

“Drawing Water” fuses art, science and nature

For many little connection exists between art and science, but recently an effort has been made to bring these two realms together in an exhibit by six artists and six scientists called “Drawing Water.”

“Drawing Water” is a collection of paintings, quilts, poetry and other artwork inspired by the changing ecology of lakes in Wisconsin’s northern highlands. Each work of art in the exhibit offers a short explanation of the science behind it. The collaboration began at the University of Wisconsin-Madison’s Trout Lake Research Station.

The project is an outgrowth of Trout Lake Station’s mission to document and understand the changes in the lakes since Trout Lake Research Station began in 1924, said UW-Madison ecologist and principal investigator of the North Temperate Lakes Long-Term Ecological Research program Emily Stanley.

Terry Daulton, an artist in the project, began her career as a scientist. For her, the fusion of the two fields is not surprising. As she explained, many successful scientists, such as Aldo Leopold and Jane Goodall, have integrated the humanities into their work.

“I think that many artists are inspired by nature and the beauty and intricacy of the natural sciences,” Daulton said. “I started out to be a field biologist, and over time realized that the two fields of endeavor are linked for me.”

Daulton created a series of pastel paintings using poster art from the 1900s as inspiration for the design layout. One piece, ‘A Sunday Afternoon on the Shore,’ uses vivid hues to depict a scene on Crystal Lake.

“[With pastels] I can get the ideas down quickly and capture the colors and feelings on location,” Daulton said.

Wisconsin native John Bates, the sole poet among five visual artists participating in “Drawing Water,” was inspired by a deep respect for the area. The artists involved in the project were asked to contemplate the future of Wisconsin’s lakes and many of the outcomes are troubling, Bates said.

He researched the historical and archeological finds around Trout Lake, one of the seven lakes in the Long-Term Ecological Research group. Bates also read many of the ecological studies conducted on the lake over the past 80 years.

“I don't know anyone who doesn't love this area, yet an uneducated love can destroy [it],” he said.

Despite the challenge of incorporating scientific figures into her design, Daulton said the rewards outweighed any obstacles. The discussions with other artists and scientists spurred by “Drawing Water” have been the most fulfilling part of the process, she said.

“Drawing Water,” a traveling exhibit, is now on display at the headquarters of the National Science Foundation in Virginia. It is part of a larger show called “Ecological Reflections.”

“Drawing Water” will be shown at the Ecological Society of America in Portland, Ore. near the beginning of Aug. From there it will travel in September to Estes Park, Colo., where it will be displayed at a meeting of the Long-Term Ecological Research scientists.