



Vanessa Barragão

# Intricate Oceans

Plunging through a spray of bubbles down through depths of water to a coral reef, you enter a magical world. Brilliantly hued fish, sea horses, barracudas and sting rays swim among elkhorn, brain, star, pipe organ, flower or any of the hundreds of hard corals found in marine habitats ranging from shallow coastal waters to the open seas. They share reefs with soft corals like sea fans and sea fingers as well as with spiky sea urchins, sponges, anemones and creatures like the dagger-toothed moray eels who you might see poking out from crevices.

Given the variety of color, texture and shape, it's easy to think of coral reefs as backdrops for the sea life that moves through them. Indeed if you've ever come across a bit of rigid coral on a beach or in a souvenir shop, you might even be tempted to think of corals as rock-like or perhaps as ossified plants. But these denizens of the deep are animals living in complex, connected communities. In fact, although their movements are imperceptible to the human eye, coral polyps pulsate and wave in currents, reaching out to feed upon zoo plankton — microscopic organisms like protozoa, larvae and eggs. And those green, red, yellow, blue and purple colors? They come from algae that thrive symbiotically with corals, photosynthesizing nutrients for them.

What's more, even though coral reefs cover less than one percent of the ocean floor, these diverse ecosystems support an estimated 25 percent of marine life and protect our shorelines from storms and surges while providing filtration systems for surrounding waterways. But warming seas, ocean acidification, plastic and chemical pollutants, overfishing and other environmental pressures have led to bleaching, where algae disappear, weakening coral exoskeletons and leaving them vulnerable to disease and death.



Mara Lefebvre



Lisa Tubach

## ARTISTS CAPTURE THE BEAUTY AND VULNERABILITY OF CORAL REEFS.

STORY BY CAROLYN MALES

It was these threats to our reefs that led Elizabeth Greenberg, the Coastal Discovery Museum's director of exhibitions, to bring together seven artists from the United States, Portugal and France whose work focuses on environmental issues. The exhibition, "Intricate Oceans: Coral in Contemporary Art," celebrates the beauty and importance of the world's coral reefs through large ceramic installations, tapestries, paintings, mixed media and sculpture. "While each artist makes us aware of what we had and what we've lost, they're also hopeful that by raising awareness, we can work together to support conversation efforts and stem some of the damage," says Greenberg.

**Courtney Mattison** creates large ceramic wall pieces made up of hundreds of hand-crafted clay pieces that highlight the fragile beauty of coral reefs. Then she jolts us by juxtaposing the vibrant colors and textures of healthy ecosystems with bleached-out areas where climate change has triggered a collapse. Mattison, who holds degrees in marine ecology, environmental studies and ceramics, works with conservation groups like Mission Blue, promoting public support for a global network of marine-protected areas.

**Lauren Shapiro** uses techniques like hand-building, mold-making and casting, along with technologies like 3-D printing, to create accurate models for her nature-inspired sculptures and installations. The Miami-based artist collaborates with scientists to document how human activity endangers aquatic environments and how rising seas have impacted coastal biomes. Her work has been described as sculptural ceramic archives of disappearing ecosystems.

Inspired by childhood trips to the Caribbean where she first explored coral reefs, Portuguese artist **Vanessa Barragão** became saddened over the years as she watched these unique environments lose color and biodiversity.

# In the House!

Join the owners of **Wild Birds Unlimited Hilton Head** for every aspect of backyard birding. From equipment and outings, to solutions and resources.

House finches are opportunistic feeders known for their adaptability to various food sources. They exhibit a preference for small seeds, with sunflower seeds and safflower seeds being among their favorites. Additionally, they are attracted to fruits like berries and sometimes even nectar.

House Finch



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## local | culture

Aware that the textile industry, with its use of chemicals, energy consumption and promotion of fast fashion, has been a major contributor to pollution, she focused her art on “living sustainably to ensure a healthy planet.” Using upcycled deadstock and leftover fabric from manufacturers, she employs traditional techniques—weaving, embroidery, latch hook, macramé and felt in her tapestries to draw attention to these issues.

Sculptor and painter **Stephanie Kilgast's** ink-and-watercolor works for this show focus on nature's resilience in the face of harmful human activities like overdevelopment and pollution. Blue-green coral reefs stand defiant against high-rises. pink and red reefs confronts ocean acidification; marine life colonizes a trashcan. Yet even as these ecosystems meet each threat, the Brit-tany-based artist leaves a portion of them grayed or whited out as a warning and a call for us to “find an equilibrium” between nature and what we do to the environment.



Artist Courtney Mattison with her work *Texture Study*

As a child, **Lisa Tubach** had dreamed of a career as a marine biologist. As an adult, she has worked with conservation groups throughout the world, portraying her love for the world's oceans in paintings filled with bold colors and dynamic lines that underscore connections between marine and territorial environments and our own existence. Describing her work as “a concoction of fact, memory and invention” she urges us to take supportive action.

**Ginger Ertz** works in the most unusual medium of this group — chenille stems also known as pipe cleaners. Weaving and twisting them together often with beading, she depicts water in motion—waves, whirlpools, splashes, currents. She describes these 3-D forms as “abstract yet organic, recalling simple life forms like underwater creatures, fantastic plants or imaginary animals.”

**Mara Lefebvre** gathers odd bits and pieces to fashion into collages, sculptures, assemblages and digital prints. Her work in this show focuses on bijoux — 3-D pieces conjured up from her imagination, covered with patterns of beads, pearls, wire and other embellishments — each one looking like some fantastic undersea reef dweller. *LL*

## Sea the exhibit

**What:** Intricate Oceans: Coral in Contemporary Art  
**When:** Through March 24  
**Where:** Coastal Discovery Museum  
**Contact:** 843.689.6767, coastaldiscovery.org