

Judith Gebhard Smith



P O R T F O L I O

portfolio

Intrigued by the pairing of art and science, American artist Judith Gebhard Smith creates stirring, atmospheric and haunting pastel drawings and encaustic paintings of marine life and underwater scenes inspired by her experiences diving exotic locations around the world where she has met diverse and curious creatures of the underwater realm. *X-Ray Mag* interviewed the artist to learn more about her artwork, creative process and perspectives on the planet's fragile oceans and reefs.

Text edited by Gunild Symes
All artwork by Judith Gebhard Smith

X-RAY MAG: Tell us about yourself, your background and how you became an artist.

JS: I literally began drawing on most available surfaces as soon as I was able to hold a crayon. My parents encouraged my creative pursuits with an abundant supply of art materials, but never considered art as a suitable career choice. Since my marks in high school science classes were above average, parents and teachers suggested that I might like



Sulawesi Sirens: Eagle Rays, pastel, 14 x 18 inches, by Judith Gebhard Smith



Sulawesi Sirens: Collector Crab Wearing Urchin, pastel, 20 x 23 inches (above), and *Close Encounter*, encaustic, 8 x 14 inches (previous page), by Judith Gebhard Smith

to pursue a career in medicine. After two years in a pre-medical course in university, I chanced to meet an individual working for a scientific book publisher who asked me if I had considered becoming a medical illustrator. After researching this, I changed my field of study from pre-medicine to art history, graduating with a major in art history and a minor in the biological sciences. I spent three years in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Toronto, obtaining my post-graduate degree in medical illustration. After my eight years working as the medical artist for McGill University in Montreal, Canada, my husband

and I moved to Washington State where I returned to the joys of producing fine art.

X-RAY MAG: Why marine life and underwater themes? How did you come to these themes and how did you develop your style of drawing and painting?

JS: We were sailors when we moved to the West Coast, and my husband started diving in order to be able to clean the bottom of our racing boat. The water in Puget Sound is pretty dark and very cold





Sulawesi Sirens: Porcupine, pastel 14 x 18 inches (above), and *Sulawesi Sirens: Peacock Mantis with Eggs*, pastel, 18 x 18 inches (left), by Judith Gebhard Smith

most of the year. So, I was not really tempted to swim in it. But on a trip to South America, we stopped in the Dutch Antilles for my husband to experience tropical diving. I snorkeled above the divers. When they turned back toward the boat, I followed, encountering a

wind-driven current and a foot of chop. As the divers swam leisurely back to the boat and climbed out, I was struggling to make it back to them without swallowing half the sea through my rental snorkel. It was then that I knew that I wanted the freedom of my own air supply, and

to the beach, donning an ill-fitting rental 8mm suit with a hood that would only allow me to turn my head to the left. The water was a bone-chilling 42°F, but I did not feel it once I caught sight of a baby octopus feeling its way along a wall, looking for a crack where it could

escape my gaze. I was “hooked” forever. It seemed a natural segue to paint this underwater world and the emotions that I have experienced there.

X-RAY MAG: *Who or what has inspired you and your artwork and why?*

JS: In the early days of my fine-art pursuit, I was heavily involved in printmaking, and fascinated by the work of Leonard Baskin. I also admired the drama of Caravaggio’s paintings. While there is

a dark side to my imagery, peopled by crows and ravens and birds of prey, there is also a playful influence in these works, demonstrating a mixed reaction to the world around me. However, I developed health issues from the use of solvents, so I moved on to try my hand at neon sculpture and even some metal welding, which was still pretty much centered on bird imagery.

In the early ‘90s, I found and fell in love with pastels. My painting style was influenced by the Nabis, Paul Gauguin, the



I Sea You Mantis, encaustic, 15 x 13 inches, by Judith Gebhard Smith



Hammerhead, encaustic on wood, 8 x 10 inches, by Judith Gebhard Smith

Fauve movement painters, Franz Marc and several of the German expressionists. Seeking to escape the precision of my early medical artwork, I pushed myself further toward abstract expressionism—Franz Kline being a favorite.

X-RAY MAG: *What is your artistic method or creative process?*

JS: A pastel painting usually begins with using a sanded paper substrate that has the ability to capture the pigment crystals in its “tooth” or rough surface. I start with a rough drawing using vine charcoal and then work toward a finished painting with pastel sticks. Sometimes I create my own surface using pumice and gesso spread onto a stiff mat board. I often use water to mix into the dry pastel

to give a fluid appearance to the image. Recently, I have been using pastel with some water and/or acrylic inks on canvas, subsequently sealing the work with acrylic varnish.

“Encaustic” is best explained with the following quote from *The Art of Encaustic Painting*:

“Encaustic from the ancient Greek *enkaustikos*, means “to heat” or “to burn.” Heat is used at every stage of encaustic painting. The medium consists of beeswax melted with a small amount of resin to impart hardness; it becomes paint when pigment is added to the molten wax. Painting requires the artist to work quickly, for the wax begins to harden the moment it leaves its heat source. What makes encaustic unique—



Kelp Dream, encaustic, 12 x 10 inches, by Judith Gebhard Smith



Crabby Night, encaustic on wood, 16 x 20 inches, by Judith Gebhard Smith

indeed, what makes encaustic *encaustic*—is the application of heat between layers of brushstrokes. Heat binds each layer to the one set down before it, so while the image may consist of discrete compositional elements, structurally the entire surface is one carefully crafted mass, a whole ball of wax, if you will."

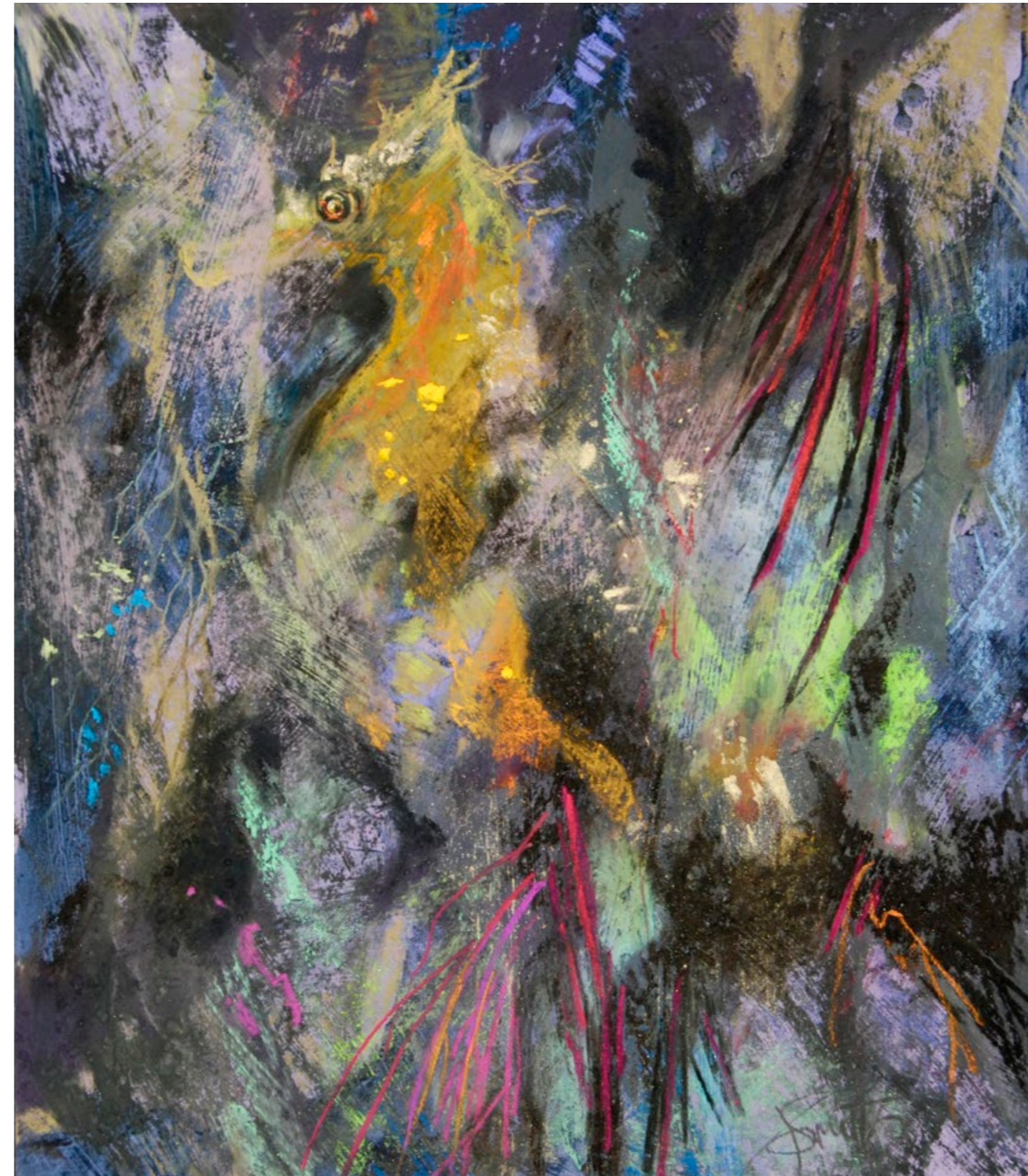
— Joanne Mattera,
The Art of Encaustic Painting

I occasionally use some of my husband's underwater photographs for reference, but generally, I rely on quick underwater sketches on my slate with a 6B graphite pencil, and my memory. My early medical art experience, doing rapid

sketching in the operating room, has proven useful in this effort.

X-RAY MAG: What is your relationship to the underwater world and coral reefs? How have your experiences underwater influenced your art? In your relationship with reefs and the sea, where have you had your favorite experiences?

JS: I began diving when I was 40 years old and have been fortunate to have done more than 800 open water dives. It is difficult for me to describe the ecstatic feeling of freedom that I experience when I roll backwards into the water; for me, diving feels like flying without wings and without fear of falling. It is the privilege of being in another world where everything is new and dif-



LEFT TO RIGHT: *Night Dive Sea Apple*, pastel, 11 x 13 inches; *Night Dive Hippocampus*, pastel, 13 x 11 inches; *Jellies I*, encaustic on clay board, 20 x 16 inches, by Judith Gebhard Smith

ferent and magical.

My diving experiences include the Caribbean, the Red Sea, Mozambique, the Coral Triangle and many Pacific Island groups. I have stroked moray eels (this was early on, before I knew not to touch); had a chunk taken out of my fin by a titan triggerfish; swum with whale sharks beneath a native fishing bagan in Cenderawasih Bay, West Papua; descended into the Tulagi Tunnels,

Solomon Islands, with hundreds of lobsters covering the walls; and first encountered a flamboyant cuttlefish in Lembeh Strait.

My dive logs turned into underwater journals illustrated with watercolor paintings of whatever marine creatures I had the good fortune to see that day. A few years ago, a friend was perusing these logs and asked why I had never used them as resources for larger paintings. I did not have an answer, so I began that afternoon.

X-RAY MAG: What are your thoughts on ocean conservation and coral reef management and how does your artwork relate to these issues?

JS: I believe that if people could see what is underwater through diving themselves or more practically, through art and photography, that they would do everything in their power to preserve what is there. It has disturbed me greatly

to have witnessed, in some parts of the world, how humans have been heedless of the damage they are doing to the reefs, and the oceans in general.

X-RAY MAG: What is the message or experience you want viewers of your artwork to have or understand?

JS: Cherish what we have been given here and work to keep it safe.

X-RAY MAG: What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist in the world today? Any thoughts or advice for aspiring artists in ocean arts?

JS: Being an artist has never been an easy way to make a living, although there are many aspects of the art world that will sustain one financially. I think artists are extremely lucky to have the ability to see things slightly differently



Shell We Dance, encaustic, 11 x 14 inches (above); *Under Pressure*, encaustic on chalkboard, 16 x 20 inches (top right); and *Turban Shell*, encaustic, 7 x 5 inches (right), by Judith Gebhard Smith



than others, and it is our responsibility to present that special sight to other people, to engage them in a different perspective. We have the power to communicate the beauty and necessity of a healthy ocean to the rest of the world, and it is a privilege to be able to do so.

X-RAY MAG: How do people—adults and children—respond to your works?

JS: In a gallery setting, people generally respond to my work with questions about diving. One little boy asked, “Do you really see stuff that looks like that?” indicating a painting of a mantis shrimp with eggs. I answered, “Yes, and so very much more.”

X-RAY MAG: What are your upcoming projects, art courses or events?

JS: I have a show (not marine life) coming up in September at the Childhood's End Gallery [in Olympia, Washington State], and I am considering ideas for a children's book about sea creatures. ■

For more information and to purchase artwork, please visit the artist's website at: nightwingstudio.com.