Translating Earth, Transforming Sea

SHAWN BITTERS / JOAN HALL / LAURA MORIARTY





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Translating Earth, Transforming Sea

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Curated by Andrea Packard



The greatest challenge of the anthropogenic Earth is to redefine responsibilities and frameworks to live by. Each area across the sciences, history, arts, and culture can have an indispensable role in framing the central principles of life in the Anthropocene.

— Dr. Richard Potts¹

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.

The song and water were not medleyed sound Even if what she sang was what she heard. Since what she sang was uttered word by word. It may be that in all her phrases stirred The grinding water and the gasping wind; But it was she and not the sea we heard.

— Wallace Stevens²

The Translator's Dilemma: Sculpting Landscape in the Anthropocene

by Andrea Packard

Wallace Stevens' modernist poem "The Idea of Order At Key West," eloquently conveys the dilemma faced by writers and artists who wish to express their experience of nature without solipsism, deception, or cliché. Is it possible to or be "true" to nature when using artificial constructs such as language or paint? How do we express our desire for oneness with nature without becoming anthropocentric or detached from reality? In the 21st Century context of climate change, such questions acquire a different kind of meaning and urgency. Contemporary artists are more likely to ask: how do fictitious representations of nature influence our use of natural resources? How does one translate experiences of wonder and beauty without encouraging escapism or a false sense of security?

As scientists redefine our current epoch as the Anthropocene, an increasing number of artists are reconsidering the relationship of their art to the global environmental crisis. In their 2007 article, "The Antrhopocene, Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature?" Nobel laureate Paul J. Crutzen and co-authors Will Steffen and John McNeil argue that the Holocene epoch ended some time in the 1800s after the onset of Industrialism and that the term Anthropocene better describes our current period during which accelerating rates of fossil fuel emissions, deforestation, species extinctions, and other effects of human activity are fundamentally altering the earth's geology. The term has gained acceptance among artists as well as scientists. In her February 2014 article in *Art in America*, "Art for the Anthropocene," Eleanor Heartney describes a wide array of proactive artistic approaches to climate change including Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1991–0ngoing), which employs plant ecology to remediate a hazardous landfill.

Of course, no single artist or group of artists should be expected to provide a definitive response to environmental crises. Art that addresses our relationship to nature should not be evaluated solely in terms of

Joan Hall

Your Existence is Not Unlike My Own, 2010 Paper, Mylar, and acrylic Dimensions vary As shown: 65 x 12 inches x 20 feet

its efficacy as an agent for social or ecological change. Art is often at its worst when it merely admonishes. It can be at its best when it results from a life-long engagement with nature and a rigorous and self-critical process of inquiry. As a curator, I find myself most drawn to those artists whose creative engagement with their chosen materials and concerns broadens our capacity for empathy, curiosity, and perception.

Translating Earth, Transforming Sea brings together just three such exemplary artists—Shawn Bitters, Joan Hall, and Laura Moriarty. The exhibition is the fifth major visual arts presentation in the Artosphere series sponsored by Walton Arts Center, an ongoing, exploratory, and inter-disciplinary conversation about how art can engage us with nature and the need for more sustainable practices.

Although differing in style, Bitters, Moriarty, and Hall share a fascination with geological change and their works convey the beauty and complexity they find in distinct topographies that have inspired them for decades. Through integrating disparate materials and creative processes usually associated with two-dimensional art forms, they create sculptures and installations that invite us to reconsider our changing relationship to both art and nature.

All three artists create artworks that contradict the pastoral ideal of society living in harmony with nature. Although they demonstrate a love of beauty more than an affinity for dissonance, Bitters, Moriarty, and Hall question the notion of nature as sublime—a limitless resource to fear or exploit. Nor do they portray an immeasurable array of natural forces that are somehow impervious to human activity. Instead, Hall, Moriarty, and Bitters create works that evoke nature yet emphasize the omnipresence of human industry. Whether standing before Bitters' Yes, Yes, Now, Now, Now (2010), Moriarty's Atchafalaya (2013), or Hall's Acid Ocean (2012), we become mindful of the fact that our notions of nature are continually shaped by culture. While accepting and even embracing the capacity of art to distort and reinvent, these artists focus attention on how nature has been increasingly engineered, managed, and merged with the artifacts of human industry.

In distinct ways, Bitters, Hall, and Moriarty have linked their evolving individual and artistic identities closely to the metamorphosis of the earth. Whereas Bitters and Moriarty create works that capture their fascination with geologic phenomena and Hall's sculptures demonstrate her lifelong fascination with the sea, all three artists share a concern for the fragility of our environment. Collectively, whether evoking seismic upheaval or documenting ocean pollution, their works reflect a profound identification with nature and concern about the geological consequences of human activity.

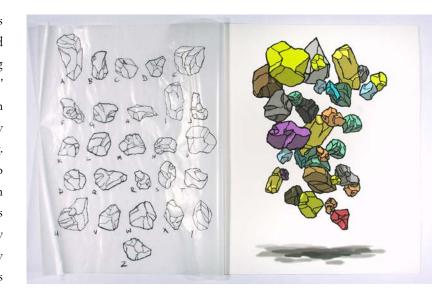
Shawn Bitters

Born and raised in Orem, Utah, Shawn Bitters takes inspiration from the Wasatch Mountains and the other remarkable geological formations such as those found in Arches National Park. Bitters states that growing up in the Mormon faith, he was taught that "all people existed with God in a spirit state before we were born and assisted in the creation of the earth." As he goes on to say in an artist's statement, "This idea took root in me to a profound degree when I was a teenager. As I explored the mountains, I wondered what part of nature I may have assisted God in creating. That was one of the stories that I used to explain the connection I felt to that landscape." Subsequently reading both literary and scientific texts, Bitters became more aware of the diverse and culturally specific myths that societies use to explain their relationship to nature.

Bitters' own belief system radically changed as he began to study geology and art. He was especially influenced by Vladimir Nabokov's short story Signs and Symbols, in which a delusional protagonist believes that

nature is communicating directly with him. Nabakov's dramatization of the absurdity of such misguided interpretations catalyzed Bitters' interest in exploring similar themes in his sculpture. In particular, Bitters' mixed media installations have focused on the human urge to impose codes and fictions upon nature, many of which misdirect rather than facilitate understanding.

The descendant of European immigrants who traversed the United States and eventually settled in Utah, Bitters is keenly aware of the shifting narratives that have validated settlers' appropriation of territory and allowed them to construct a new sense of identity in relation to the landscape. His five-part *Rockfall* series is a playful autobiography encoded as landscape. Each



Shawn Bitters
The Gem, Sire
Display measuring approximately
12 x 12 inches

work is numbered and subtitled to represent the different countries from which his ancestors emigrated (Swiss, English, Scottish, German, and Danish). Bitters printed handmade paper with flat diagrams of rock contours, cut out the forms, and then assembled them into multi-layered three-dimensional wall reliefs the size of a small portrait bust. Merging notions of printmaking and sculpture, these sculptures revel in irony and contradiction. Representing dense rock, they are nevertheless light, airy, and fragile. What at first appears to be a landscape turns out to be a portrait. And as portraits, these works do not reveal individual qualities so much as a broader experience of displacement and yearning.

Bitters usually exhibits his *Rockfall* series accompanied by two related works that encourage the viewer to consider problematic cultural relationships to nature. One accompanying work, *The Interpreters* (2011), is a pair of silver spectacles with specimens of obsidian and amber in place of lenses. Although the spectacles are presented on a shelf like magnifying glasses as if to facilitate closer inspection of Bitters' detailed sculptures, we immediately understand that wearing such lenses would obscure, not facilitate our vision. We are not asked to behold nature so much as consider the contingent character perception and the questionable lenses through which societies interpret—or distort—nature.

Also critiquing human perception is *The Gem, Sire,* a color lithograph representing each of the stone contours Bitters printed in the *Rockfall* series. A transparent overlay on glassine paper provides a code key with letters of the alphabet corresponding to each stone. Using this key to translate each *Rockfall,* viewers note the absurdity of such reductive interpretations, yet delight in the lyricism and craftsmanship that animates Bitters' forms. Openly confessing their subjective and hermetic qualities, Bitters' dynamic, colorful intricately crafted arrangements nevertheless engage us with their obsessive passion.

Contradictions also abound in larger works such as Bitters' 10-foot tall and 20-foot wide installation titled Yes, Yes, Yes, Now, Now, Now (2012). This pyramidal arrangement of approximately 83 earth-colored stones appears to tumble toward the viewer, yet each paper element remains fixed in place. The diagrammatic contours printed on each paper panel convey a flattened and schematic notion of nature, yet the sculpture fills an entire corner of the room as if penetrating the gallery walls. Connoting the vastness of escarpments and other landforms, the work nevertheless reminds us of the insufficiency of art to accurately represent such phenomena. As with the Rockfall series, Bitters positions a code key nearby revealing the letters associated with each rock form, but the coded "answer" remains an enigma. Dramatizing the fallibility of such translations, Bitters prompts us to question our own habits of labeling and representation.



Laura Moriarty Atchafalaya (detail), 2013, Encaustic monotype on Sumi-E scroll, 12 x 20 feet flat and folded to 160 inches

in length

Laura Moriarty

Born in Beacon, New York, Laura Moriarty grew up and continues to live amid the Catskills, a region noted for its sedimentary rock formations and escarpments that make visible more than 20 million years of planetary change. Her current sculptures and wall reliefs are composed of colored layers of encaustic that suggest varied topographies, canyons, and columns—visual metaphors for nature's ongoing metamorphosis as well as the imprint of human industry.

In the 1980s, Moriarty studied painting and then worked for 10 years at Womens' Studio Workshop in Rosendale, NY, where she completed a 4-year apprenticeship in papermaking before continuing as a studio manager and mentor to younger artists. Working for more than two decades outside the academy and largely outside the commercial gallery scene, her development was fostered by residencies, such as a 1996 UCROSS Fellowship in Wyoming, and two grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation. In the mid-1990s, she experimented with a variety of natural materials including beeswax. For a decade working for R&F Paints, she taught workshops in traditional encaustic painting techniques while pursuing an unconventional approach to the medium in her own studio.

Although her initial work in encaustic reflected her background in printmaking, Moriarty quickly discovered ways to build pigmented wax into massive layers. She alternately added thick layers of encaustic and used a torch to erode sections, revealing colorfully patterned cross-sections. She carved out sections and embedded these fragments into other works. In addition, she began to create complexly folded, multi-layered blocks that could be burnished, carved, and split to reveal underlying strata, and combined with other elements to create new composites.

The resulting hybrid aesthetic of works such as *Erosion Mountain* (2009), recalls the ways in which fossils and other artifacts of natural upheaval and certain natural history dioramas convey narratives of geological change caused by glacial movement, erosion, and other forces. Works such as *Angular Unconformity* (2009) and *Accretionary Wedge* (2011) suggest varied topographies and strata built up over millennia. However, by cutting into these works and removing straight wedges of terrain, Moriarty evokes human interventions such as mining and road construction.

For more than a decade of building up forms and then carving away elements, Moriarty has produced an array of scraps that she variously termed pebbles, geodes, and "artifacts." She carefully organizes them according to size, shape, and color and reuses them in the creation of new works. Referring to her studio practice as a type of ecosystem, she states that she tries to create an environment in which nothing is wasted. Thus, she views each by-product of her creative process has having future evocative potential in its own right.

Moriarty also uses her "artifacts" or multi-layered wedges of encaustic as tools to create prints. Drawing these colorful accretions across the surface of a large metal hotplate, she distributes pigment in patterns that become 2-dimensional echoes of her sculptures. Placing sheets of paper on top of the heated encaustic, she creates monoprints in which the pigment appears not applied but completely integrated into the fiber of the paper.

Inspired by John Cage's integration of procedures that introduce chance into his creative practice, Moriarty favors practices that may yield unexpected results. She often accepts the way her encaustic tools become reconfigured as prints, although she reserves the right to reheat and edit them further. In contrast to her complex and hybrid sculptures, which provide distinct readings when viewed from different angles, many of her monoprints lie flat and result in an aesthetic of comparative calm, simplicity, and immediacy. Moriarty also creates large-scale prints such as her twenty-foot-long *Atchafalaya* through a process of blending successive encaustic impressions onto scrolls of Sumi-E paper. In a "once out and once back" process, she fills the scroll with pigment and then edits it once, burnishing the pigments into an expansive terrain of layered and interpenetrating color.

In contrast to her smaller monoprints, which lie flat, Moriarty exhibits her scrolled works as undulating reliefs. Their colorfully striated ribbons bunch into folds, angle upward, and descend across the wall like ancient strata of earth folded by plate tectonics or a map of a river's meander. Moriarty's title *Atchafalaya*, emphasizes its river-like form but also underscores concerns about the problematic intersection of culture, geo-engineering, and nature. John McPhee's 1987 essay "The Control of Nature: Atchafalaya," describes the massive yet perilous efforts of Army Corps of Engineers to control the Mississippi despite the inevitable floods and redistribution of silt that causes all rivers to shift course. Engineers have temporarily prevented the Mississippi from being captured by its distributary, the Atchafalaya, which provides a shorter and steeper path to the Gulf of Mexico. However, as McPhee writes:

Atchafalaya. The word will now come to mind more or less in echo of any struggle against natural forces—heroic or venal, rash or well advised—when human beings conscript themselves to fight against the earth, to take what is not given, to rout the destroying enemy, to surround the base of Mt. Olympus demanding and expecting the surrender of the gods.³

Thus in title as well as form, works such as Moriarty's *Atchafalaya* remind us that natural forms, like her art works, are inherently elastic and variable. Each time she installs works like *Atchaflaya*, making different decisions about its direction and density, Moriarty affirms a creative elasticity in relation to new contexts that is often absent in our approach to land use. In doing so, her work becomes a metaphor not for the control of nature but for a more open and collaborative response.



Joan Hall

Ghost Fishing, 2012

Paper, resin, and Mylar

57 x 91 x 9 inches

Joan Hall

Born and raised in Ohio, Joan Hall learned to sail as a teenager and developed a life-long love of the ocean that continues to inform her art. Her large-scale mixed media sculptures convey her experience of sailing beyond sight of land and observing the vastness and mutability of nature. While logging more than 25,000 miles at sea, she has witnessed the increasing spread of plastics and other pollutants worldwide. As a result, she has become an environmental activist and her works have begun to directly address the ways in which our waterways have been transformed through human industry. Her recent artwork also explores some of the ways in which human and marine biology are analogous and interdependent.

As a student, Hall was especially drawn to ceramics, papermaking, and printmaking—labor-intensive processes through which materials are transformed by heat or pressure. Like Bitters and Moriarty, she uses two-dimensional art forms to create relief works and sculptures. For example, she created works such as *Acid Ocean* (2012) through layering handmade papers that she has cast, printed, reinforced, reshaped, and folded into a multi-layered evocations of netting, seaweed, and other forms swept up in sea currents. On closer inspection, viewers see that Hall punctuated the work with shells and ocean detritus cast in paper and that she attached forms to the wall with numerous bottle cap pins cast in resin and embedded with plastic.

Similarly, seen from a distance, *Your Existence is Not Unlike My Own* (2008–2012) appears like an ocean swell carrying foam, shells, and netting, and unknown debris. Such works captivate viewers with undulating rhythms, subtle transparencies, and patterns evoking water currents. Spanning more than 20 feet, the work is not an image so much as an environment that elicits visceral reactions. Striking contrasts—from its densely layered masses to its airy palette and open contours—remind us of water's protean nature as it both sculpts the shoreline and dissipates into atmosphere.

In Your Existence is Not Unlike My Own, Hall used washed-up fishing nets to make the collagraph plates with which she printed and embossed images of the net on paper. Making her own paper with hand-beaten Japanese fibers such as abaca and gampi—materials that transform through immersion in water—Hall emphasizes an organic vitality in tension with the netting. After printing the image of the net, she adhered

the paper onto Mylar to add structural support before excising the net's openings with a scalpel. Thus printed and reinforced with acrylic before manipulating it sculpturally, the paper netting can simultaneously appear flat and three-dimensional, organic and artificial, open yet confining.

Creating *Your Existence in Not Unlike My Own* soon after her recovery from cancer, Hall decided to embed the work with circular images of the first cancer cell recorded via microscope. Other circular prints placed throughout the work include microscopic images of coral and reproductions of Hall's PET scans. Thus the work draws attention to the way the both humans and sea creatures endangered by pollution. Envisioning her own health, the history of medicine, and marine biology as tangled up in a sea-swept net, she presents an image of entrapment that is also a tour-de-force of ingenuity and resilience.

A centerpiece of *Translating Earth, Transforming Sea* is Hall's *Hello Sailor* (2012), a 12-by-14-foot tableaux made of steel panels that tilt like the listing deck of a ship. Sprawled across the deck are encrusted forms that appear to have been hauled up from the ocean or washed ashore. On closer inspection, we see that the distressed patina of the steel has been etched with a compass design and dozens of sailor tattoos. Images of mermaids, anchors, coiled ropes, and the names of ships appear like worn memorials evoking past lives in half-forgotten code. We see that the detritus is a heavy rope and crabpot that Hall has encased in paper pulp mixed with metal fragments to add a patina of rust. Encrusting the crabpot with salt, Hall further evokes the way materials decay and become covered with accretions. In its entirety, the commemorative structure and memorial tone of *Hello Sailor* suggest the varied traditions of sailing and fishing that now exist only as history.

Incoming Tide provides the exhibition's most direct evocation of environmental degradation. Spanning an entire wall of the gallery, Hall creates a ceiling-high wave composed mainly of blue and green colored plastic that she has collected on her many trips to shorelines, including sites affected by the 2010 BP/Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Students of Art History cannot view Hall's blue arc without recalling sublime beauty of Katsushika Hokusai's Ukiyo-e print The Great Wave off Kanagawa (1831). However, whereas Hokusai's fishing boats appeared insignificant compared to the towering wave and distant grandeur of Mount Fuji, Incoming Tide represents an ocean not only diminished, but utterly displaced by industry. The fisherman are absent from this contemporary view, replaced by-products of commerce.

Incoming Tide also brings to mind the trash vortexes that have been forming in ocean gyres around the globe. Instead of portraying the beauty of rising water and foam, Hall attaches her plastic wave to the wall using hundreds of glass pins that refract light and sparkle, evoking the night-time glow of bioluminescent organisms at sea. She surrounds the found scraps of plastic with ultramarine blue paper castings that she made from discarded sailing blocks. Transforming such navigational tools into ineffectual paper forms, she provides new symbols for our collapsed systems of control. As in Hall's other works, inventive detail, craftsmanship, and beautiful compositions, encourage us to confront harsh realities. Bearing witness to the artifacts of the Anthropocene, Hall models some of qualities we will need more than ever: analysis, creativity, empathy, and resilience.

Endnotes

- 1. Abstract of "What will it mean to be human? Imagining our lives in the Anthropocene," a lecture by Dr. Rick Potts, Director of the Human Origins Program, National Museum of Natural History, http://www.si.edu/consortia/castlelectureseriesseptember252013/
- 2. Wallace Stevens, The Idea of Order at Key West, in The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens, http://www.poetryfoundation.org/
- 3. John McPhee, "The Control of Nature: Atchafalaya", The New Yorker, February 23, 1987, http://www.newyorker.com/archive/1987/02/23/1987_02_23_039_TNY_CARDS_000347146?currentPage=all

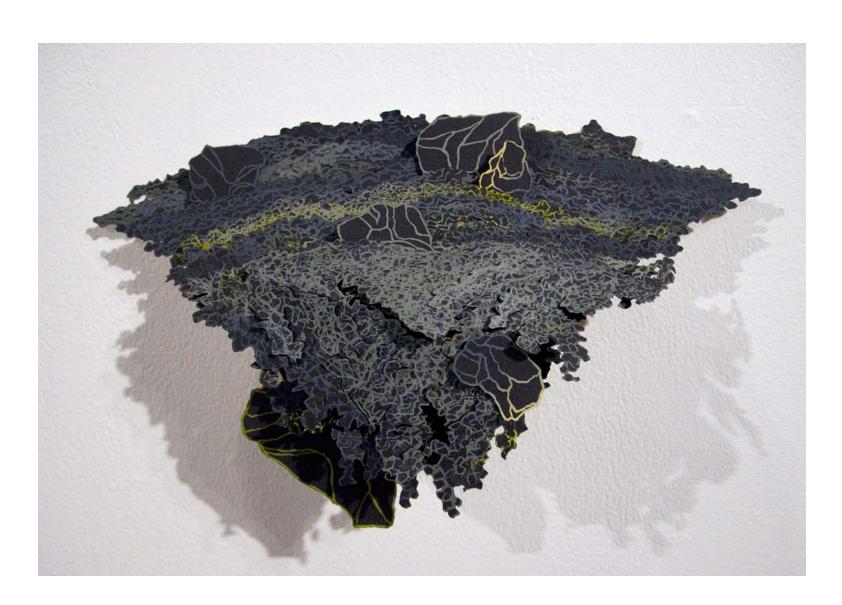
Shawn Bitters

Below

Rockfall 3—German, 2010 Screen print on handmade paper 8 x 10 x 6 inches

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Rockfall 1—English, 2009 Screen print on handmade paper 10 x 5 x 4 inches Born in 1981 and raised in Orem, Utah, Shawn Bitters received a BFA from Brigham Young University and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. He has exhibited his work internationally including a solo exhibition in 2012 at the Hall of Awa Japanese Handmade Paper Museum in Yamakawa Tokushima, Japan. He has mounted solo exhibitions at Swarm Gallery, Oakland, CA; Haydon Art Center, Lincoln, NE, and Fairbanks Gallery, Oregon State University, and the Leedy-Voulkos Art Center in Kansas City. He has also participated in group exhibitions at distinguished venues including the International Print Center and Dieu Donné Papermill in New York City; the Providence Art Club, Providence, Rhode Island; and Temple University, Rome. He recently completed the Council of Danish Artists Residency on Hirsholm Island, Denmark and a residency at Frans Masereel Centrum in Kasterlee, Belguim.Other grants include a General Research Fund Grant and Faculty Travel Grant from the University of Kansas, First prize from the Monotype Guild of New England's National Exhibition, and a fellowship from the Vermont Studio Center. He currently is an Assistant Professor of Art at the University of Kansas.







Above

Yes, Yes, Yes, Now, Now, Now, 2012 Screen print on handmade paper Dimensions vary Approximate width: 20 feet

Right

The Interpreters, 2011 Silver, Danish obsidian and amber 5 x 5 x 2 inches

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Rockfall 5-Swiss, 2010 Screen print on handmade paper, 11 x 8 x 3 inches





Laura Moriarty

Laura Moriarty was born in 1960 in Beacon, New York. She received training in papermaking and printmaking through an apprenticeship at Women's Studio Workshop from 1986–1990. Her honors include two grants from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation, a Radius Award from the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, a MARK Award from the New York Foundation for the Arts and, most recently, a Projects Grant from United States Artists. Laura has participated in numerous artist residencies throughout the United States and abroad, including The Frans Masereel Center in Belgium and The Ucross Foundation in Wyoming. She has exhibited extensively at venues including the Castellani Art Museum, International Print Center New York, The Islip Art Museum, The James W. Palmer Gallery at Vassar College, The Nicolaysen Art Museum and Discovery Center in Casper, WY, and The Jyväskylä Art Museum in Finland. Her work is in the permanent collections of The New York Public Library, The Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, The Center for Book Arts, and the Progressive Art Collection, among others. She is the author of *Table of Contents*, an artist's book published in 2012. Moriarty resides in Kingston, New York and is represented by OK Harris, New York City.



LeftAcretionary Wedge, 2011
Pigmented beeswax
on panel
12 x 12 x 5.25 inches

Atchafalaya, 2013
Encaustic monotype on Sumi-E scroll,
12 x 20 feet flat and folded to 160 inches in length







Footer, 2013
Pigmented beeswax,
powder charcoal
10 x 11 x 3.5 inches

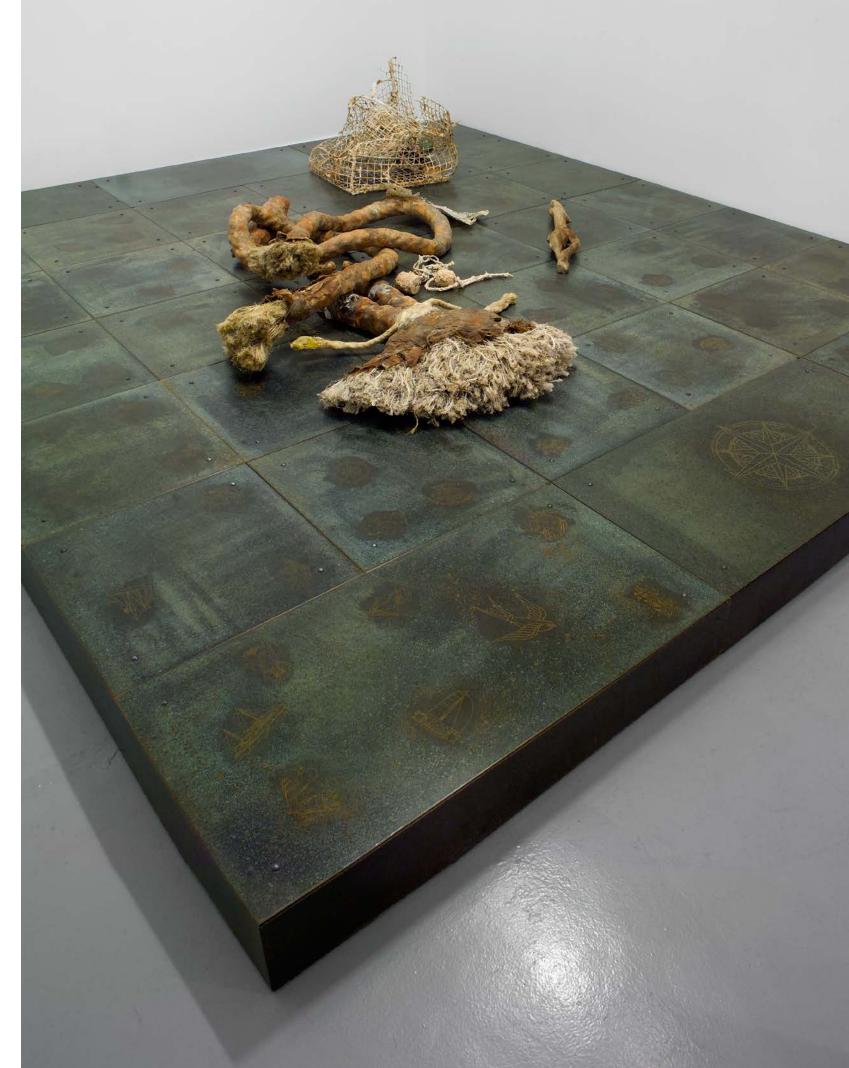
Joan Hall

Below
Incoming Tide, 2014
Cast paper, pins made
from beach plastic,
detritus
Dimensions variable

Page 19
Hello Sailor, 2012
Paper, etched steel,
detritus
144 x 168 x 16 inches

Joan Hall was born in 1952 in Mansfield, Ohio. She received a BFA from the Columbus College of Art and Design, Ohio, and an MFA from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln. She also studied papermaking with Garner Tullis at the Institute for Experimental Paper in San Francisco, CA. Hall has shown her work both nationally and internationally, including at The Slkeborg Art Center, Silkeborg Bad, Denmark; The Blue star Contemporary Art Center, San Antonio, TX; The Rijswijk Museum, Holland; Appledoorn Museum, Holland; The Hillwood Museum, Brookville, NY; Bruno David Gallery, St. Louis, MO; Korean International Invitational, Chang Won, Korea; the Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY; Museum Aemstelle, The Netherlands; Budapest Museum of Art; Leopold-Hoesch Museum, Germany; and the Nordjylands Museum, Aalborg, Denmark. Her work is represented in major collections including The Brooklyn Museum of Art, NY; the Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA; the Municipal Museums in Suwa, Japan and Nanjiing, China; the St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, MO, and the Leopold-Hoesch Museum in Duren, Germany. Hall is the Kenneth E. Hudson Professor in the Fox School of Art and Design at Washington University in St. Louis. She is represented by Bruno David Gallery, St. Louis, MO.







Acid Ocean, 2012 Mylar, acrylic, cast, cut, hand-formed paper 69 x 130 x 26 inches



Your Existence is Not Unlike My Own, 2010 Paper, Mylar, and acrylic Dimensions vary As shown: 65 x 12 inches x 20 feet

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