

MaryBeth Thielhelm: Unclaimed Waters
October 10 – November 15, 2008
Opening Reception: October 10, 2008, 6 – 8 PM

Sears-Peyton Gallery is pleased to present “Unclaimed Waters,” an exhibition of recent large-scale oil paintings by MaryBeth Thielhelm.

MaryBeth Thielhelm has been painting water for seven years, but her obsession with what she calls the “elemental, uncontrollable, and immeasurable ocean” started when she was a child and has been woven throughout her life. She grew up in Saudi Arabia where she was mesmerized, not only by the deep emerald-green Persian Sea, but also the warm dusty light playing over the shifting sands of the water-like desert. After graduating from art school, Thielhelm spent many blissful months on the island of Santorini in Greece where she described the Aegean Sea as “seductive and transcendent.” After moving back to New York, MaryBeth saw a show of photographs by Hiroshi Sugimoto at the Sonnabend Gallery and was inspired by the way he captured the massive yet silent experience of those waters.

It was when MaryBeth moved to Maine and lived in a spindly crooked house on stilts overlooking the Atlantic that she felt the moment was right for her to capture the experience of the water. She did it, not by looking at the ocean, but with her back to it; all the time hearing and smelling it, even feeling it under her house. By turning her back, Thielhelm allowed the experiences of Saudi Arabia, Santorini and Maine to meld together as she began painting the feeling, rather than the representation of the water. The resulting works range in color from steely grey reminiscent of the North Atlantic to the greens of the Persian Sea to the blues of Greece and the salmon tones of the desert.

Thielhelm’s paintings originate on a double-sided primed aluminum panel built into a thick wooden frame. She begins painting very loosely, working within the wetness of the paint to capture the movement and energy of her subject. She gradually builds layers of paint, pulling her image together yet leaving areas of earlier layers to show through, revealing the vagueness and clarity within each piece. MaryBeth says, “My intention is to capture the tension of two opposing ideas within one image, to address the complexity of a single form possessing opposite truths – tranquility and foreboding, beauty and brutality, silence and loudness.” These challenges have occupied her for years; continually discovering new meaning in the water has fueled her creative dialogue with it and kept her loyal to this focus.

Lately, her subject matter has taken on a new significance as well. In titling the exhibition “Unclaimed Waters,” MaryBeth refers to the environmental and political significance of water and how it may be our most precious commodity in future. Will wars be fought over the rights to water? What price will we pay for not taking better care of our waters? And with recent hurricanes, floods and tsunamis, she asks “how can man possibly control or claim the earth’s waters?”

In line with her concern for our most precious natural resource, MaryBeth Thielhelm is known for her solarplate etchings: a non-toxic and eco-friendly alternative to the traditional printing technique. Each piece in Thielhelm’s solarplate etching series originates with photographs she takes of the ocean. The photographs are digitally altered and developed onto a light sensitive polymer plate using only water and sunlight. MaryBeth uses an array of oil-based etching inks to create a vibrant spectrum of colorful sears. 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.



MaryBeth Thielhelm lives and works in New York City. She studied at London School of Fine Arts and received her BFA with honors from Syracuse University in 1988. Thielhelm has had three solo shows at Sears-Peyton Gallery starting in 2003. Her most recent group exhibitions include "New Artists", Bentley Gallery, Arizona, 2007; Black and White Works form the Permanent Collection at the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Missouri, 2006. Her work is included in the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hunterdon Museum of Art, American Express, Barclay's Global, Merrill Lynch, General Electric, Pfizer, Schwab institutional and US Department of State collections.

About Sears-Peyton Gallery

Founded in 1999 by Macie Sears and Gaines Peyton, Sears-Peyton Gallery is located in Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood and represents the work of contemporary American artists. While the gallery's artists work in a wide variety of media and subject matters, the common thread that unites this diverse stable of talent is a grounding in historic styles and subjects, rendered contemporary and seductive through modern processes, interpretation, mood and technique. The result is work that feels simultaneously timeless and timely. With emphasis on process-driven exploration, improvisation, and rigorous craft, Sears Peyton's artists are committed to producing earnest and contemplative works of art.

The gallery is committed to the long term development of their artists; placing works in public and private collections as well as acting as an accessible public space in which works are exhibited and become part of the cultural dialogue.

