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Shaped by the Ocean

An artist moves coastal and meets her muse



Being in Meg Black's studio is an extension of reality. Although it is situated on a landlocked wooded property in Topsfield, Massachusetts, you can almost wade into the tidal pools in the canvases lining its walls. You feel as if seafoam will wash over your ankles—you can almost hear the surf. That is exactly the

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artwork. When she first took the ocean as her muse three decades ago, there was no medium that furnished the experience she tried to convey. Black pioneered her own material to express how the water moved her—it took three years of experimentation to capture what she was experiencing. Thirty-three years later, she still thinks of her canvases as a portrait of her life's journey.

Black was transfixed the moment she met the ocean. Growing up in central New York, she was deprived of coastal interaction until graduate school brought her to Boston's Massachusetts College of Art and Design and the shore. "It was instant," she recalls of the love-at-first-sight experience 33 years ago. "It was such a thrill." Although the move meant a temporary long-distance relationship with her fiancé, separation from her family and friends, and leaving a budding career as a middle school art teacher to plunge into a new life as a fine artist, the ocean was her compensation. Her homesickness and feelings of insecurity and self-doubt were literally washed away when she spent time beside the ocean. "The water was my escape."

She worked her way through graduate school, married her fiancé, and moved from Nantucket Beach to Revere Beach before settling in Topsfield—visiting the water throughout the process. "I visited the beach constantly, I saw it from dawn to dark throughout the seasons, and it was the perfect subject. It was a metaphor for me. All I needed to do was find the right medium to express the rocks and water. Then I found it. The medium is pulp—the same material used to make sails for sailboats."

The material is called abaca—the inner pulp of *Musa textilis*, a member of the banana family also used to make tea bags. Black literally beats it into a pulp, adding pigment to portray the nuances of water-washed rocks and the ocean in all its many moods. As she works, she does not simply apply paintbrushes to her canvas. Instead, she works with spoons, squeeze bottles, turkey basters, and even credit cards to "paint," smooth, move, and mingle the pulp while adding pigment. "Applying the medium is always an act of discovery; that's what keeps me hooked," she says. Laid on foam board and stretched over an armature, the resulting artwork is incredibly dynamic; it's also colorfast, nonfading, and acid-free. "It's very translucent. It has a pearlescent quality that looks like shimmering water."







Meg Black finds the correlation to the realities of life. "Sometimes things are so rocky, and then they're smooth. The strength of the water and



the crashing waves reshapes us. We weather the storms."

To glean inspiration, Black goes to the coast. "You have to experience the place," she says. Rather than working from photographs ("They don't really capture it"), she brings watercolor pencils and sketches her color palette. "If the colors play the right role, the piece will really sing," she says. To further seize the dynamic, Black works on large-scale presentations, made possible in her studio environment. The studio experience is a fairly recent perk for Black—until eight years ago, she worked in the garage and basement while the family filled a five-gallon jug with spare change to invest in a space where she might make art without distraction.

Black also works to express other aspects of the surrounding beauty in her town, including the wooden panels commissioned by the New Hampshire Council on the Arts and a series of panels hanging in the Topsfield Town Hall that capture Topsfield's River Road in autumn. Yet she finds herself continually going back to the water, which never ceases to inspire creatively and novel works. Always, she finds the correlation to the realities of life. "Sometimes things are so rocky, and then they're smooth. The strength of the water and the crashing waves reshapes us. We weather the storms." Just as she evolves with time and experience, the ocean also reveals its many facets. "I think of these as self-portraits," she says while waving a turkey baster toward the dialogue between surf and rock that she's laboring to translate onto canvas. Meg Black has served as a coastal interpreter for decades as she lays down visual autobiographies that feel uncannily universal. When you think about it, we all have the shoreline in our souls. ➔

Opposite page: The inspiration for the pulp painting *Rocks and Water as Portrait of Life's Journey* came from Cape Ann on Boston's North Shore. Black says this 40-inch-by-40-inch artwork took "30 years of practice and at least 200 hours of work" to create. Rather than brushes, her tools were a turkey baster, squeeze bottles, and spoons.

FOR A LIST OF RESOURCES, SEE PAGE 110



Morgan Stanley's financial advisor Steven Principe Rides for Pan Mass

RIDING FOR A CURE... So why do I ride? I ride for my son, Tyler. The kid who was dealt a bad hand and never let it get the best of him. I ride for, one of my best friends, my father-in-law and so many others that live with this disease.

For those less familiar, the Pan Mass Challenge is a two-day, 191-mile, bike-a-thon spanning Sturbridge to Provincetown. It is consistently the single largest athletic fundraising event in the US. With over six thousand riders, the Pan Mass Challenge continues to raise more funds each year for The Jimmy Fund/Dana-Farber and has raised over \$654 million since its inception in 1980. Due to the generosity of many sponsors and volunteers, 100% of these rider-raised dollars go directly to support adult and pediatric patient care and cancer research at Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. Over the two-year span that Steve has participated he has raised over \$90,000.00 for The Pediatric Oncology Fund at Dana Farber.

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