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Installation of *Algae Bloom* at WaterFire Arts Center, 2022. Photo: George Bouret

Subject To Change: A Conversation with Joan Hall

October 26, 2022 by Jan Garden Castro

Joan Hall's layered, monumental sculptures address how the climate crisis affects human bodies and bodies of water. Her processes and forms start with handmade paper and evolve organically. Part of the mystique in Hall's work stems from the fact that she uses dry pigments and paper to create water-like surfaces. Her conceptual thinking is as complex and layered as her hands-on approach. Though her work aligns cancer with invasive marine toxins and plastic pollution, she approaches such dark subject matter through the lens of beauty. Hall's current solo show at Childs Gallery in Boston caps a series of large, environment-centered works exhibited earlier this year at the Concord Center for the Visual Arts in Concord, Massachusetts, the WaterFire Arts Center in Provincetown, Rhode Island, and the IFPDA Print Fair in New York.



N41 29 277 W71 20 255, 2022. Handmade paper (printed, pulp painted), mylar, acrylic, and hand-cut construction, 75 x 140 x 9 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist

Jan Garden Castro: You make a distinction between three-dimensional works and installations.

Joan Hall: Yes. They look the same, except the three-dimensional works are fixed. The installations consist of panels that allow me to change them based on the space. I use an iPad to record the install, so the basic configuration remains the same. The shaping is a personal process about my body and the ocean.

JGC: What is the significance of the red and the green in *Algae Bloom*, an installation that you made for your exhibition earlier this year at the WaterFire Arts Center in Provincetown?

JH: We have red algae and green algae here, and they are also present in China and other parts of the world. I created the piece to symbolize how what goes on in one part of the world affects something somewhere else—East meets West. Algae is dangerous for marine life and for humans—it’s toxic. Like the algae problem in our waters, the piece keeps growing. It began in 2013, and I make more panels each time it’s exhibited.



Algae Bloom, 2022. Handmade paper (printed, pulp painted), mylar, acrylic, and hand-fired glass pins, 20 x 38 x 2 ft. Photo: George Bouret

JGC: How big was this fifth version of the installation, and how did you make it?

JH: It was about 26 by 40 feet. Director Barnaby Evans said I could do whatever I wanted. I decided to wrap the piece around a corner of the wall and install it at an angle. I used 43 handmade paper panels, measuring up to five by nine feet. Each panel is printed and pulp painted in a range of hues and hand-cut with a scalpel or wood burner. I installed by starting from the edges and working until it met itself. The folds become more aggressive as the translucent layers overlap, relax, and transform naturally into a

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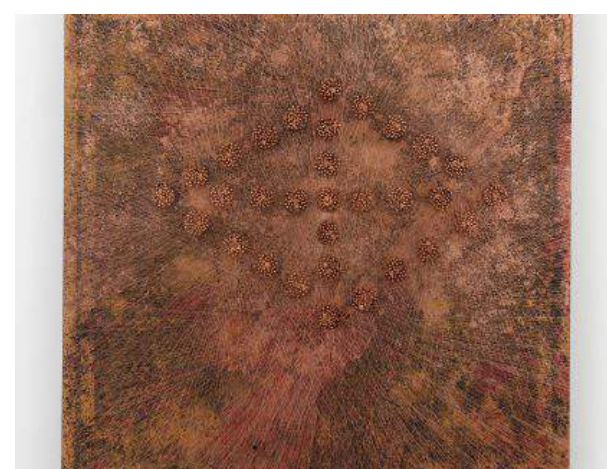
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sculpture. I was in ballet and gymnastics, so being aware of space has always been important to me. I build the works alone and visualize drawing in space as I build. This version took 12 hours to install.

JGC: Your current exhibition, “Where Light Dances (On the Ocean and in My Memories),” features *Invasion of Hull Cove*, another three-dimensional algae work. You showed a monumental version at the Venice Biennale in 2019.

JH: The work originated at the Newport Art Museum in 2018. I had taken photographs of algae at Hull Cove in Jamestown, Rhode Island. The blooms were a foot or two deep, and a biologist identified them for me as invasive algae. Because the waters are warming, the algae that comes on ships from Asia doesn’t die anymore, so it’s invading our waters. I created a removable wallpaper with the photos. In Venice, this piece had 800 hand-painted, laser-cut metal pieces, some of them new, which I then bent and embedded in the wall. From far away, it’s camouflaged; you don’t see the pieces sticking out at you until you get close. It symbolizes beauty disguising danger in nature.



Maria Lai: The time of the incalculable

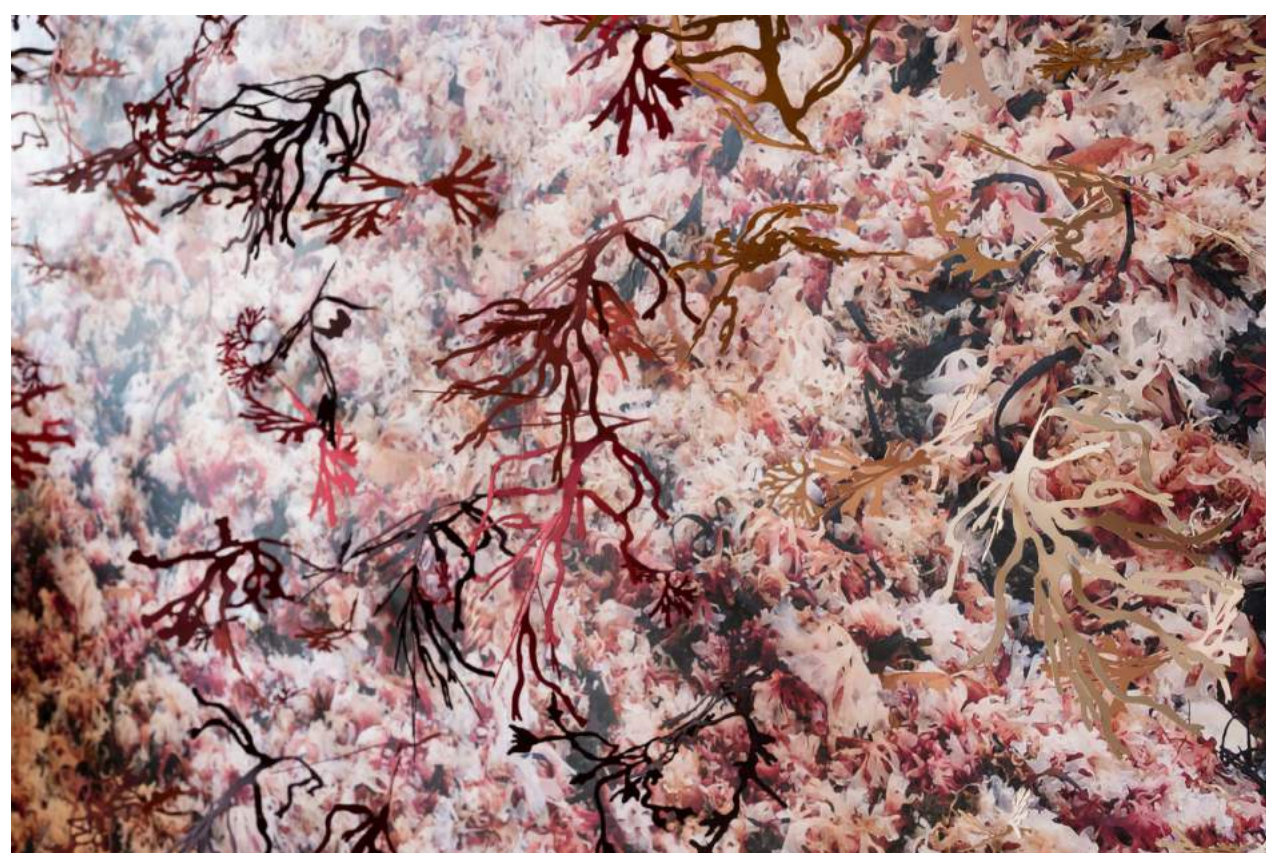
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Invasion of Hull Cove, 2019. Custom wallpaper from artist’s photo and 800 hand-painted, laser-cut steel and acrylic pieces, installation view at Venice Biennale “Personal Structures” satellite exhibit.

Photo: Matteo Losurmat



Invasion of Hull Cove (detail), 2019. Custom wallpaper from artist’s photo and 800 hand-painted, laser-cut steel and acrylic pieces, installation view at Venice Biennale “Personal Structures” satellite exhibit. Photo: Matteo Losurmat

JGC: What is *Love, Loss, Serenity* (2022) about?

JH: It’s about loss due to the climate crisis and my loss of my husband, Mark, who died last year from cancer. The plate is made with embossed bottle caps that I found on the beach. A map from Mark’s PhD thesis on Rome in 1472 is obscured in the plates and cutouts of marine life. Importantly, the piece is circular—as Rome once was and as earth is seen to be.

JGC: Could you explain a bit about the three *Ocean Library* pieces?

JH: The book shapes are cast paper coated in sand from all over the world. There are two cast books in the stacks: Janson's *History of Art*, which I considered a book of misinformation because there were no women artists in my copy, and *A History of Religious Art*, which belonged to my husband and has a beautiful spine. I chose it because combating climate change is like religion: you must have faith. The books are cast out of cotton paper created by processing my husband's old shirts and cut-up ties. It relates to *Going, Going, Gone* (2018) and *Going, Going, Gone II* (2022), which are about the loss of coral. If parrot fish no longer have coral on which to feed, sand will be another beautiful thing that could disappear. (A large percentage of white beach sand consists of the excretions of parrot fish.) We don't think about how diverse sand is around the world and how gorgeous. At the Newport Art Museum show in 2018, *Going, Going, Gone* and *The Greening of Our Beaches* suggested cause and effect. I had read an article in the *New York Times* about how Miami-Dade County beaches were running out of sand. They wanted to buy it from The Bahamas and were refused. They decided to see if people could tell the difference between ground-up glass and sand. Since humor surfaces in my work from time to time, I decided to grind up Perrier bottles to have a green beach. This led to a collaboration with Benny Giguere at Gather Glass in Providence.



Ocean Library Stack 3, 2022. Cast handmade paper, silk ties, detritus, sand from world beaches, rose petals, beach glass, and resin, 11.5 x 15 x 17.5 in. Photo: Courtesy the artist

JGC: I love the detritus and embedded micro-seashells in the sand books.

JH: The sand is from Miami. Each stack of cast books sits on a resin pedestal that is also a cast book. The resin has sea glass and plastic in it.

JGC: Do you sometimes travel to pick up trash for your work?

JH: Yes, one of my favorite spots is Marathon Key, Florida. This year, I saw more microplastic than I've ever seen on the beach, which was disturbing. The plastic garbage becomes one of my mark-making tools. For instance, I found a propeller in Florida and

made a 3D print of it. In an alcove at Childs, the propellers are piled on a platform and painted to look like copper that has been submerged in salt water; they are surrounded by a wallpaper of manatees, which are endangered.



Installation view of “Sea of Heartbreak,” with (foreground) *The Greening of Our Beaches*, 2018, hand-blown and cast glass, sand, beach glass, plastic detritus, and dry pigment, 120 x 120 x 14 in.; and (background) *Algae Bloom* (version 4). Photo: Daniel McManus

JGC: Why do you make reproductions of your finds rather than use the actual objects?

JH: I like that they’re once removed, and my hand is somehow involved in obscuring the objects. During the pandemic, I created marks in the plates for the diptych *Touches Me, Touches You* (2022) using masks, gloves, and plastic detritus that I found on the beach. I also hand-cut net-like forms with masks. *Times are a Changin’*, which I showed at the IFPDA Print Fair, was started in 2019 and completed in 2021.

Any work in my studio is subject to change. I like to add and subtract. I start with an idea, then go to work. I do not make sketches. I move back and forth with printing, cutting, and assembling. I am not a linear thinker—I am more of a blender. My studio has cutouts that range from a few inches to a few feet, and when I start to build the works, the piece dictates what I need to add as sections overlap and keep growing away from the wall. I am an avid sailor, so control and surrender are important both in my sport and in my studio.

JGC: You were born in Ohio. Was there a seminal moment when you discovered your passion for seas and oceans?

JH: I learned how to sail when I was 16 with a friend of mine whose father was British. Neither of my parents had anything to do with water. I am still racing sailboats; the last work for the Childs show is about the microburst in Narragansett Bay in 2020, when my boat sank as the wind went from 7 mph to 70 knots. It was brought back up, rebuilt, and she is racing today.



Going, Going, Gone II, 2022. Handmade pulp-painted paper, steel wire, and extruded plastic, 49 x 54 x 60 in. Photo: George Bouret

JGC: How does your love of sailing help shape your work?

JH: I raced from Newport to Bermuda in the '90s. When you're in the middle of the ocean for days, you feel small when out of sight of land. I make large work to express that experience of immersion.

JGC: One of your earlier pieces, *Would You Swim the Ocean for to Ease My Pain* (2008–16), addresses your bout with cancer.

JH: I stole the title from a Lyle Lovett song. I felt like a fish in a net with no control, so I printed images of lobster pots with imagery from my PET scans located where the bait would be. Certain sponges are thought to hold possible cures for cancer, and the blue blood of horseshoe crabs can be harvested safely to detect dangerous endotoxins. I was thinking about our bodies in relation to the ocean and the fact that we're destroying it when we could be curing illnesses. That led to my concern about plastic pollution and ocean warming, the major focus of my work since then.



Would You Swim the Ocean for to Ease My Pain, 2008–16. Handmade paper (printed, pulp painted), mylar, and acrylic, 105 x 151 in. Photo: Richard Sprengeler

JGC: Could you discuss the origins and development of your complex practices?

JH: I was drawn to printmaking and ceramics as an undergraduate because of the indirectness of making a mark. In graduate school, I learned how to make paper and never looked back. Both collagraphy and papermaking have endless ways in which to work. Any process that involves chemistry interests me. Glass and steel are other materials that I like to combine with paper.

JGC: How do you make paper, and what are some of the pulps you use?

JH: I use a range of processes and fibers. Some paper is made in a Hollander beater, and some I beat by hand. All of my tables are on wheels, so I can change the studio around for different ways of working. I use rubber molds to cast the books. I make a cotton pulp, and it's hand-sponged to remove the water. You press as hard as you can to get the paper to become dense. I have frames to make kozo and gampi papers up to eight by 10 feet for the panels that I print and attach to Mylar with acrylic. For painting pulp, I use abaca, flax, and hemp, and for the blow-outs, I use an over-beaten abaca and sometimes kozo or gampi.



Touches Me, Touches You, 2022. Handmade paper (printed, pulp painted), mylar, and acrylic, diptych, 56 x 45 x 12 in. and 49 x 45 x 10 in. Photo: George Bouret

JGC: Your work is much lighter in weight than most large-scale sculpture. Do you think about carbon footprint issues when making or shipping work?

JH: I used to make thick large-scale paper sculpture that had to be shipped flat in crates. One day I decided I was tired of building crates, so I started working in parts and pieces. In 2005, I began to make work on very thin handmade paper backed with Mylar that I can roll up like a carpet and shove into a tube and carry around by myself. Most work fits into the back of my SUV. *Algae Bloom* fits into three five-foot-by-12-inch tubes. I recycle any paper that I make that I can, and the drain in my paper studio sends the water to my garden.

JGC: How did you start using dry pigments?

JH: I started experimenting with dry pigments in my paper in grad school. They were pushed way back on a shelf in the printmaking department and used to make inks (no one did that anymore). I thought, "Why not pigment my paper with them since they're free?" They created intense colors that I couldn't get any other way.



Joan Hall pulp painting in the studio, 2022. Photo: George Bouret

JGC: You taught for about 40 years, and in 2000, you became the first female endowed art professor at the Washington University College and Graduate School of Art and Architecture. Did teaching complement or take away from your studio work? What did you enjoy most?

JH: When you're teaching, you're dedicated to your students. I would learn from them, and they would learn from me. To have enough studio time, I had to say no, socially and professionally. Sometimes it was hard. I had two jobs; now I only have one. I most enjoyed the give and take with students. I'd learn techniques from other papermakers and then twist them. That's what I try to pass on to students—learn the process, then follow your own rules. Now, I work with recent grad students from RISD that I hire as studio assistants.

JGC: Has living by the ocean for eight years influenced your practice?

JH: I see the sea daily, so I notice more things that become part of my thinking. I love the quiet of working in Jamestown. I'm going to do something with an underwater drone at some point.

Joan Hall's solo show at Childs Gallery in Boston is [on view](#) through November 12, 2022.

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