

The Howling Infinite: Moby Dick, Art and the Environment
Syracuse University Art Museum August 12-November 28, 2021

The Howling Infinite: Moby Dick, Art and the Environment is inspired by Herman Melville's narrative of a whaling industry that had a long-lasting effect on the health of the oceanic ecosystem. The exhibition adopts this classic American tale as a framework to unpack American art's complex engagement with its natural world. Hudson River School paintings celebrated the unmatched beauty of the Americas, while contemporary pieces reference the effects of oceanic pollution from plastics. Between these two pillars of time, the artworks document a complex human struggle in American art with our oceans and nature itself. It reflects dueling viewpoints—that the natural world is a source of awe and a resource to be plundered.

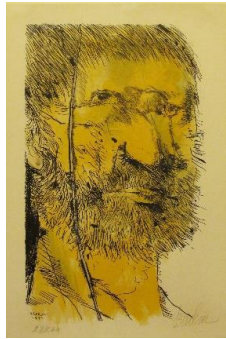
But, in addition to the disciplines of art history and literature, *The Howling Infinite* also includes scientists, humanists and artists to collectively examine how art can provide insight into our complex relationship with the ocean environment. Climate change and the negative effects of commercialization have been debated internationally for decades with little to show. One reason is the public's inability to directly see these consequences or understand complex scientific data thereby generating little political pressure. This exhibition illustrates how visual culture can advocate for social change. Until relatively recently the ocean's physical immensity and visual uniformity has kept its environmental secrets from nearly everybody, hiding a multitude of egregious acts perpetrated in the name of progress. American Daniel Beltra's large aerial photographs document the effects of the 2010 Gulf oil spill. His images describe the significant damage to the gulf and its wildlife, and the less than effective response to the disaster. On Midway Island, Chris Jordan photographically documents dissected albatross chicks killed by plastics their parents accidentally fed to them. Australian Mandy Barker's manipulated images of plastic debris mimic the pioneering discovery of plankton in Cobh, Cork harbor by John Vaughn Thompson in the early 1800's. Acclaimed American artist Jonathon Keats intends to partner with Syracuse University faculty and students and open *The Center for Creative Symbiosis*. It will amass knowledge about all marine species and their challenges, and provide them with timely symbiotic guidance while considering how our relationship with the American ocean-scape has shaped our artistic national identity.

An illustrated publication will accompany the project. A curator's introduction will use selected exhibition objects to introduce contributions by a scientist, humanist and an artist. Each will explain and illuminate a marine environmental concern of particular interest to them. This approach avoids data and creates a diverse, more engaging dialogue. Each author will have 4-5000 words, and the introduction another 2000. An intended August 2021 publication date coincides with the show's opening.

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selected images



Rockwell Kent
Illustration for *Moby Dick*, c1930



Leonard Baskin, *Ahab* from *The Moby Dick Suite*, 1970



Anne Ryan
*Now, Ever Awake, My Master Dear,
I Fear a Deadly Storm*, 1947



Wynn Bullock, *Point Lobos Wave*, 1958



Berenice Abbott. American, *Lobster traps on Mantinicus Island, Maine*, c 1965



Joan Hall, *Acid Ocean*, 2012



Chris Jordan, *Midway: Message from the Gyre*, 2009-current



Daniel Beltra, *American Oil Spill 15*, 2010



Nick Pumphrey, *untitled*, c2015



Mandy Barker
Beyond Drifting: Imperfectly Known Animals, 2017