

Julie Heffernan



The great flood: Julie Heffernan's When the Water Rises

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"Camp Bedlam" Julie Heffernan

If Dr. Seuss and Salvador Dalí had one wild night of dystopian passion, Julie Heffernan's *When the Water Rises* would be the product of their union.

The colors — rich oils that lack the heaviness typical of so many paintings done with pigmented linseed — are soft and suggested. The images — eclectic and surreal all at once — are almost unidentifiable if you view them from too far away or too closely. These are paintings that will stop you cold. When you catch your breath again and examine them, they will call to mind a lower-level humanities class, perhaps one where your professor dissected Jan van Eyck's "Arnolfini Wedding Portrait." What do the shoes mean? Who is that second figure in the mirror? What does the dog mean? Why are there oranges? Why does this painting have so many clues?

You will find Heffernan's paintings no less enigmatic, and no less immersive in their puzzles. You can stare at them almost endlessly — I did — and you will find yourself with some answers, yes, but also some sobering realizations and, also, more questions.

Consider climate change as the frame for this exhibit — not difficult, as its title is *When the Water Rises*.

Consider it, that is — and the resulting sea level rise — through the lens of an artist. It's one thing to intellectually process the way your carbon footprint impacts sea level rise and climate change and insert lots of big scientific words here that we know are bad but have stopped hearing because we hear them so much and hey, doesn't the far right say climate change isn't really a thing anyway? and quite another to walk into University of Tampa's Scarfone/Hartley Gallery and have oversized paintings of post-apocalyptic families punch you in the gut.

That was my visceral reaction to the exhibit when I visited, a reaction that didn't seem to shock Heffernan. Is this how people felt when they first saw the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel? I wondered. Heffernan was at the gallery when I visited, and she told me the images were ones that came into her head — she stops short of calling them visions, but there's not really a more effective way of explaining them — and wouldn't leave her alone until she painted them. So strong were these images, she told me, that she found herself abandoning other work and painting these detailed works about our world, post-sea level rise.

Sea level rise. I guess if you live in Colorado, that's a different thing than if you live in, oh, Redington Beach. Or Queens. In Colorado, or Nebraska, it's an abstraction. And, I realize as I gaze upon this exhibit, it's been an abstraction to me, too, because heretofore I've only considered sea level rise as a detriment to my privilege.

To me — a person more at home on or in the water than removed from it (one of the chief reasons I left Orlando was its distance from saltwater) — the notion of climate change and sea level rise has saddened me on an abstract level; I love to dive, and the tragedy of acidic oceans dissolving reefs has always seemed the harshest proof of man's ability to destroy the planet.

Heffernan takes a different tack with her work — in her oversized paintings, the tragedy stems not from our destruction of our environment but of ourselves. Her view may well involve a world with dissolved coral reefs (opening across the bay next week, Shayna Leib captures such beauty in glass and prints, a perfect juxtaposition of beauty and destruction), but also a world where failed sanitary and storm sewers and other collapsing infrastructure make it clear that we have not much more of a chance than Key Largo's North North Dry Rocks, Christ of the Deep or Molasses Reef.

"Camp Bedlam," a 2016 triptych, presents the horror of rising waters in wide and narrow focus. At first glance, the painting depicts a group of displaced people, making camp amongst discarded mattresses and the ephemera of conspicuous consumption — television sets aflame at the water's edge, a Christmas tree atop the mattress pyramid, discarded couches off to the side.

But look closer — and the size of this work allows you to do so — and look everywhere. Each vignette has, to steal from Thoreau, a life playing out in quiet desperation, but also a touch of Hieronymus Bosch's "Seven Deadly Sins."

How appropriate when those same sins may have led these people — us — to this collapsed society. Gluttony, greed, sloth — one can, easily and without much chance for a successful counterpoint, make the case that these things all contribute to a world where we created sea level

rise and then did nothing to stop it. We are, Heffernan seems to suggest in "Camp Bedlam," architects of our own destiny.

ARTS Water Self Portrait As Standing My Ground Julie Heffernan020118
"Self Portrait As Standing My Ground"

JULIE HEFFERNAN

My least favorite image — and, to be clear, I would be over-the-moon delighted to have painted any of these myself, so "least favorite" is akin to "my diamond shoes are too tight" rather than truly seeing no value in the work — is the 2016 "Standing My Ground," the image you'll see most frequently associated with this exhibit. It's a self-portrait (and, Easter egg alert, you can find Heffernan in most of these works). Heffernan poses herself as part of and behind a tree, living aloft (as do many of the people and cities she paints). Almost part of the landscape is a cat-o'-nine tails of broken glass bottles, leaving one to ponder what horror awaits that this gentle yet strong-faced creature would need to defend herself with such a crudely fashioned implement. The world in which she lives seems to offer not much worth defending so violently; even Heffernan herself has little to protect, perhaps. With no clues, what virtue does she retain? With no possessions, what items must she defend?

So "Standing My Ground" speaks not to circling the wagons around the very things that have put her in the tree — Hieronymus Bosch be damned — but, I suspect, to the only things that will save us from our waterlogged dystopia: our memories and collective soul.

Throughout the series of oil paintings, that theme presents itself: The collective war against collective disaster. In one painting, you see a mansion treehouse; in another, a fiery chariot attempting to cross a body of water.

And please make no mistake: Each painting contains many separate, yet connected, stories. Every work contains a collection of tales, like a snapshot of a crowd. The people in the crowd may be connected, and they may all be part of that crowd for different reasons, but each has his or her own story, connected but not truly a part of the story of the person next to them. And if each painting tells many stories, the exhibit collects those stories into one massive patchwork quilt, knitted together with many different bits of yarn. That quilt tells the overarching story, but without each scrap and thread, the overarching story would be quite different.

When you go — and go, please; even if you disagree with the veracity of the science that tell us yes, Virginia, there is sea level rise — leave enough time to truly appreciate the tiny stories in each painting. Each is a thing of art, worthy of study and reflection.

One can but hope that in several hundred years, a new, treetop or sub-aquatic culture will not study these works as insight into how our society finally fell apart.

When the Water Rises: Recent Paintings by Julie Heffernan

Scarfone/Hartley Gallery, R.K. Bailey Art Studios, 310 N. Blvd., University of Tampa

Jan. 24–March 3

Gallery talk with Heffernan Wed., Jan. 24, at 6 p.m., and a reception and curatorial tour with Francesca Bacci, UT associate professor of art, on Fri., Jan. 26, from 7–9 p.m. Gallery hours 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Tues.- Fri.; 1 -4 p.m. Saturday. Free admission.

813- 253-6217, www.ut.edu/When-the-Water-Rises.aspx