

MaryBeth Thielhelm*Nameless Seas*

When the sun rises in Abqaiq, a town near the Persian Gulf, the sand dunes turn a magical purplish blue. The horizon is low and flat and the wind-etched dunes roll endlessly into the distance. A gaseous sort of heat resonates from the sand, creating a shimmering mirage of color particles. MaryBeth Thielhelm's earliest visual memories revolve around these shifting hues of warm, dusty light which saturated her childhood in Saudi Arabia.

Thielhelm's love for the sea developed during these early years, as her family would spend weekends sailing on Half Moon Bay in the Persian Gulf. As the days and tides ebbed and flowed, a kaleidoscope of colors would be soaked up by the water and then bounce away with a glitter of colorful light. These effervescent colors were too quick to catch with a camera, but were embedded in Thielhelm's mind.

After an extended trip to the Aegean Sea in the early-nineties, Thielhelm saw an exhibition of seascape photographs by Hiroshi Sugimoto in New York that inspired her to take on the ocean as a subject for her paintings. While the photographs that inspired her featured smooth, steely gray shifts of light on water, Thielhelm found her seas to be gently splashing with plentiful blues and greens once she began painting.

Thielhelm's devotion to this subject has led her to recently take a studio in Maine. For the past few summers, Thielhelm has painted by a window overlooking the Atlantic in an old, crooked house on stilts, hovering just above the water. The colors of her Arabian childhood have crept into her work, as she freezes those magical-color-moments into her paintings of golden, salmon and emerald dyed seas.

Each of Thielhelm's paintings originates on a thick, bare birch panel. She works the panel over with viscous gesso, which she blends and smoothes until the surface becomes like a velvety chalkboard. The waves begin to appear with slow, lapping strokes of oil paint. Gradually, these shallow pools of placid waves dissolve into deep oceans.

Thielhelm's solarplate etchings are created using an alternative etching process that is nontoxic and eco-friendly. The process begins with a photograph taken by the artist, which is burned onto a light-sensitive plate using only water and sunlight. Thielhelm uses an array of oil-based etching inks to create a vibrant spectrum of colorful seas. Since photographs of the ocean are essentially reflections of sunlight on water, Thielhelm's use of a process that depends upon light and water to bring her oceans to life is especially harmonious.

Using simply paint and wood and rendering only water and light, Thielhelm's reductive paintings are meditations on the interaction of basic elements. They

bring to mind notions of the Romantic sublime, of hovering over a nameless sea where light dancing on the water's surface communicates both nothing and everything.

-Kimberly Whinna