

Julie Heffernan



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"When the Water Rises," a provocative and timely exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art

By Denise M. Watson
The Virginian-Pilot
Oct 20, 2018

The first painting of this show came after Hurricane Sandy in 2012 demolished a historic Brooklyn neighborhood near Julie Heffernan's home.

The artist had been inspired years before, too many times. Heffernan's frustration comes from how people continually irritate nature's delicate balance and contribute to natural and man-made disasters.

In her painting, "Self-Portrait with Red Tent," people hide in a shelter while water laps at its edges. Unbothered, the people watch movies and play cards while ignoring a man drowning nearby. In the distance, oil rigs burn against a smoke-tinged sky.

“It was clear to me that things hadn’t started with Sandy,” Heffernan said during a phone interview. The burning rigs reference the 2010 Deepwater Horizon explosion in the Gulf of Mexico, the largest marine oil spill in history.

“It was around Sandy that I decided not to be subtle anymore.”

Little is understated in “When the Water Rises: Recent Paintings by Julie Heffernan,” one of the latest exhibitions at Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art, MOCA.

Its timing is almost too appropriate.

The sea level has risen in Hampton Roads by 14 inches since 1950, according to sealevelrise.org. Small increases in sea level leads to more street flooding during high tide, and it is exacerbated during rainstorms, including hurricanes. Locals don't need statistics, though. Residents are rebuilding after last year's Hurricane Matthew and cleaning up after tropical storm Michael a week ago. The death toll for Michael climbed to more than 30 this week from its sweep from Florida to Virginia.

Even President Donald Trump, one of the most vocal naysayers against the idea of climate change, last week said he no longer considers it a hoax. He still doesn't believe that humans are making it worse, however.

The Virginia Beach museum has tackled issues of sea level rise for years, not only through its exhibitions but also by opening the gallery to community conversations about solutions.

Heffernan will participate in a panel discussion Thursday and host a master class Saturday. The museum is also asking local students, all grade levels, to imagine and imagine and create flood-resistant housing. The art can be two- or three-dimensional.

Alison Byrne, director of exhibitions and education, said terms like “sea level rise,” “resilience,” and “sustainability,” can put a crowd to sleep, but using work like Heffernan’s makes the complicated subject digestible. Heffernan’s involved, colorful pieces also make the conversation more engaging.

“Whenever I look at her work, I discover something new that I didn’t notice before,” she said.

Heffernan tells stories in lush, layered scenes as if the artist has so many points to make.

Her piece, "Camp Bedlam," is a fantastical imagining of a rebuilt community after a disaster. Television sets explode near a river's edge. People live dispersed among tree limbs with water-soaked mattresses draped and stacked to form shelters and to prop up branches. Shorted-out refrigerators, abandoned toilets and washing machines become household fixtures as humans create new living spaces. The abundance of stuff also speaks to our decadent nature, Heffernan said.

Heffernan finished the piece in 2016 just weeks before it was to be included in a show at Louisiana State University Museum of Art in Baton Rouge. A week before the show, record-breaking floods swept through Baton Rouge and surrounding parishes. Thirteen people died; in one parish, 74 percent of the housing was damaged by water.

The museum had originally requested and curated the traveling show because the environmental themes resonated with the coastal area.

But when Heffernan got a call from the curator that the streets surrounding the museum "look like something out of your show," Heffernan said, "it was pretty eerie."

Heffernan's images are not all bleak, however. Her characters, often women, are constructing homes in trees or floating rafts, a sign of resiliency among the chaos.

In-not-so-subtle touches she paints how humans are trying to solve problems while also creating or quickly ignoring them as soon as the land is dry. Look for her take on climate-change deniers, many of the names of the most famous are "carved" in a tree in one painting.

During the years of creating work for the show, other human crises, such as that of refugees, surfaced and Heffernan painted their desperation as well.

Heffernan said the refugee crises are relevant because they often spring from environmental issues like drought and famine, and exacerbated by human conduct like war.

If she can use her art to call attention to them and work to solve the problem, she will.

She said she's looking forward to meeting local people who are working to combat climate change. "I love sidling up to those people," she said. "I'm just telling the story."

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