



The Motherly Art and Daughterly Science of Life Forms Aswim in complementary worlds

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A mother and a daughter, pursuing separate passions for painting and plankton, find inspiration in Chesapeake Bay and in each other.

Gail Hillow Watkins, the artist, lives and paints in a secluded aerie overlooking the Severn River. Her daughter, Elizabeth North, works across the Bay as a marine biologist at the Horn Point Laboratory. Though they work in different worlds, each uses the other as a flint to spark her creativity.

The family home on the Severn, where the two meet to discuss their work, looks out over two marshes, one salt, the other fresh, complete with a pair of wood ducks. The yard is landscaped with native plants.

“I got to grow up in a wild place,” says North, recalling the Signs of Spring walks her mother led for her and neighborhood children, to search for emerging shoots and buds in the woods.

Gail Watkins' icon-like paintings hide extinct species.



Inside the house, the décor, Watkins' paintings, and even the women's clothing draw from a palette of earth tones: dusky mauves, browns and gold.

“When I moved here,” Watkins says, “I was painting still-lives.” One day she dug into the mulch pile in the yard, and creatures scattered. “I quickly did a drawing,” she says. Her art began to change, becoming more organic.

Watkins' Chesapeake connection began as a child when she spent weekends at North Beach with her grandparents. Later, as a camp counselor in Betterton, she canoed all the way across the Bay.

In her own youth, North got a commercial crabbing license, ran a trotline and sold crabs by the highway. “It taught me respect for those who make a living on the water,” she says.

Watkins encouraged North to follow her own career path, which led through studies of comparative religion and English and eventually to marine biology.

“I didn't want to do what my parents do,” she says, but she recognizes that she had absorbed parts of each.

Painting Species X

Watkins creates paintings with shapes of extinct species hidden within. Labrador duck, dusky seaside sparrow and Maryland darter (the darter rare but not extinct) hide in her canvases. She became interested in the stories of vanished animals after her daughter gave her a book about them. She titled her one-woman show in an Annapolis gallery this year Species X, after the official designation of an extinct species. Income from her paintings was donated to the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

Decay and transformation are themes in her elegant, iconic paintings. Her unlikely basic material is Sunday newspaper comics. Years ago, when using colorful comics to wrap her children's presents, she noticed their resemblance to frescoes. She prefers the Baltimore Sun's comics to the Washington Post's for their richer colors.

She layers up to seven sheets of comics, giving her paintings three dimensions by sanding and distressing the surface to let hidden shapes show through. “It's like an archeological site,” she says. “I'm making artifacts from comics.”



Chesapeake
Winter

One hangs in North's laboratory. "I can look up at it and remember why I'm working," North says, referring to her hope that her work will make a difference in preserving the Bay.

In Watkins' studio hangs a poster of plankton created by one of her daughter's colleagues. The forms of floating microscopic life in fantastic colors and shapes fascinate her, and she plans to incorporate them into a painting.

The physical processes that shape the life of plankton in the water are the subject of North's research.

"I'm a translator between physical science and biology," she says.

She studies how physical forces concentrate larvae and nutrients to create nursery areas for fish and other life where salt-water meets fresh in the northern Bay. She has also created computer models of how oyster larvae move around the Bay.

Science by Design

Watkins' teachings about art have enriched North's science. When Watkins taught art for 20 years at Saint John's College in Annapolis, North attended her classes, learning, for example, how shapes convey information. That has helped her to communicate her research.

"Design and composition are part of communication," she says. "Of course, you have to have the science behind it."

In a way, both mother and daughter are researchers in their working methods.

"I do many, many tests until I develop a methodology," Watkins says, experimenting with soap and water, glue, PAM cooking spray, sewing machine oil and turpentine — to name a few — and keeping careful charts of the results. Her husband likens her to an alchemist.

"I never really know how it's going to come out," Watkins says. She speculates that her daughter, by contrast, probably does foresee the results of her scientific investigations.

"No, I don't," North says. "Science is a process of discovery. It's a different type of story-telling, trying to piece together your palettes of facts."

The data from a short scientific cruise on the Bay is but a "snapshot" of the complex nature of the ecosystem, only "a glimpse of a moment in time."

"What we know about the world is so obscure. There's still so much we don't know," she says. North is speaking of science, but her words as readily describe the extinct creatures emerging and disappearing in her mother's paintings.

"It's an amazing world we swim through," North says of the same world explored by mother and daughter in complementary languages.



Biologist Elizabeth North (left) and her artist mother, Gail Watkins.