

HEATHER GENTLEMAN:



Erielhonan >



HEATHER GENTLEMAN'S LATEST WORKS ARE BORN OUT OF HER CONCERN FOR THE PLANET'S WATER AND FOR OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH WATER. HER PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURE REPRESENT CANADIAN BODIES OF WATER SINCE WATER IS THREATENED AROUND THE WORLD BUT ALSO CLOSE TO HOME.

The series, called Song to the Siren, is made up of paintings and sculptures. Heather has been a professional artist since she had her first solo show when she was sixteen. Years later, she says her work still holds a thread of the style that existed in her early works. "I have always been a figurative painter," Heather explains, "When I graduated I was both a sculptor and a painter." Heather decided to pursue a career in painting primarily but says that "sculpture has

SOUNDING THE SIRENS

STORY:
SARAH DANN



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< Nipissing

always been a love of mine." Over the past few years she has moved back to sculpture. *Song to the Siren* includes both. The series was on display this past Fall in New York and then at the AGO as part of the Environmental Film Festival. It was Heather's focus on the world's water and its plight that brought the series to the attention of the festival.

Heather's works are thoroughly thought out although, the way they come to be is more of an organic process than a conscious one. *Song to the Siren* is a series born out of many influences within Heather's core beliefs and being. Years back, she heard a song called "Song of the Siren" by a singing group called the Mortal Coil. The song tells of a ship brought in to the rocks by a siren and then left there,

alone. It is a haunting song to listen to and Heather says that when she heard it she knew she was going to do a series called *Song of the Siren*. "It is a deeply emotive song," she says, "It speaks about yearning, desire and remorse. It was so powerful to me that it felt bigger than that. It was calling upon the sirens and they are open to us, to listen to us."

Heather had been doing a lot of reading about the ocean and about the large sections that are filled with garbage. The song came back to mind since she believes, "we are on a path to our own destruction and at some point mother earth is going to say enough. She will regulate herself." Heather's work has a history of dealing with the divine feminine and the environment so the sirens became



Sedna >

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a natural embodiment through which she could express her concern about the planet's water.

The paintings are named after the Great Lakes, but are "titled by their original names given by the Indigenous people who lived in harmony with the waters and understood, in both a physical and spiritual context, that water is the axis of all life." Heather included Nipissing, because she says, "Nipissing is a marvelous lake and is considered the "mother of all the Great Lakes." The large sculpture included in the collection, is titled Sedna and was included as Heather's response to fracking and drilling in the Arctic.

Heather explains that she is "deeply moved and upset about what is happening to the waters and the oceans, including changes to our political policies such as deregulation of protection of lakes and rivers. These are significant Canadian issues and that's why I used Canadian Arctic imagery as well as the Great Lakes."

The work itself is very beautiful. The paintings and the sculpture include elements of the sea such as coral, shells, ships and mermaid-like figures which Heather explains to me are Melluzines, similar to mermaids in that they are half woman and half fish but with two tails. Sedna herself is a mermaid. All the works portray women. The writeup that accompanies Sound of the Sirens explains, "In Britain, there are thousands of Pagan holy wells...It was believed that the healing and nourishing effects of the holy well waters emanated from the breast of the earth mother, so it follows naturally that the spirit of the well was feminine."

Heather's paintings and sculptures are an amalgam of various techniques and materials. She says she experiments a lot and likes looking at how organics and polymers work together. For instance, her paintings use acrylic with beeswax which technically she says you are not "supposed" to do. The original pencil sketches are also visible as well as oil and photo transfer components. Sedna (at left) is accompanied by several smaller sculptures that include organic materials such as branches to represent corals, as in Sedna's headdress. "I'm a bit of a magpie," Heather says, "I collect branches, stones, skulls, bones." Many of these eventually end up in Heather's sculpture. They also always include something manmade since Heather likes to look at how organic and manmade dynamics work together.

Coral is a common thread throughout the Song to the



Siren series. Heather says "coral is the lifeblood of the ocean. Any part of the ocean where there is no coral, there is no life. Its health is really important to the ecosystem."

Just as coral is critical to the oceans, and in peril, Heather sees reason to be concerned about people. She says "there is a cultural and social conditioning that has created a spiritual void and has left us so disconnected from the earth. We have an insatiable need to fill this emptiness."

Heather says she is "calling the sirens to heal us." To go back to the song that originally inspired her series, she is

calling the sirens back to the boat so to speak. Heather sees water as critical to human spiritual as well as physical health. She says, "we are sixty percent water. We are all connected. We are all one. Water is the one thing that connects us with everything in the world." She believes that when water is sick, we are sick and vice versa. She follows studies that amongst other things claim polluted water can be healed by positive thought and prayer. She believes that "we should be able to change the makeup of our own bodies through our own beliefs and thereby change the water in the world."