

Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Showcard

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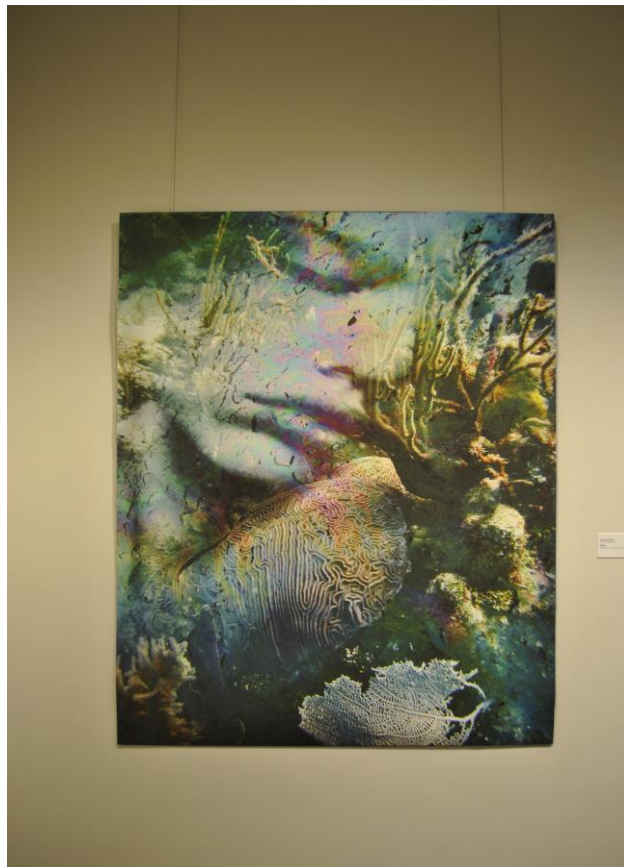
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If nothing is done, how long until they vanish, become ruins, deceased remnants of the past? If our ignorance continues will they be completely lost, left abandoned, and nothing but traces of a once-thriving world? The Earth's coral reefs are in extreme danger, which ultimately means that our human existence is also threatened. As a scuba diver and artist, I have researched the causes and effects of declining coral reef health, as well as the relationship humans have to the rising imbalance of reef ecosystems. Through printmaking and painting techniques, I have created a body of work comprised of prints on paper, wire, and found objects that expose the threatened existence of corals, reasons for their endangered state, and how humans are both producers and victims of the damaging consequences.

There are no words powerful enough to fully express how I felt during my first diving experience. What I can tell you is that I tried so hard to hold back the tears of euphoria behind my goggles. My entire life had been leading up to that moment of intoxicating happiness, and I quickly became addicted. I soon realized that every dive was its own unique adventure. I would discover something new on each dive like a reef I had yet to explore or a species I had never dreamed of swimming alongside. However, one day amidst the beauty and splendor, I noticed something was very wrong. The underwater cities, thriving with marine creatures, turned to jagged stone, left colorless, dangerous, and void of life. I did not comprehend what I was seeing, and I couldn't help but wonder what had happened there. Was it supposed to look like that? Were those graveyards once coral havens?

What I did not realize that day is that I was swimming along a bleached reef, a mass graveyard; a ruined ecosystem. It was that excursion that fueled my investigation to uncover and comprehend what is happening to our coral reefs. I began researching the specific reef system where I dove in Utila, Honduras. This led me to the realization that the endangerment of coral reefs is worldwide and on a rapidly increasing level.

In order to convey this information through visual imagery, I combined underwater photography, painting in both digital and traditional forms, and printmaking techniques such as monotype embossments. The varied materials I used in my work consist of wire, printmaking ink, found ocean objects, and painting materials such as oil paint and India ink. With these materials I was able to achieve different effects and characteristics.



Blind, Digital print on Somerset Velvet, 42 x 56 in., 2016

Underwater photography has proven to be essential for the digital collage paintings I create. The photographs I use are my own and are taken while I am diving at various dive sites. The photographs were taken when I visited Utila, Honduras. Utila, a small island that is part of the Bay Islands of Honduras, is home to many reefs that are endangered like many of our planet's coral ecosystems. I used both healthy and sick corals in my digital collages, depending on what I tried to convey in each work. The underwater photos were collaged with photographs of factors or events that threaten coral health. When the collages were completed, they were printed on a large scale. I then physically manipulated and added to the prints by painting with inks and/or oils directly onto the paper. The digital prints I created are imperative to my thesis work because through them I was able to express the various threats to corals and humans visually in each collage. I then built content using painting and sculptural techniques on each print to individualize and strengthen them.

When I work with wire, I am able to shape, twist, and manipulate it and turn a two-dimensional drawing into a three-dimensional object. For my thesis work, I created wire sculptures of hybrid human-coral figures. The sculptures were run through an etching press to make an embossment. These wire embossments are impressions from the wire left on paper after running both through the press. The end results exhibit a negative impression that has fossil-like qualities. These qualities are ideal for my work, as they visually portray the presence and existence of something that was later removed and is now nonexistent. This is directly related to coral reefs because they are rapidly dying off and turning to lifeless stone. Dead reef colonies will crumble, perhaps become fossils or turn to bits of sand, and ultimately vanish. Something that once was will be lost.

Before I begin to create an informed artwork, I first have to research the issue I aim to address. The issues I portray consist of both causes and effects that threaten the stability and future of coral reef havens. Causes are threats such as the lionfish invasion, over-fishing, pollution, land development, urbanization, and warming sea temperatures due to climate change, and more (Healthy Reefs Initiative, 2012, 3). Effects include the migration and/or extermination of marine species, mass coral bleaching, possible future extermination of reef systems, ecosystem imbalance, future migration of many peoples due to lack of food resources, and perhaps many other problems yet known to us (Skoloff, 1).



Dead Zones, Digital print on Somerset Velvet, 42 x 56 in., 2016

When investigating these subjects I work backwards and frequently interrogate my research process and materials. For example, when reading contemporary articles concerning the current state of a coral reef, I formulate questions about the past and the present state of the reef. What are the characteristics of a healthy reef and what is needed in order to preserve balance? When did the health of the reef start to decline and what are the specific signifiers of ecosystem imbalance? I also question how the instability is affecting other species, including humans. Why is the preservation of a reef vital for all life on the planet? These inquiries lead to more questions, and this is how I develop and move through my investigation. I also interviewed advanced divers, researchers, and environmentalists whenever I could in order to strengthen my research and knowledge concerning this topic. The research provided me with crucial information from experienced and educated persons about the reefs I have visited.

However, nothing compares to the first hand experience of scuba diving. When diving, I am able to observe and surround myself by corals and sea life. I can intimately experience their magnificence, as well as how complex, dynamic, and truly fragile they are. I am able to see negative impacts, both natural and unnatural, that are affecting reefs. Human presence is never far from even the deepest depths of the ocean, or the furthest dive sites and ocean bottoms I have cruised above. On many of my dives far from shore I have seen corals littered with plastic bottles and bags. On rough current days, I have found it hard to avoid the fast-moving plastic debris among the corals I have swam past. Experiences like this highly influence my work and the materials I use. Dives such as these motivate me to create work intended to inform my audience about these issues.

Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, my thesis body of work, reflects my research and artistic development and is comprised of large-scale direct digital prints, embossment monotypes, and wire hybrid human-coral sculptures. Together, these works portray the declining health of coral reefs, and the negative impacts coral reef extermination will have on humans. I accomplish this in three ways. My first approach is through digital prints that are 42 by 56 inches. There are four digital prints that portray human figures and the impact of human presence on coral reefs. The prints are colorful and highly saturated, yet they are seductive and simultaneously disturbing images. It is my intention to attract the attention of my viewers through the use of bold colors, as well as the presence of large-scale prints. Collaged and disguised in the coral forms are unnerving, destructive photographic fragments or found objects that portray threats to both human and coral health. For example, smoke from oilrig fires, harmful algae from cyanobacteria blooms, and plastic ocean debris are incorporated and blended into my underwater photographs. What the viewer sees is both beautiful and ugly, nature versus manmade, life and death.



Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, View of digital print installation, *Blind*, *Barrage*, *Invasive Consumers*, and *Dead Zones* (left to right)

The four monotype embossments titled *Litter*, *Destructive Tactics*, *Vanished*, and *Fossil* convey a different approach. Instead of employing bright, bold, captivating colors, I use the absence of color. The embossments are stark white prints that are impressions of the hybrid human-coral sculptures, as well as collected objects such as fishing nets, rope, and plastic debris that washed up on the beach. The use of the white paper, and the lack of color represent not only absence, but also death. When corals die due to both natural and unnatural causes, they completely lose their color. The corals bleach, harden, and turn white.



Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, View of embossment installation, *Litter*, *Destructive Tactics*, *Vanished*, and *Fossil* (left to right)

Intertwined, the wire sculpture installation, is part of this process. The wire sculptures are made from a variety of wires, and they are the primary elements used for embossing. The wires vary in gauge, length, and color, and many different wires are used for one sculpture, as many different species of coral make up one reef. There is a large array of colors in each sculpture, as coral reefs are some of the most colorful known habitats. In several coral forms on part of each structure are cut-out fragments of plastic bags. Many of the plastic bag fragments are the sections of bags that have warnings, "safe use" tips, and/or text that reads "Thank You" or "Have a Nice Day" on them. These fragments not only act as contradictions in the work, but also as evidence of human presence, damage, and negligence.

Installation of my work was also crucial to its presentation to the viewers. Lighting was extremely important when it came to displaying the wire sculptures. Strong lighting produced shadows on the wall behind the sculptures, which not only provided an agreeable aesthetic, but also gave the structures a stronger presence and a sense of depth. The digital prints and embossments were also strongly illuminated in order to highlight the brilliant colors of the digital prints and the delicate impressions of the embossments. The work was hung in an area with three walls so that a surrounding environment was created. The embossments were arranged together on the wall to the left of the installation. The digital prints were also exhibited together, but they were hung on the center wall. The wire sculptures were arranged on the wall to the right of the space and exhibited together.

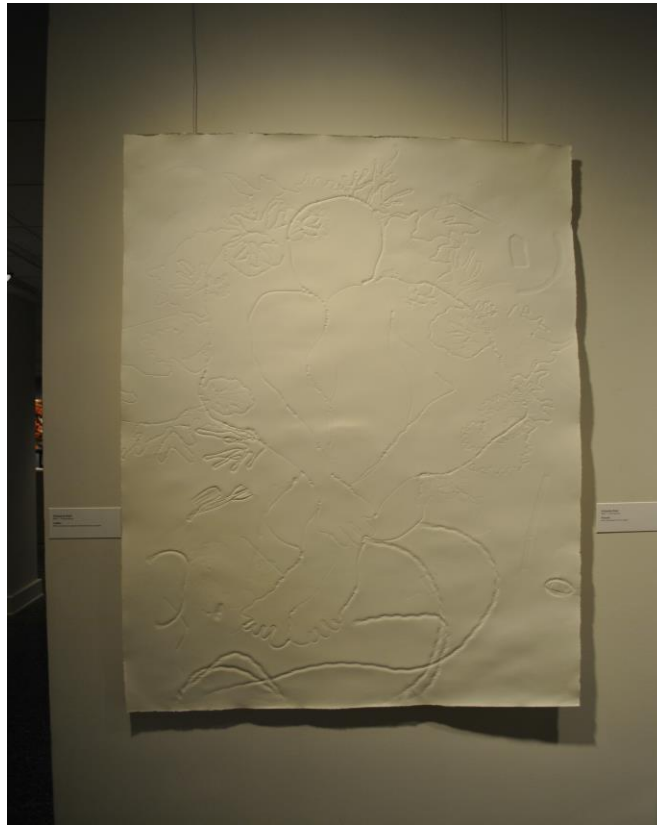


Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Installation of Intertwined

It is not that we do not know or understand what is harming the world's coral reefs. In fact, scientists, researchers, and environmentalists know the exact causes. The problem is that there are many causes, and much of the damage is happening on a global scale. A major threat to coral reefs is global warming, which is causing rising sea temperatures. Higher temperatures have turned entire coral reef environments white due to coral bleaching. Fragile corals are not adapted to withstand warmer temperatures, and therefore they cannot adjust. If sea temperatures do not decrease within a certain time frame, bleached corals cannot revive and will permanently die.

Pollution is another cause for sick, dying corals. There are various types of pollution such as plastic, trash, and other marine debris that is discarded from vessels or from land

into the ocean. The debris is then carried by ocean currents and accumulates into gyres.

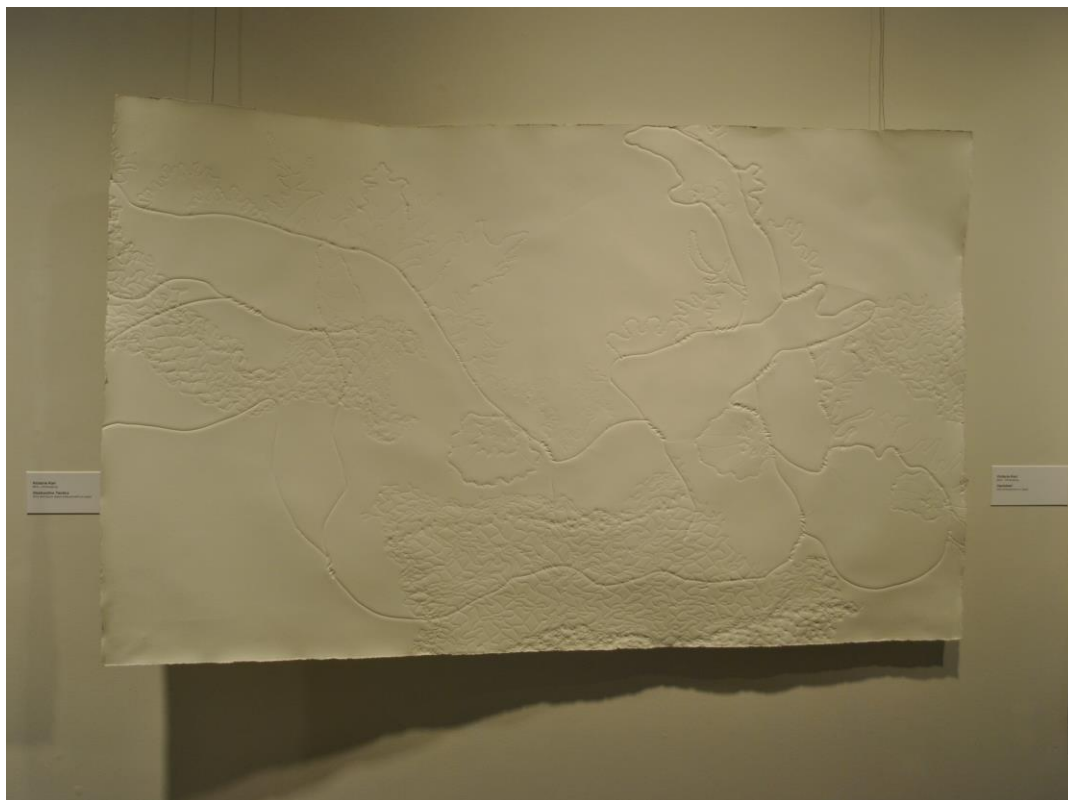


Litter, Wire and found object embossment on paper, 31.5 x 47 in., 2016

Bottles, bags, and plastic debris can suffocate and harm marine life such as fish, turtles, birds, sharks, and more (Healthy Reefs Initiative 2012, 7,8). Inadequate sewage treatment can cause human waste to leak into water systems such as rivers and streams that eventually reach the ocean, or the lack of any sewage system allows for the toxic pollutants to be directly disposed of into the sea. Oil spills can exterminate corals, large and small fish species, birds, and entire marine ecosystems. Both of these types of pollution are directly linked to coral disease and death (Healthy Reefs Initiative 2012, 10).

Over-fishing is an extremely damaging act that is often overlooked. It involves not only fishing large amounts of one species, but it involves over-fishing large fish of one species as well. Large fish produce more eggs and more eggs produce more fish (Healthy

Reefs Initiative 2015, 1). By fishing them, the overall future and survival of the species is in jeopardy. Over-fishing one species will then lead to the fishing of another, and therefore it is an ongoing cycle of depletion. Fishing also involves using large equipment such as nets. Often, the nets drag on the ocean bottom and over reefs, breaking new fragile coral heads, which ultimately kills the coral. Often times, nets get caught around coral, which block the coral from adequate sunlight and essential nutrients. Caught nets may also trap and kill fish that are vital to the ecosystem. Both young coral and very old coral will break from damaging nets. In some countries, destructive fishing habits such as the use of cyanide and explosives will destroy a reef in seconds ("Corals," 8). These explosives destroy habitats for marine life and forever modify the geography of the coral reef. This is not the only practice that changes land geography however.



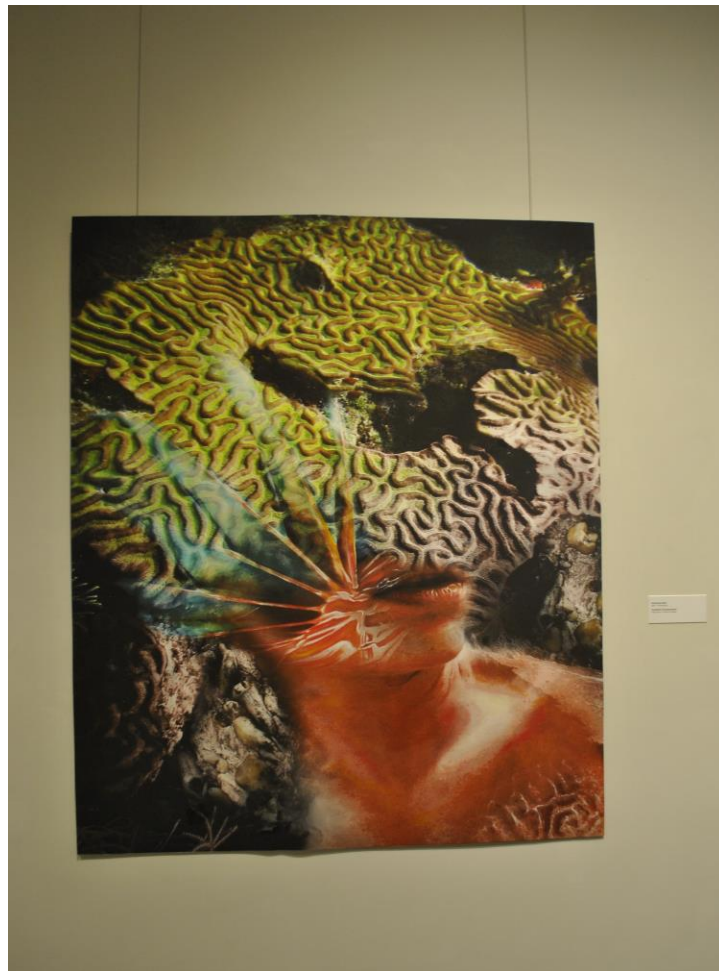
Destructive Tactics, Wire and found object embossment on paper, 31.5 x 47 in., 2016

Land development is another cause for ocean pollution and coral damage. Unnatural erosion due to disrupting the earth often causes sediment to run into rivers and streams that empty out into the ocean. The sediment then rests directly on top of corals and can cause algal blooms, which negatively impact marine life (Healthy Reefs Initiative 2015, 16). The debris then blocks the coral from sunlight, nutrients, and food that is needed for survival. Unmanaged treatment plants are responsible for harmful nutrients to reach coral reefs, and poor waste disposal causes trash pollution and the presence of toxins in the water (12).



Barrage, Digital print on Somerset Velvet, 42 x 56 in., 2016

Lastly, another plague in our oceans right now is the increasing invasive Indo-Pacific lionfish population. Lionfish are thriving in the Mesoamerican reef system, which includes reefs in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and Belize. Lionfish are rapidly spreading up along the east coast of the United States. They are guilty of eating a massive amount of important reef fish, both small and large, on a daily basis. They lack a natural predator and are able to reproduce extremely quickly. A female can produce a maximum of 30,000 eggs each month. The lionfish was introduced to the Atlantic Ocean in 2008. Now, the fish has become common, larger, and abundant. This mistake has now become very clear, highly destructive, and uncontrollable (Healthy Reefs Initiative 2012, 4).



Invasive Consumers, Digital print on Somerset Velvet, ink, oil paint, 42 x 56 in., 2016

What follows these causes is potentially much worse. I have been asked before, “Why is the preservation of coral reefs relevant and vital to all life on this planet? Why should we care?” Without coral, the amount of carbon dioxide in the water would rise dramatically. This would affect the air we breathe, and ultimately affect all living things on Earth. Corals are even used in medical science and for pharmaceuticals. Many drugs are being tested and used from coral reef animals and plants in order to treat cancer, arthritis, infections, viruses, and other diseases (“Corals,” 6). The strongest and most effective drug used to help treat childhood leukemia is cytarabine, which is taken from a type of Caribbean sponge. It is also the first of several anticancer agents to originate from a marine species. In the years to come, we could lose medical solutions such as cytarabine and the potential for future cures if we are to exterminate their ecosystems (Langenheim, 1).

Not only would losing reefs affect the air we breathe as well as eliminate potential health benefits, but it will also affect the daily lives and homes of many people. Warming sea temperatures will produce stronger storms. Damaged, depleted reefs will not act as barriers, and larger waves will strike land. Land erosion and destruction of developed, populated area such as cities and towns will follow. Without coral reefs to provide shelter and food for marine species, topped with the issue of over-fishing, many fish and marine life will be exterminated. Cultures that depend on fish as a source of food, business, and way of life, will be forced to migrate and seek food elsewhere. If demand for fish depletes, independent fisherman and small businesses will vanish. Poverty and hunger will follow. Coral reefs provide food and resources for over 500 million people worldwide. According to the Langenheim, “It’s not just divers or nature lovers that should be concerned. Reefs globally support the livelihoods of half a billion people – 120 million in the Coral Triangle

alone. While they cover just 0.1% of the ocean bed, a quarter of all marine species live in them. Behind rainforests, they are the richest ecosystems on the planet.” They also have an estimated economic value of \$375 billion (“Corals” 6). Tourism is important in supporting many communities. It provides income and jobs to towns and cities all over the world, so what will happen if one day coral reefs are completely extinct? What some may not realize is that it has already begun. Ecosystem imbalance has already taken hold of many coral reefs. Mass bleachings have already resulted and are continuing. Currently, our coral reefs are experiencing the third largest mass coral bleaching epidemic ever recorded due to El Nino, highly detrimental, climatic events that result in an increase in warming sea temperatures (Langenheim). It has been predicted that by 2050, there will be no more living coral reefs on this planet. The day may come faster than we think.

An artist who is currently working directly with corals and their sustainability is Jason DeCaires Taylor, who inspires my work. DeCaires Taylor is an underwater photographer, sculptor, and scuba diver who creates underwater living installations. His site specific, permanent works act as artificial reefs in their underwater environments that attract different types of corals and fish species. His work exhibits a relationship between man and nature, while balancing messages of hope and loss (Taylor).

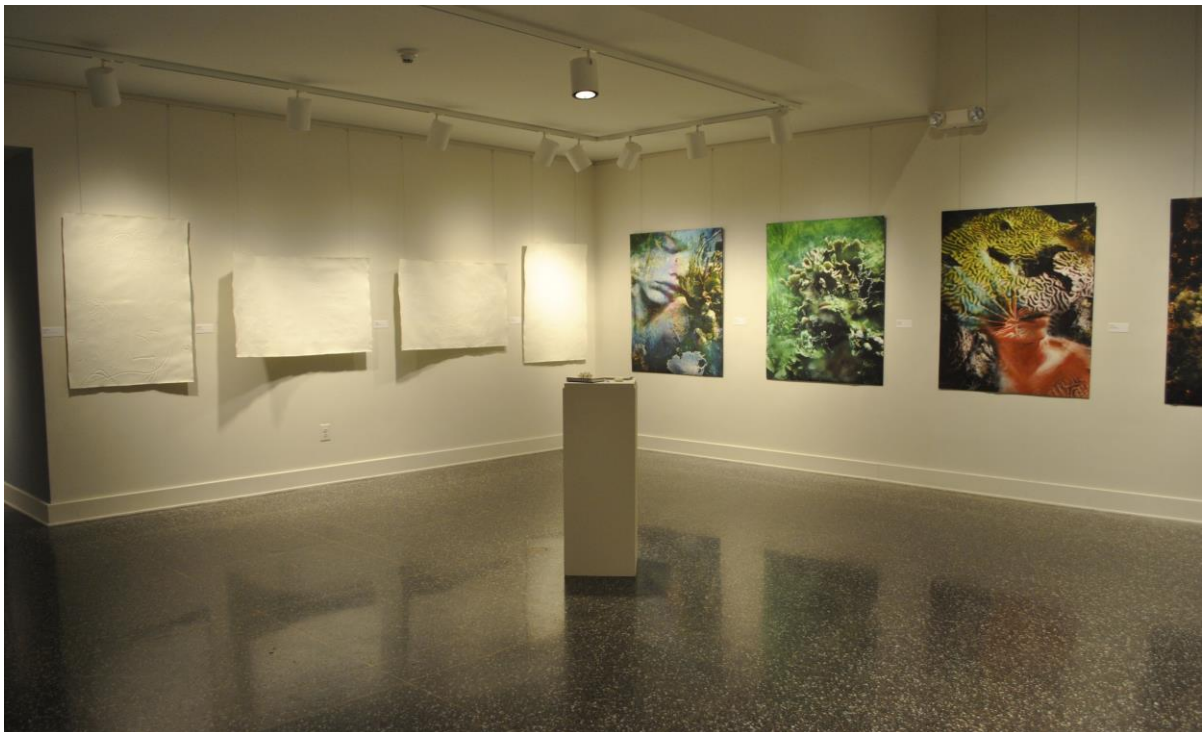
Another inspiration for my work is photographer Fabrice Montiero, who in his latest series titled “The Prophecy,” focuses on environmental devastation in Africa. He collaborated with designers who together combined costume, fashion, and photography to create his surreal, haunting photographs (Montiero). Hope Ginsburg, another inspirational artist, received the Art Matters Grant in 2011, which enabled her to learn to scuba dive in

order for her to observe sponges in their reef habitats. Many of her later projects took inspiration from such investigation (Ginsburg).

We as a species need the ocean to survive, and right now it needs us. The damage we have done cannot be undone, but it can stop. We can help save our coral reefs and ultimately our oceans. We have the capability, technology, and knowledge to become saviors. We can preserve our world and its corals so that our descendents know what a healthy and vibrant, underwater, coral wonder looks like. As an artist, it is my wish to send a message not only of caution, but also of hope. This exhibition reflects a passion to educate and inspire others, but in the end I can only do my share and hope that others might do the same.



Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Right view of installation



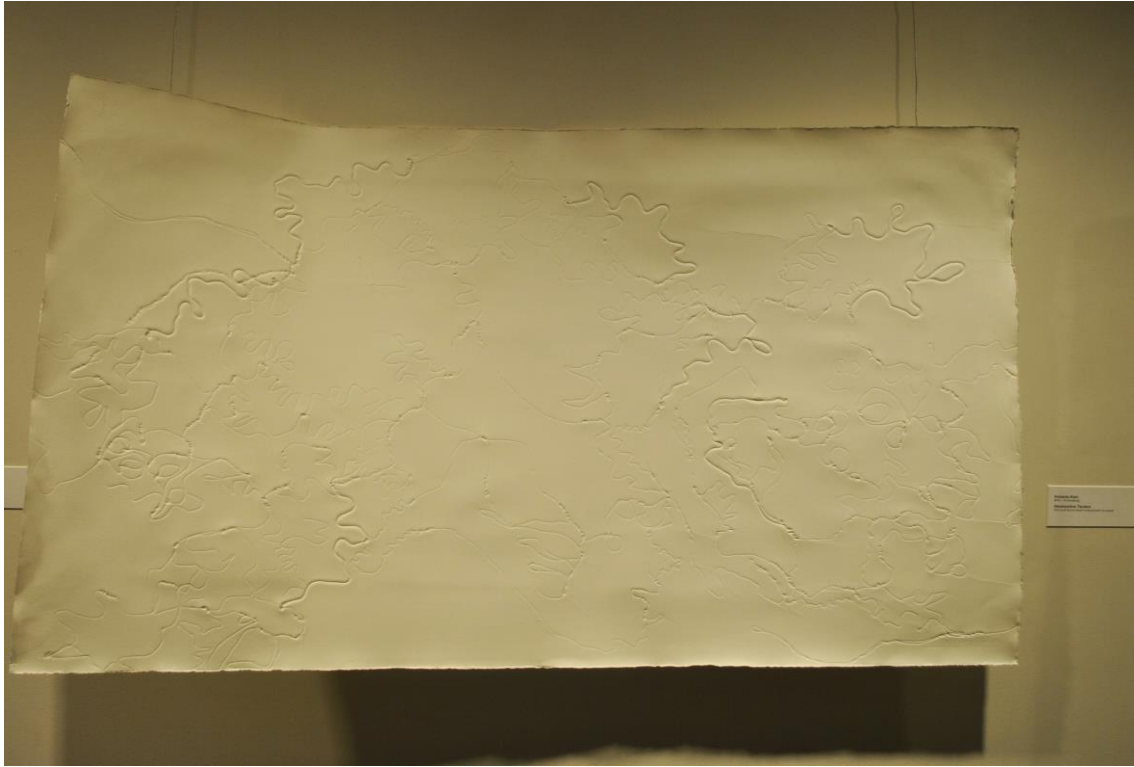
Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Left view of installation



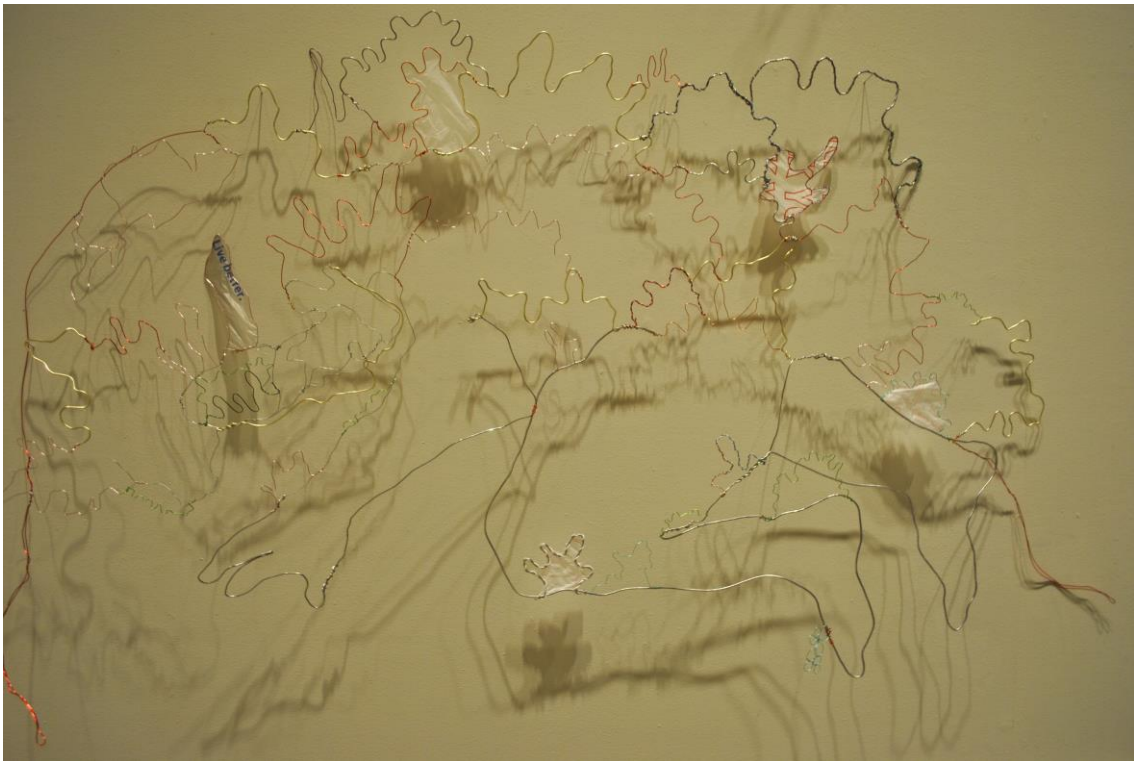
Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Wire sculptures # 1 and # 2 of Intertwined



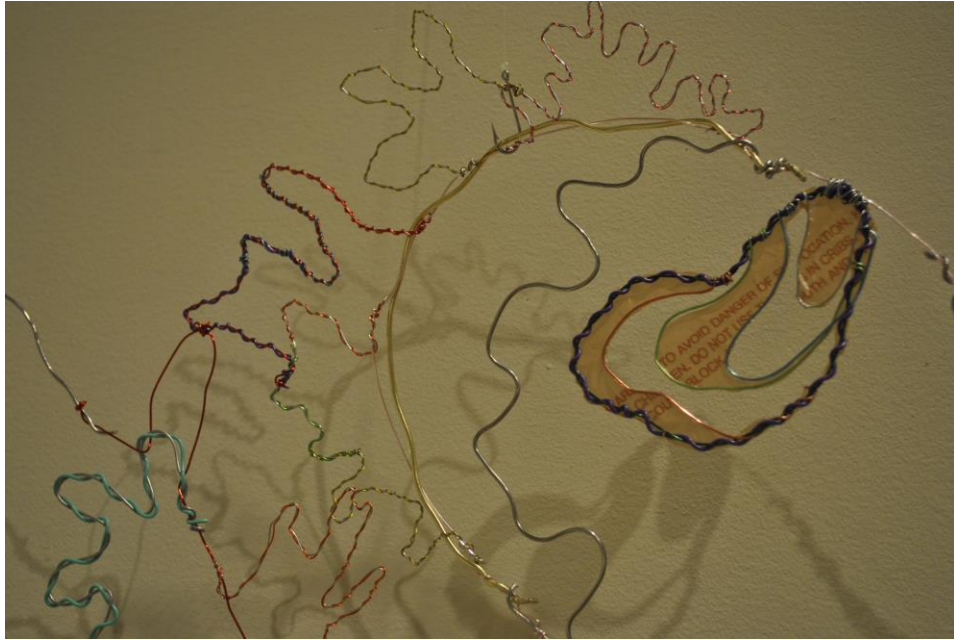
Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Wire sculptures # 3 and #4 of Intertwined



Vanished, Wire Embossment on paper, 31.5 x 47 in., 2016



Forsaking Our Shallow Seas, Wire sculpture #3 of *Intertwined*



Details of *Intertwined*

Forsaking Our Shallow Seas

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