

Esra Kanisicak
Matt Lynch
Thesis
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Blue Peril: The Devastating Impact of Ghost Nets on The Environment and Marine Life.

"How inappropriate to call this planet Earth when it is quite clearly Ocean," Arthur C. Clarke

I have always felt deeply connected and drawn towards nature and animals, which led me to my former career as a scuba diving instructor. The natural wonders, the equilibrium, and the serene tranquility of the underwater realm is where I found my soul and the only place where I truly felt in the moment and free. Marine biologist Wallace J. Nichols explores the psychological and emotional connection humans have with the ocean. He suggests that our attraction to the sea is deeply rooted in our evolutionary history, and establishes the concept of the "blue mind," a state of mental clarity and peace induced by water environments. Memories of my precious times underwater and my lifelong love of the ocean now drive my deep concern for its well-being.

Before I started scuba diving, the ocean scared me, and I felt much safer in pools. On the surface, you experience the choppy waves that make swimming a struggle and you often choke on saltwater and imagine what terrors might be lurking directly below your toes as you cannot see anything but dark blue. But when you descend below the surface, the waves become a gentle swing and you become part of a wide landscape where even the sharks you were terrified of look like playful puppies. The Ocean is typically described as savage and dangerous, and sea

life is 'alien' or otherworldly. By using these descriptors, we feel disconnected from and uninvested in the volumetrically largest part of the earth that sustains all life.

My artistic practice conveys the beauty and the plight of our oceans while emphasizing the destruction of marine life. More specifically it spotlights on the increasing burden of waste that includes plastic and abandoned, lost, or discarded fishing gear (ALDFG). By bringing marine life into our sphere of empathy, I seek to ignite a desire to change our consumption-based relationship with materials and our environment.

In the contemporary artistic landscape, my work serves as a response to the critical intersection of human actions and the health of our oceans. By utilizing materials sourced from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, specifically ghost nets, my sculptures become a striking commentary on the dire consequences of abandoned fishing gear. The art not only confronts the destructive impact on marine life but also challenges the prevailing culture of consumption and waste.

Derelict fishing nets, also known as 'ghost nets' are left to accumulate and grow in size, continuing to float in the currents; invisibly and silently killing, even after they have been abandoned by fishermen. Made of non-biodegradable synthetic fibers that can endure in the environment for hundreds of years, forming giant underwater icebergs of rope, they entangle and trap marine life, like fish, crustaceans, turtles, and marine mammals. When washed ashore they can entangle birds and other land animals. On the seafloor ghost gear does not just entrap sea-life but it scrapes, damages, and even moves important sea-bed features. On the move, it transports invasive species. Each new entangled animal attracts other animals looking for food

who also end up getting caught. This creates a vicious cycle of death in the open ocean, on the seafloor, and on the shore. They block sunlight, cause damage to coral reefs, and make up 40-70% of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The ocean is earth's main source of oxygen. As we continue to entangle marine life, break fragile coral reef systems, block the sun and create hundreds of dead zones, we are laying the groundwork for our own suffocation.

In my mixed media sculptures, I incorporate ghost nets that I sought out from The Hawaiian University's marine conservation program that were salvaged from the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. These nets are so distraught and tangled that most of them break apart when trying to detangle them. They show signs of the passage of time and despite how deteriorated they have become; you can clearly see how as a whole they are impossible to escape from and how ocean movements push these materials to bind together into large masses amplifying their power to engulf marine life and block light and oxygen to their world.

In her book, 'Wild Blue Media : Thinking through Seawater', scuba diver and literary scholar Melody Jue attempts to give us an understanding of the contrast between being underwater and on land and how our inherent terrestrial bias undergoes drastic change when we are displaced in the surrounding water and our bodies lose all the familiar land based senses including orientation, gravity, vision, hearing, weight, pressure, movement and more.

Pioneer environmental biologist and writer Rachel Carson also wrote similarly, "To sense this world of waters known to the creatures of the sea we must shed our human perceptions of length and breadth and time and place." (Carson)

I elicit the beauty and the fragility of this world, working between the contrasting imagery of the colorful and serene aquatic life and the feelings of being captured and entangled by these nets while in the media we call water. The nylon and polyester ropes that are lightweight when on dry land become heavy and slow moving when submersed under water. I simulate this by casting and firing rope in ceramic slip and glaze and creating tangled rope-like dendritic forms by casting bronze into sand and water and then creating a patina using salt, thereby also using the core elements of the ocean in addition to ghost nets in my work. Another way I create is welding thin cut strips of steel into cage structures and brazing the steel with bronze to look corroded and rusted. By using these rigid materials in contrast to soft fibers, my work emulates the way the heavy unbreakable synthetic nets cut into the animals' skin strangling them or cutting off their fins. In addition, when on land your weight and surroundings allow you to free yourself from an entangled situation whereas underwater, there is only water to hold on to or push away from, so whatever you do, the nets stay on, making the situation worse the more you struggle, dragging and cutting and strangling the more you try to escape. Thus, nets function as they were designed to do, limiting movement, and leading to starvation, lacerations, infections, and suffocation for creatures that must reach the surface to breathe. Adding the found fishnets to my hand created pieces imbues my sculptures with color and texture and helps strengthen a story around my work which challenges the prevailing culture of consumption and waste by emphasizing the tragic stories of entanglement and suffocation.

An artist-activist-feminist I am inspired by who also uses ghost nets in her work is Pamela Longobardi; Founder of the Drifters Project; an ongoing intervention where she mobilizes

citizens, students, scientists, filmmakers, and indigenous communities in labor-intensive cleaning of sea caves, beaches, and coastlines. She is known for her work involving the collection and transformation of oceanic plastic debris into visually striking large-scale installations and artworks, addressing themes of environmental conservation and the impact of human activities on the natural world. I find her work compelling because she evokes empathy and care in the viewers through her striking configurations of these found plastics and nets.



Pamela Longobardi, Consumption Web for Monaco (Self-Proclaiming Material Snare), 2011. Found ocean plastic and driftnet from Hawaii, Costa Rica, New Bedford, MA, Florida Everglades, and Monaco

In my work, I place equal emphasis on both the visual impact and the message conveyed. I have a deep love of process and technique development through experimentation and

documentation. I explore a wide range of textures and colors on my surfaces to create organic and dynamic forms and love to create unique glazes, patinas, and methods of working with the surface textures of materials such as layering different metals through brazing. By integrating multiple materials, I add depth and visual intrigue, resulting in rich and captivating compositions. I work freely between paint, ceramics, canvas, cement, wood, resin, fiber, metal, natural, found, and experimental materials. Although my concept is heavy and has urgency, my visual art is as vibrant, dynamic, and interesting as the underwater world it reflects on.

I love to create large organic forms and include a surface that is both intricate and colorful. I patiently paint the surfaces of my ceramic sculptures with underglaze, only to cover them with matte glazes resulting in a mysterious and soft veil resembling our vision under water. And I use a combination of rough and polished surfaces to emulate nature and add sand and shells into my surfaces before glaze firing them. For some of my ceramics I make a paper-clay body which is stronger to build with and enables me to be able to create the more delicate shapes of ocean life as well as something thin and fragile like the shredded skin of a shark that wiggled its way out of the clasps of a constricting net or the back of a whale struck by boat propellers.

An artist who informs my work in ceramics is Linda Sormin, who explores fragility, upheaval, migration, survival and change through sculpture and site-responsive installations that invite the viewers to engage with the artwork on a physical and emotional level. She mixes clay and found objects and pushes the limits of ceramics which are similar to my creative methods, and watching her install fragile work that easily breaks especially reminds me of my slip-cast

fibers that constantly break and fall apart both during making and after my sculptures are completed. Like myself, she also uses multiple different mediums in her work including glazed ceramic, watercolor on cut paper, found objects, video projections, sound, metal, wood, epoxy resin, gold leaf, which is an integral part of my practice. Most of the time I am not satisfied by using a single medium and reach out to other mediums to create the variety and appeal that is satisfying to me, and sometimes the variety is not there in any one piece, but it is there as a whole in the variety of materials displayed in multiple pieces that create an exhibition and an underwater environment in the gallery space.



Linda Sormin, *The Disillusionment of the Toiler*, 2016

A large-scale ceramic and mixed media installation

For my thesis exhibition, I created multiple pieces that together created the visual resemblance of an underwear scene. The challenges of creating an underwater environment above ground on dry land while dealing with air and gravity were great. I wanted to show the iceberg-like floating nets from below but had to create steel armatures and create hundreds of points of contact with the nets to circumvent the look of gravity and hanging mid-air.

I made a large-scale ceramic shark that was swimming away from a snare and created bronze traps that emulate the strength of these snares underwater using bronze flashing and welding them into circular forms. I created lobster traps with bronze brazed patina and used slip-cast fish and oysters made from real carcasses to decorate the nets in the gallery. In addition, I also made a wall of travertine pools with unique glaze combinations showing the contrasts between a pristine aquatic environment and one covered in nets which I make by slip-casting cotton fibers that I weave into net structures. I also researched unique methods of working with foam and fabricated two reef-like pedestals out of polystyrene to add to the environment I was trying to create. I hand sanded a plank of poplar wood along its natural grain to emulate the ripples on water that speaks to the concept of an unstoppable abrupt end to water and life. I then added one figurative sculpture and interspersed 2 human hands, one bronze, one resin as reminders to the fact that our lives are intricately tied to the health of our oceans as 70% of the oxygen we breathe is generated directly by the ocean.

“Even if you never have the chance to touch the ocean, the ocean touches you with every breath you take, every drop of water you drink, every bite you consume, everyone, everywhere is inextricably connected to and utterly dependent upon the existence of the sea.” (Earle)

My work fosters a deep connection and empathy for the underwater world, aligning with the sentiments expressed by marine biologists like Wallace J. Nichols and environmentalist Sylvia A. Earle. My vibrant colors and intricate textures serve as a metaphor for the delicate yet imperiled beauty of marine ecosystems and conceptually speaks to the urgency of environmental advocacy with a compelling narrative that addresses environmental injustice.

Artists pave the way and speak daring truths that wake people up. I aim to use art as a universal language to convey the beauty and the fragility of our oceanic ecosystems and the impact of derelict fishing gear on the aquatic environment. Through my work, I hope to inspire viewers to feel empathy and care towards protecting these ecosystems. My progression in art school has been one of unlearning to dictate the viewer what to feel or how to take action, however the more I grow as an artist the more I think about reversing this progression into how I can make the art do the speaking for me and how can I make art so powerful that it urges an emotional response without trying. I hope that my art can evoke the feelings of the underwater environment; both the beauty and the dire situation that the aquatic world is suffering due to our waste and consumption.

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Gallery Images

























