough. As a child might build a boat from flotsam and dream of escapes and far-flung adventure, McCullough's "Lifeboat" series, constructed from remnants of lobster traps, is purposely fragile and flawed. "These boats offer little in the way of protection or sanctuary," she tells us. She goes on to say, "On a personal level they speak of the sometimes irreconcilable and contradictory aspects of life, as well as man's futile arrogance in the face of forces greater than himself."

As we look around the room and appreciate the visual dialogue between the artists here today and those who passed through a century ago, we find it appropriate to end with McCullough's poetic and insightful observation. Faced with the profound majesty and power of the sea, the artists' expressions encourage our sense of awe and curiosity. There are no answers here, only questions, and profound humility expressed with craft and beauty as we ask ourselves: what do we see in the sea now?

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