



Antarctic journey: Waters on ice

A new frontier for Oregon painter April Waters, known for her waterscapes and large-scale portraits: a research station in Antarctica

OCTOBER 16, 2018 // [CULTURE](#), [VISUAL ART](#) // [BOB HICKS](#)

The view to the west out the expansive windows in April Waters' studio is a rolling landscape of woods, farmlands, habitations and foothills stepping up toward the Coast Range. Against one wall a giant bare canvas stretches 72 by 108 inches, almost as wide as and considerably longer than a king size bed. A commissioned portrait in process is visible, and several giclee prints of her landscape paintings are slotted in a folding stand. As the sun moves across the studio, which is built on a hillside to the south of downtown Salem, her easel rolls with it, catching the light the way she likes it.



April Waters with portraits of two of her Sheroes: marine biologist Sylvia Earle (left) and water-rights activist Maude Barlow. Oregon ArtsWatch photo

The vista is rich and fertile, vastly different from the edge of Antarctica, where she'll travel in November to take part in the National Science Foundation's Antarctic Artists and Writers Program. The NSF program places artists in one of [three United States Antarctic research stations](#) to observe the world at its extremes, and help explain through their art the significance of the life and landscape of the southernmost continent and what changes there mean to the world as a whole. Both the Willamette Valley vistas that Waters paints and the Antarctic ice shores she is about to visit are places intimately involved in the shifts and balances and warning signs of climate change.

The land below Waters' studio windows is fed and replenished and constantly reinvented by water and the way it rises, falls and flows. Those fluctuations – what she calls water's “qualities of reflection, transparency, movement and life generation” – are central to much of

her work. What might seem at first glance simply a well-rendered landscape is certainly that, but also more: It is an examination of waterways, their shifting patterns, their effect on humans and the way we live our lives, the precarious ecological balances of a world in climate upheaval. There is something, not clinical, but deeply observational about her interpretations of the natural world and the way things work. “As Sylvia Earle says, with every drop of water you drink, every breath you take, you are connected to the sea,” Waters comments, quoting the marine biologist whose large-scale portrait she has painted. “She says with knowing there is caring and with caring there is hope.”



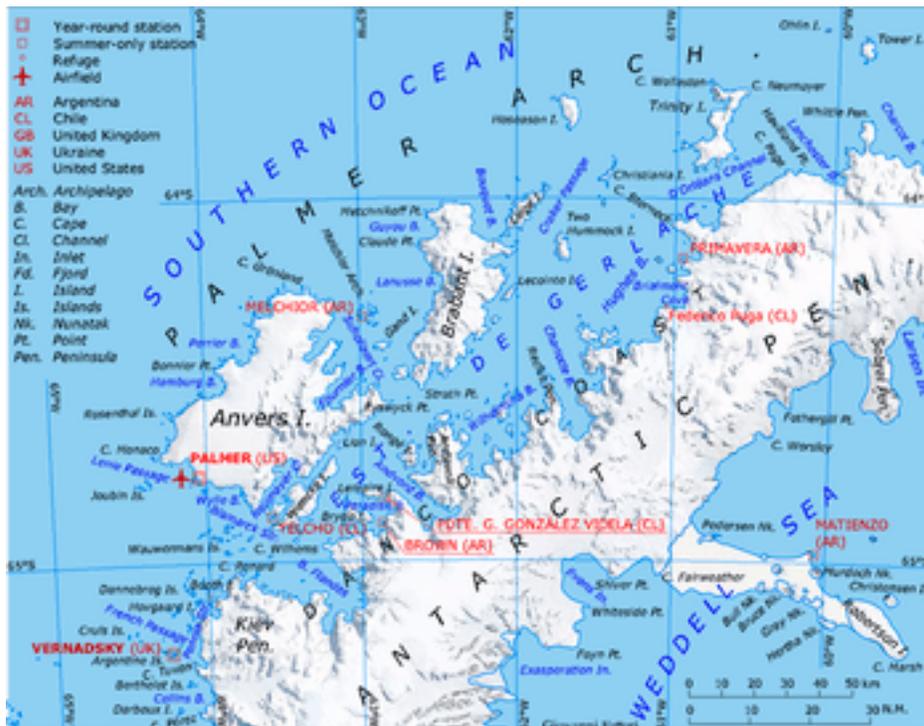
April Waters, “Willamette in Bloom,” 2013, oil on canvas, 38 by 56 inches. Private collection.

Waters began her career as a portrait painter, mostly doing private commissions, a specialty that eventually blossomed into a 10-year project called *Sheroes*, a series of eight giant portraits of people she calls “women leaders for peace, justice, and the environment.” As different as the portraits seem on the surface from the landscapes and waterscapes of the

Pacific Northwest she now considers her central focus, the *Sheroes* series has an environmental bent. The group includes the Indian environmental leader Dr. Vandana Shiva, the Canadian water-rights activist Maude Barlow, the late Kenyan environmental and human rights leader Wangari Maathi, and the prominent American marine biologist Earle. Walters describes the women as “the lifeguards of the planet.”

Waters’ paintings of the Willamette River and its variations, including flood stage, eventually came to the attention of scientists at Oregon State University in Corvallis, who began to ask her permission to include images of her waterway paintings in slide shows to illustrate their lectures on what one calls “the physics of water.” It was Roy Haggerty, dean of OSU’s College of Science, who brought the National Science Foundation program to her attention and urged her to apply.

Waters’ visit, which between travel time and residence will last about a month, will take her to the NSF’s northernmost research base, Palmer Station, which is also the smallest. The largest, McMurdo Station, is on the Ross Sea, near the starting point for polar expeditions by Scott and Amundsen a century ago, and during the summer months often supports more than 1,000 people (during the winter that number shrinks to about 180). The Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station is 841 miles inland, at the geographic pole, where temperatures year-round average 60 degrees below zero Fahrenheit, and where as many as 250 people are in residence during summer.



Map of Gerlache Strait region, including Anvers Island. Cartographic base: Antarctic Digital Database www.add.scar.org/ Wikimedia Commons

Palmer is on Anvers Island in the Antarctic Peninsula region, which reaches out from the West Antarctic Ice Sheet like an icy hook, roughly the shape of Cape Cod but vastly larger, toward the southern tip of South America, where Chile and Argentina meet. The trip there – flying to Santiago, Chile, moving on to a small port town to the south, then boarding the research and supply ship the *R/V Laurence M. Gould* for a four-day voyage – will take six days. “It’s not like a luxury cruise,” Waters says. “It’s a boat that’s a science lab.”

The South Orkney, South Shetland, and Falkland islands are relatively nearby, as the ship ploughs, and this is also where the Antarctic, South Atlantic, and South Pacific oceans come together. “The scientists say, if it happens to be a calm day, you can see the oceans meeting,” Waters says. In the Antarctic summer Palmer supports only about 45 people, almost all of them scientists: marine biologists, oceanographers, geophysicists. She’ll be the only artist among them, and the prospect invigorates her: “These are people who are the top-notch scientists on the planet. And I get to go out on these islands with them.”

Waters will be in an area where climate change is at work – “the whole landscape, and the sea ice.” As things warm and become spongier, the ice breaks off and entire ecosystems begin to shift. Some of it is natural, driven by the seasons: “There’s a pattern of sea ice sort of filling in the borders of the continent during the winter and then receding during the summer.” This is a place where shrimp-like [krill live by the millions, and are now threatened by weather changes and overfishing](#). Pretty much everything eats krill, which are the base of an interlocking biological system, and as their supply shrinks everything else shifts, too.



An Adélie parent guards a newly hatched chick on Torgersen Island, less than a mile from Palmer Station on Anvers Island. The webcam is seasonal and operates primarily from October to February, the Adélie breeding season. Source: United States Antarctic Program, Torgersen Island Penguin Camera

“It’s making animals like the [Adélie penguin](#) migrate, and other penguins move in,” Waters notes. (Adélie colonies appear to be thriving in East Antarctica, but are declining on the Peninsula.) On a much larger scale, what’s happening here is not unlike the shifts in estuaries and river beds and microclimates that Waters paints in the Pacific Northwest. “Visually,” she says, “the pattern of it seems interesting.”

Waters will take a lot of photographs while she’s in Antarctica, and plans to create at least 10 paintings from them. It’ll be roughly a two-year process, she estimates: “Every painting takes three to five months for me.” She has commitments so far to show them at the Hallie Ford

Museum of Art in Salem, Oregon State University in Corvallis, and the National Center for Atmospheric Research, in Boulder, Colorado.



The view of Palmer Station from the glacier above it. At $64^{\circ} 46' 27.23'' S$ – roughly equivalent to Fairbanks, Alaska, in the north – it is the only U.S. research station in Antarctica that is north of the Antarctic Circle, which lies at about 66.5° South latitude. The Laurence M. Gould (orange) can be seen just docking at the water's edge. Source: Heinz it up 57 at English Wikipedia

Her crossing of the great scientific/artistic divide is actually something of a reintegration. In 1959 C.P. Snow famously defined and lamented the cultural split between what he called “The Two Cultures” – science and the humanities – which had increasingly become ignorant of each other, not only undervaluing each others’ importance but barely even speaking the same language. The split isn’t quite so complete, of course: many mathematicians and

scientists are also amateur musicians, knowing and appreciating the similarities in logic and structure, and the intuitive leaps that each can take. Scientist-writers ranging from the biologists Rachel Carson and Lewis Thomas to the theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking and the astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson have written about science and its implications for a popular audience.

In the visual arts, Portland artist [Kindra Crick](#) has built a successful career from her evocations of DNA and the workings of the human brain. And while funding for the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities has become a perennial partisan Ping-Pong ball, other federal agencies such as the National Science Foundation and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration have quietly funded artistic responses to their scientific and technological work. The prominent Portland painter Henk Pander, for instance, has done [a major series of paintings](#) based on his observations at NASA's Jet Propulsion Lab and the building of the Galileo Spacecraft. Artists and environmentalists have been frequent co-collaborators. The Portland-based group [Signal Fire takes artists into the wilderness](#) to learn and work. The Elisabeth Jones Art Center in Northwest Portland is predicated on the role of art and artists in environmental issues: Its current exhibition *For the Seventh Generation*, through November 15, is drawn from a mile-by-mile group portrait of the Pacific shoreline from California to Washington. *Into a Study: Between Venus and Mars*, a collaboration between artist Paul X. Rutz and neuroscientist Amanda Hampton Wray, opens October 27 at Portland's Ford Gallery. In such cases one doesn't speak of a cultural either/or, but of a cultural both.

Waters' work fits into that tradition, neatly and expansively eluding artificial dividing lines. In the living area below her studio hang two portraits from her *Sheroes* series, of Earle and Barlow, and in an intriguing way they seem like landscapes, too: personified mappings of skin and contours and wrinkle lines that run like rivulets or valleys; expressions of individual terrain that are all the more riveting because these aren't full-body portraits, they're closeups from the shoulders up. They capture you with their size and strength, compelling you with their gaze so you can't ignore them. "I love the bigness," Waters says of the paintings in the series, which in addition to Earle, Barlow, Shiva, and Maathi include the peace activist Cindy Sheehan; the journalist/activist Amy Goodman; the medical/nuclear activist Dr. Helen Caldicott, and the Afghani politician and dissident Malalai Joya. "It keeps you there longer. I love working on the face, focusing on the face, so you're staring straight into those eyes."



April Waters, "Low Tide, Proposal Rock," 2018, oil on canvas, 44 by 72 inches. Private collection.

Waters traveled around the country to meet with each of her *Shero*s, and friends who traveled abroad returned with stories to tell her and images to show, which she incorporated into the portraits. Her painting of the marine biologist Earle, for instance, puts her in a setting "against ocean and sky: the whole water cycle of the world." The *Shero*s process was slow and considered, requiring research and thought and experience and time, and seems not unlike what lies ahead for her Antarctic series.

What will she paint? She has ideas, Waters says. But like the shifting ice floes, they are open to rearrangement: "All the artists tell me, 'You go there thinking you're going to do one thing, and then you have the experience, and you might end up doing something entirely different.'" Time, and an environment in flux, will tell.



April Waters, "Oneonta Creek, Columbia River Gorge," 2011, oil on canvas, 80 by 36 inches. Collection of Salem Hospital.