

Julie Heffernan



Julie Heffernan: A closer look at the artist behind 'When the Water Rises'

By Lexi Riley On Feb 18, 2019

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The detailed works of artist [Julie Heffernan](#) are currently on display in the [UHCL Art Gallery](#). "When the Water Rises: Recent Paintings" is a collection of vibrant and intricate works inspired by the wreckage Heffernan observed after Hurricane Sandy.

Heffernan was born in Peoria, Illinois, raised in Northern California, and received her MFA in 1985 from the Yale School of Art in Connecticut. Her artistic mastery has pinned her all over the map, having held 55 solo exhibitions of her work since 1999. Heffernan has also held the title of Professor of Fine Arts at Montclair State University since 1997.



Close-up of detail in "Self Portrait as the Other Thief, 2013, Oil on canvas." Photo by The Signal reporter Lexi Riley

Heffernan's work is noted for her use of vibrant colors, hidden imagery and ethereal figures. Her human figures, such as the ones in "Self Portrait as the Other Thief" are reminiscent of how the saints are

depicted in Catholic art. One female figure in this piece appears almost virginal, and her pose is reminiscent of crucified Christ. Heffernan attributes this aspect of her artistic style to her Catholic upbringing.

“All that powerful visual imagery of a Catholic upbringing, with holy cards and church treasures, plus the secrets of the sacraments, gave me a lot to imagine/think about when I would sit in church for hours every week,” Heffernan said. “All that powerful imagery provided lots of fodder for the imagination.”



Close-up detail in “Self-Portrait as Hiveminder, 2016, Oil on canvas.” Photo by The Signal reporter Lexi Riley

The focal piece of Heffernan’s “When the Water Rises” exhibition is aptly titled “Camp Bedlam.” In “Camp Bedlam,” Heffernan melts industrial elements such as traffic cones, a washing machine and obliterated, burning television sets into an enchanted forest.

“I wanted to imagine a kind of makeshift community shelter that might grow up around stuff left on the street after a flood,” Heffernan said.

On the topic of Hurricane Sandy, Heffernan recalls that a lot of the trees in Prospect Park, where she walks every day, had been blown down by the storm.

“Within a few days the Parks Department had cut up all those downed trees into manageable pieces and arranged them into neat piles, as though nothing terrible had happened,” Heffernan said. “The piles were almost like playground equipment.”

This imagery Heffernan describes is immortalized in her pieces such as “Self-Portrait as Hiveminder.”

Another important piece in the exhibition is “Sky Burial.” In “Sky Burial,” cannons are aimed at a majestic bird mansion built in the trees.

“With Sky Burial I was imagining how we might all have to take to the trees, like some communities in the Amazon Basin who live in villages that flood once a year have to live in towns that float,” Heffernan said.

While Heffernan describes how she ultimately chose birds for this piece instead of painting her notable figures, she reveals her affinity for vultures and why she specifically chose vultures for this piece.



Close-ups of detail in “Sky Burial, 2016, Oil on canvas.” Photo by The Signal reporter Lexi Riley

“They are the birds who clean up the corpses in places like Tibet, according to their burial customs, for lands where the ground is too hard to bury people underground,” Heffernan said. “Very resourceful and useful birds – I wanted to honor them.”

Madison Ziegelmaier, a biology major who works at the UHCL Art Gallery, noted that Heffernan’s pieces are like “I spy’ for adults.”

“Every time I come in, I notice something new about the pieces,” Ziegelmaier said.

The UHCL Art Gallery is open Monday – Thursday from 9 a.m. – 6 p.m. and Fridays from 9 a.m. – 12 p.m. Heffernan’s work will be on display through March 21.