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Concern inspires Anne Neely to evoke watery subjects

By Cate McQuaid | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 08, 2014



MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

“I don’t think of myself as a political person,” Anne Neely (pictured in her studio) says. “But the feeling that water . . . was at risk, shifted me to a more purposeful approach to painting.”

An aquifer in Maine lighted a fire under painter Anne Neely. The Boston artist has a studio in Jonesboro, Maine, and a few years back she discovered the local aquifer’s dirty history: Back

in the 1980s, it was a toxic dump.

“The aquifer was so distant from everything that developers thought they could put it there,” Neely says. “A clean-water coalition stopped it.”

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She'd been painting water since 2005; its depths and surfaces, its mirror of the soul, can be irresistible to a painter. But now she began researching threats to water: drought, depleted aquifers, dried up riverbeds, pollution, toxic sediment, fracking.

The more she learned, the more she poured what she learned into her paintings.

“It dawned on me that my art and science were coming together,” says Neely. The formation of kettle holes fascinated her as much as paint did. In 2012, she called the Museum of Science and proposed an exhibit about water.

David G. Rabkin, the museum's director of current science and technology, signed on. “Water Stories: Conversations in Paint and Sound” opens on July 11. It is part of a slate of water-themed programming that Rabkin says will continue for a couple of years.

“Water Stories” is the science museum's first exhibition featuring exclusively paintings since it opened a gallery dedicated to art in 2009. Paintings, perhaps more than photographs or video, can invite a different response than science museum visitors are used to.

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“It's impressionistic and emotional, rather than pure thinking,” says Rabkin. But, he adds, there are confluences between art and science. “For me, any painting is an invitation to inquire. I find Anne's more an invitation to inquire than most.” Informational wall panels will balance Neely's more visual take on water issues.

Neely's expansive land and waterscapes verge toward abstraction, jumbling perspectives, shuddering with repetitive marks. Looking at one, you don't know precisely where you are.

She has had shows in Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Ireland, and has paintings in

WATER STORIES: Conversations in Paint and Sound

Museum of Science, One Science Park,
617-723-2500. <http://www.mos.org/exhibits/water-stories>

Opening date: July 11

Closing date: January 2015

collections at the Brooklyn Museum, the National Gallery of Art, and the deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum. Her work, while expressive about nature, has been principally about painting itself — until the water canvases.

“I don’t think of myself as a political person,” Neely says. She’s seated in her tiny South End studio at the end of June, preparing to pack up the paintings and ship them to the museum. “But the feeling that water — inside me, around me, water I’ve played in — was at risk shifted me to a more purposeful approach to painting.”

Neely traveled the country — to drought-stricken California; to Pennsylvania, where fracking threatens the ground water; to Idaho, New York, and around New England — and interviewed locals about their relationship to water. She gave the interviews to sound artist Halsey Burgund to edit into an incantatory soundtrack over a bed of water sounds.

The paintings, with titles such as “Gush,” “Run Off,” “Diminishing,” and “Splash,” seep, swell, burst, and settle. Many are nearly 8 feet across, but even the smaller ones can engulf you.

“Spill,” with its dark spindle rising through a blue-green field, might remind viewers of the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or the spill in Lake Michigan earlier this year. Neely avoids looking at photographs of environmental crises, and instead works from her imagination.

“People ask Anne, ‘Where is that place?’ It isn’t a place,” Rabkin says. “It’s an idea. An exploration of what’s happening in our world.”

The paintings, while gorgeous, are full of foreboding. That roiling and seductive combination drives all but one of the works in “Water Stories.” The only vertical canvas in the show, “Blue,” is clean and luminous, and inspires a feeling of peaceful immersion. It is placed apart from the rest of the exhibition, in an alcove.

“A little sanctuary for water,” Neely says. “Just you and this painting, and sounds of water.”

She wrote a poem extolling the wonders of water — “Water: A Love Story” — to accompany “Blue.” The poem, the burble and rush of a stream, and the quiet majesty of the painting, prompt a feeling of renewal that also serves to remind viewers what we’ll miss if we don’t become better stewards.

Neely started out as a plein air painter, then painted landscapes she saw through her window, and still lifes. But after the terrorist attacks of September 11, her approach shifted. “I could not paint from innocence,” Neely says. “I had to paint from an inner life, and an inner understanding.”

Her works became less specific, farther reaching and more voluptuous, great fields of chattering marks, layers of color, and the suggestion of a horizon line. They grew more deeply felt, and opened the door to the big, expressive works in this show.

“I want to explore what’s in those paintings,” says Rabkin. “All these different things going on simultaneously allows you to wonder, and create hypotheses, and resolve the questions yourself.”

Back in her studio, Neely has a lot on her plate, pinning down exhibition details, showing her paintings to a visitor before shipping them, and, she says, maybe even finishing one last painting to include in the show. It’s hard to imagine what’s next.

Neely knows one thing. “I don’t think I’ve finished about water,” she says. “I think I have more to say.”

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