

Lisa Tubach



P O R T F O L I O

portfolio

King Nudibranch (right), oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches; and *Bommie and the Wrasse* (previous page), oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, by Lisa Tubbach

Text edited by G. Symes
All artwork by Lisa Tubbach

Drawing on profound experiences underwater, as well as shark and reef conservation work in Belize, Hawaii, Puget Sound, Bahamas and Australia, American artist and James Madison University professor Lisa Tubbach creates exuberant, dynamic and compelling paintings inspired by underwater forms, creatures and ecosystems, as well as the perils facing the ocean's fragile reefs. *X-Ray Mag* interviewed the artist to learn more about her perspectives, creative process and artwork, which has been exhibited in the United States, Peru, Suriname, France, Scotland, Japan and Australia.

X-RAY MAG: Tell us about your background and how you became an artist.

LT: I was born and raised in a very landlocked location in the United States: Nebraska. From a young age, any trip to the coasts, or to large bodies of water of any kind, was magical to me. I was, and continue to be, an avid swimmer; as a young person, I spent hours and hours in the pool each summer. An early field trip with my primary school class to collect water from a pond and analyze the sample with a microscope was such a profound revelation—what was initially hidden was just teeming with life.



My father is an artist, so that influence was profound from an early age. While I settled on visual art as a path, I was long drawn to the sciences (biology in particular), history, creative writing, and journalism (my father was also the art director for the Omaha World-Herald). In the end, this all influenced why I became an art-

ist—but also is the bedrock of why I am interested in making images about our natural world and our need to preserve these ecologies. Knowing the science—the data—behind what is happening to our planet drives the images I make. My paintings are quiet calls to action.

X-RAY MAG: Why marine life and underwater themes? How did you come to these themes and how did you develop your style of painting?

LT: As an artist, I have been working with themes of the natural world for most of my career. I have always loved being out-

side and experiencing the spaces of our fellow creatures, investigating their lives. Perhaps underwater spaces are most compelling to me because they are in a world whose riches are typically hidden to us humans. In order to visit such splendor, one needs not only to be prepared, but one can only stay a short time. It is very



Ancient Oceans, Current Clime,
oil and acrylic on canvas,
30 x 30 inches, by Lisa Tubach



Hol Chan (For Jamie), oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 inches, by Lisa Tubach

magical for that reason.

We are related to these sea creatures, of course (we actually share 23 percent of our DNA with a sea sponge), but at the same time, the sea is so vast and filled with so many surprises. I love thinking about this foundational connection to creatures that seem so other-worldly.

As a painter, I am also really interested in the beauty of organic shapes, color subtleties, and balancing conceptual and formal forces (i.e., abstraction versus representation, macro versus micro). I am interested in depicting a space that is always in motion—changing light, current, and constantly-moving creatures. I love watching fish shoaling or schooling together and getting moved about by [the current in] their space. I think it is a nice reminder of how we need to honor natural forces—and a reminder that we are not always in control.

X-RAY MAG: Who or what has inspired your artwork and why?

LT: There are so many artists and scientists I admire (Sylvia Earle, without a doubt), and a number have influenced my thinking at some point in this journey. Most profoundly is the influence of my father, also a painter. My mother was an attorney for many years, dedicated to justice—this passion to right wrongs was deeply instilled in me and certainly influences my commitment to environmentalism. I was incredibly inspired by the painter Jim Adley at Michigan State University, where I did my Master of Fine Arts degree—to paint large canvases, in particular—images that would envelop you. I am forever indebted to the sculptor Stan Sears, at Macalester College, who really showed me the life of a practicing artist. I am so grateful for every ounce of experience I had at New York University (NYU) in the digital video area; it monumentally informs my art practice, as well as my teaching.

In terms of artists/movements that I feel a kindred spirit with—or have been influ-



enced by on some level—I would include Pierre Bonnard for color; Andy Goldsworthy for his poetic, temporary installations of natural forms in the wild; Mel Chin's "Revival Field," where he uses plants to remediate toxic landscapes—making science an artistic statement; and Bill Viola for his brilliant video works. I love the painted, other-worldly spaces by Ati Maier; Terry Winters' painted repetitions; Firelei Báez's works that draw upon Caribbean folklore; and Neo Rauch's surreal collections of subjects, where scale is off-balance and beautifully strange. While in Australia, I took in as much art as I could—the Museum of Old and

New Art in Tasmania was a showstopper. Absolutely incredible. The Contemporary Aboriginal Art of the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) in Melbourne was also amazing to experience firsthand.

I started my art journey as a sculptor; perhaps this is why I am really drawn to this medium as well (I love the work of Doris Salcedo and Cornelia Parker).

X-RAY MAG: What is your artistic method or creative process?

LT: Documenting reefs and related spaces/creatures is fundamental to my process;



Circling (World on Fire), oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 x 72 inches, by Lisa Tubach

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have plunged into Alaskan waters near Ketchikan, and I have worked with shark conservation near Riversdale, Belize. My most recent research led me to document both the Great Barrier Reef and the Belize Barrier Reef—the two largest in the world. They were jaw-dropping in their magnitude. Fields of staghorn coral. I had never seen anything quite like it.

I have so many favorite interactions with underwater life. It was my job in Eleuthera (Bahamas) to count a particular type of fish (grunts)—of which there were many. I became very fond of them and was always the last one left in the water. I loved seeing baby creatures of all types gather near the roots of the mangroves on the coastline—little lemon sharks, little everything; or the curious barracuda that just stare with that toothy “grin;” or the green moray eel that came out to greet me in Belize at the Mexican Rocks site; or the spotted eagle rays. It is all so wonderful.

One of the most incredible experiences—regarding coral—was my visit to the Gates Coral Lab [also known as the Coral Resilience Lab] on Oahu (in the US state of Hawaii). There, they showed me confocal microscopic images of coral polyps—all the many individuals, gathered together, to create a community. It was stunning.

X-RAY MAG: What are your thoughts on ocean conservation and coral reef management and how does your artwork relate to these issues?

LT: Ocean conservation and coral reef management is at the core of what motivates my work. My paintings are illustrating the richness of what we must fight to preserve—and are losing, frankly, by delays in action (as one factor). It is a complex issue—but our survival truly depends on the survival of the oceans and their biodiversity.

When I first started down this path of scientific volunteerism—as a means to get closer to the science and the sub-

scientific field work becomes the first stage in my artistic practice. The resulting images pulled from video that I take underwater become references for the paintings. Ultimately, the paintings are compilations of spaces/places... no one video still becomes a singular painting—I like to blend observed reality with invention. In other words, I am

interested in both representing what I see and abstracting that vision. The distortions/abstractions speak to a constantly changing space in motion, with flickering light, darting creatures—but also speaks to my great anxiety about what is happening to our precious natural spaces. It speaks to the emotional quandaries of the Anthropocene.

X-RAY MAG: What is your relationship to the underwater world and coral reefs? How have your experiences underwater influenced your art? In your relationship with reefs and the sea, where have you had your favorite experiences?

LT: As I mentioned above, a large part of my artistic process involves seeking

out opportunities for volunteer field work experiences with scientists. I document these experiences thoroughly, with my GoPro camera. It is important to me to have authentic imagery and experiences that undergird the work. It is hard to pin down a favorite—I am willing, with wetsuit, to jump into nearly any body of water to see what is under the surface. I



portfolio

A World Within a World Within a World, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 inches, by Lisa Tubach

jects at hand—my first trip was to Eleuthera (Bahamas), where the goal was to survey the health of the patch reefs in the area, and how they might serve the larger reef systems nearby. I worked with Alastair Harborne, who, at the time, was a researcher from University of Queensland. Had I done that work as a teenager, I probably would have gone into marine biology, as a career path—I fell in love with the field work process immediately.

A few years later, I visited the Gates Coral Lab in Oahu (part of the University of Hawaii)—I contacted Ruth Gates, after reading a wonderful article by Elizabeth

Kolbert in *The New Yorker*, mentioning her incredible research aims. I was grateful that she invited me to visit and to help assist in some of the coral bed maintenance. At the time of my visit, they were working to help coral withstand the Earth's changes, via an attempt to develop "super-coral."

These activities just keep birthing new opportunities and interests. Ultimately, it fuels my work in the studio. I wanted to weave my passions together and contribute to efforts to investigate, and ultimately, work towards solutions for climate change, ocean acidification and habitat loss.

X-RAY MAG: Can you point to specific artworks, for example, and describe how they relate to or came about from your marine conservation experiences?

LT: *Circling (World on Fire)* was inspired by two research opportunities: 1) my work with shark conservation in Belize, and 2) my experience researching the Great Barrier Reef at a time when Australia experienced some of its worst fires in its history (fall 2019). A number of paintings blend terrestrial content as well as marine—to speak to the issue that each ecosystem ultimately needs the other—a balancing act that humans are sadly interrupting. The result of this, ultimately, is the more intense (and devastating) fire season. The title also refers to when I painted the work (spring 2020)—in the middle of the pandemic.

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King Nudibranch was influenced by two research opportunities: 1) my visit to the Gates Coral Lab (University of Hawaii, Oahu), and 2) my time at the Friday Harbor Labs on San Juan Island, Washington (USA). In Hawaii, I assisted with the coral garden efforts; at Friday Harbor, I assisted a visiting researcher in the collection of *Nemertea* (a phylum of sea worms); I also had access to the wet labs where I discovered the nudibranch—commonly referred to as a sea slug: it is a shell-less marine gastropod. What an amazing creature—so many species, many with wild colors and flourishes.

The form in the center of this painting is a nudibranch—hovering behind and through a view of a reef in Hawaii. I enjoy playing with perspective—making the small large, or providing a tension between macro and micro. The



nudibranch's presence is larger than life, almost magical—I was thinking of the ancient Roman god Neptune, as I painted this piece.

A World Within a World Within a World is a piece that resulted from viewing coral through a confocal microscope at the Gates

Coral Lab (Oahu). This work utilizes the micro/macro balance I mentioned above; imagery of rice coral (*Montipora capitata*) is shrouded by another, larger mounding coral—and coral polyps populate the picture plane like flowers.

Bommie and the Wrass includes marine imagery from my research trip to the Great Barrier Reef (Australia). "Bommie" refers to a type of coral formation that is an outcrop of coral and resembles a high column. This piece also includes a visual reference to the

sandstone formations from the Blue Mountains (New South Wales)—the stripes, undergirding parts of the composition. I completed an artist residency at the BigCi (Bilpin International Ground for Creative Initiatives) in Bilpin (NSW), close to that mountain range.





Lehulehu (Augusta to Hanauma), oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24 inches, by Lisa Tubach

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Hol Chan (For Jamie) was completed shortly after my visit to Belize to document the Barrier Reef. I also worked with a shark conservation team, dropping BRUVs (baited remote underwater video cameras) and tagging sharks. This piece was inspired by two locations—coral around Riversdale (mid-Belize) and Hol Chan, a marine reserve in northern Belize. “Hol Chan” is Mayan for “little channel.”

X-RAY MAG: What is the message or experience you want viewers of your artwork to have or understand?

LT: I want the viewers to be pulled into the complexity and get lost in it. Simultaneously, I am hoping that—between the imagery and my artist statement—they become passionate about doing their part to help the planet.

X-RAY MAG: What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist in the world today? Any thoughts or advice for aspiring artists in ocean arts?

LT: The benefit and the curse is the online presence that is essential—but it can also distract from what is right in front of you. Technology clearly allows me to do what I do—to document with the magic of high tech, etc (and to connect with people all over the world with my work)—but we also need to step away from it and really SEE. Looking through a viewfinder of a camera is a mediated experience. It is important to just be there. That said, I think it is quite wonderful that Instagram, for instance, has been such a connective device for artists and galleries—an emphasis on the power

of the image is really at the heart of it. I would advise aspiring artists to—no matter what—keep working. Do not give up. Be dedicated to spending time in the studio, even if you are bone tired. Keep thinking. Keep looking... it is the persistence that will eventually help to achieve successes. Take time to be quiet and absorb and note the beauty of what is right in front of you.

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X-RAY MAG: How do people—adults and children—respond to your works?

LT: People respond in a variety of ways—but often are excited about things they notice after looking for a longer period of time. I have a lot of people who respond positively to the color that is present in the works—and the concepts

behind the images. They often comment that they are glad I am making work about these issues. I am so appreciative that they are moved by my paintings. I really could not make work about anything else.

X-RAY MAG: What are your upcoming projects, art courses or events?

LT: My work was most recently exhibited at the Amy Kaslow Gallery in Washington, DC—through September 25th. I am working towards a research project next summer that will take me to Iceland. I am very interested in seeing the geothermal activity through the fissures there. I am also interested in returning to Australia to visit Ningaloo Reef. ■

For more information, visit the artist's website at: lisatubach.com