

## WATER DAZZLES IN SEA SCENES OF AREA ARTIST

Review by Mark St. John Erickson, The Daily Press, Newport News, VA.



In a region choked by seaside art of little talent or ambition, it's easy to find examples of leaden waves crashing across wasted canvas. Bermudian artist Dan Dempster - who spends much of each year living in Newport News - provides the rare exception to this unfortunate nautical dilemma.

Instead of seeking distraction in such commonplace scenes as lumpy dunes, listless seagulls and rotting wooden boats, he focuses his eyes and his imagination intently on the water. The drawings, paintings and sculptures that result may make you look at this neglected miracle of light, color and movement as if you had never seen it before.

Just check out "Waterline," one of nearly two dozen fresh, visually provocative pieces on view in Waterworks - a solo exhibit that runs through July 6 at the Peninsula Fine Arts Center. The small, 5-by-7-inch drawing - rendered in colored pencil - reproduces a shallow rivulet of tidal water with a startling degree of realism. It's almost as if you were standing barefoot near the shoreline, watching the water and light undulate in patterns across the sand under your toes.

But for all its breathtaking immediacy, the impact of "Waterline" - and many of its companion works - doesn't stop with the formidable power of the here and now. Look at it long enough and it's like scanning a satellite photograph of the earth - something real and absolutely concrete yet inextricably mixed with the infinite.

Dempster is the artist as seer, in fact, and he aims to pack much more than water, sand and sun into each of his works of art. His trick is finding mystery in the commonplace - then stepping out of the way as his audience looks on in wonder. In his drawings, he accomplished that aim through the persuasive argument of spectacularly keen-eyed detail.

Whenever he follows a line of breaking water with his pencil, he records subtle differences in the shapes of the tiny waves, the effect of their speed and changes in their breadth, cycle and duration. Then he factors in the refraction of light and the position of the sun.

In other words, Dempster mimics this busy interaction of physical processes through a variety of ingenious recreations.

His series of 20 "Ithuriel" paintings - several of which are on exhibit here - emulates the movement of shallow water and light through the use of industrial-grade graphite tinted with chalk.

The chaotic patterns that flutter across each canvas recall the arrangement of ice crystals on a window-pane or the dappling of light across wave-tossed water. Yet within all that apparent randomness lies the presence of some irresistible governing order.

The same kind of paradox emerges from a series of blue-steel plates that Dempster exposes to the corrosive effects of sunlight and water. Every drip, evaporative trail and film residue left behind may seem to be the product of something aimless and haphazard. But each yellow, orange and red image that appears can be traced back to some unbreakable combination of natural laws. Give these pieces a moment more and - like Dempster's drawings - they seem to become bigger and far more important than they first appear.

Imagine yourself looking into outer space for a second - then compare those gaseous galaxies and faraway stars to the nebulous patterns of red, purple and blue that twist and turn across the surfaces of Dempster's plates.

Don't miss the mysterious "Urbanos," a mahogany, steel and concrete sculpture that seems to rise up in the air at the far end of the gallery. Part symbol, part conceptual document and part abstract form, it distills all the things that Dempster's trying to do into a single, visually arresting icon.

For 18 months, this plywood square bobbed just beneath the surface of the water, recording - through wear and tear - the impact of each ray of light and cycle of tidal current. So did the steel

chain that bound it to an anchoring concrete block - and the pattern of copper nails driven into its surface.

Now, hovering in space under a dramatic beam of light, what might have been dismissed as mere driftwood takes on an uncanny kind of character. Everything about it seems so accidental. Yet it also pulses with the touch of the divine.



Urbanos at Fulcrum Gallery Soho, 144 Mercer Street, New York.