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Undergraduate Research Initiative in Printmaking
University of South Florida, St Petersburg
Cyanotype Project

Celeste Roberge: Cyanotypes

February 6th, 2014
Harbor Hall 103
12:00-1:30pm

Ocean Floors

Works by Celeste Roberge

The ocean has been a near-constant presence in artist Celeste Roberge's life, but until recently it was only a subtext in her art. The turning point came during a 2008 visit to Nova Scotia, when seaweed churned up by a storm triggered a memory and opened up a whole new avenue for artistic exploration.

It was not Roberge's first trip to Nova Scotia; in fact, she had lived there in the 1980s while working on her M.F.A. from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design in Halifax. Since then she has returned frequently to gather inspiration and materials for her work, notably the surf-rounded beach stones used in her acclaimed Cairn sculptures. But the 2008 trip was the first time she had walked the beach in the fall, and she was struck by the proliferation there of a kind of seaweed she hadn't noticed in previous visits: dark brown, leaf-like, and dramatically perforated in an almost machine-like way.

Further research revealed that the algae known as *Agarum cribrosum*, and now as *Agarum clathratum*, is also known as "sea lace," sea colander," "shotgun kelp," or "Devil's apron," because of its shape. It grows deep in the North Atlantic's subtidal zone, which means that it sees the light of day only during extreme tidal events or when churned up by a storm, as before Roberge's visit. The relative rarity of the sighting, combined with the seaweed's distinct appearance and its intriguing taxonomy of names, sent Roberge back to a book she'd once picked up, on a whim, at New York's The Drawing Center. It was the catalogue for *Ocean Flowers: Impressions from Nature*, a 2004 exhibition of seaweed drawings, pressings, and cyanotypes by the mid-nineteenth-century British botanical artist Anna Atkins, who is widely credited with first using cyanotype—the same medium used for architectural blueprints—as a photographic process. Atkins stretched her specimens across chemically treated paper and then exposed them to sunlight, turning exposed areas of the paper blue. Removing the original specimen left a perfect white silhouette of its shape. Attracted to the ghostly beauty of Atkins's images as well as the intellectual rigor behind her technical innovations, Roberge began to experiment with cyanotype and to seek other ways to bring seaweed and science together in her art.

The cyanotypes can seem mesmerizingly pictorial when viewed individually, suggesting forests, gardens, or even the elaborate illustrations and decorative motifs of the nineteenth-century Aesthetic movement. But Roberge says that to her they are purely abstract. Seen in the aggregate—as in this exhibition, for instance—their abstract impact does indeed become apparent and more powerful. Like flea-market glass, a fleet of boats, a beach full of sea lace washed up after a storm, or pools of water on a glacier's surface, they are "beautiful as an accumulation." As a group, they touch upon our human impulse to gather, record, and try to salvage things that might someday disappear.

A native of Biddeford, Maine, a former textile mill town on Maine's southern coast, Roberge grew up in a place where ideas about ocean and industry are intimately connected. Today she divides her time between Maine and Florida, where she teaches sculpture at the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Jessica Skwire Routhier
jsrouthier.com

Excerpts from the Ocean Floors exhibition brochure essay by Jessica Skwire Routhier for Crisp-Ellert Art Museum, Flagler College, St. Augustine, Florida, from March 7th, 2014 to April 19th, 2014.
Opening Reception March 7th, 2014 from 5:00 to 9:00pm.



Delicate in form yet robust in structure, the beauty and ecological roles of seaweeds are often overshadowed by their charismatic faunal relatives. Careful inspection of the ocean flora will leave one in awe of their profound importance on Earth.

Agarum clathratum (aka *Agarum cribosum*) has a variety of common names including sea lace, sea colander, sieve kelp, Devil's apron or shotgun kelp. The holes on the seaweed's blade are characteristic to this perennial species and are thought to decrease the influence of high water motion. This species is often found within beachcast after severe storms and naturally found in the Pacific Northwest as well as the northwestern Atlantic subtidal urchin-barrens.

Jessica F. Muhlin, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Marine Biology
Corning School of Ocean Studies
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The Cyanotypes by Celeste Roberge were made in collaboration with the Graphic Design Program's Visiting Instructor of Art and Master Printer Erika Greenberg-Schneider assisted by Annelise Sandberg and Brandon Harris-Williams as part of the undergraduate research initiative in Printmaking at the University of South Florida, St Petersburg.

"The world of an artist is composed of visuals, linguistics and semiotics. To freely create work in collaboration, each member must breach the gaps in both physical and metaphysical space to accomplish the overall vision. Working with seaweed possesses many challenges as it contains a specific duality; fragility, which displays the delicately interwoven networks and channels that comprise the whole. Both the choice of the medium and compositions allow the onlooker to immerse themselves in the journey of the seaweed as well as the voyage that occurred amongst Celeste Roberge and ourselves; a metaphor for all human relations."

Annelise Sandberg and Brandon Harris-Williams

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