

# Moby Dick: Heart of the Sea

April 17 - July 5, 2009

*Sponsored by Art in the Garden*



George Kluba, *Daggoo*, Courtesy of Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago

# RAM

## Exhibition TeacherGuide

# Moby Dick: Heart of the Sea

## Teacher Packet

### Curator's Statement

Much like Melville's character Captain Ahab, the exhibiting artists have risen to the challenge of capturing the elusive white whale, 150 years after the epic novel *Moby-Dick* was written. In *Heart of the Sea* George Klauba, Kathleen Piercefield and Robert McCauley immerse themselves in the tumultuous voyage and adventure of the whaleship *Pequod*.

Chicago artist George Klauba is a consummate storyteller. Characters are depicted as intricately tattooed mythical birds. Scenes from the book come to life with Klauba's evocative narratives. The viewer is thrown into the turbulent sea much like Melville's character Pip the Castaway. Key moments of the drama are meticulously painted in a palette of blue hues, the spectrum of which is found only in tropical seas.

Kentucky printmaker Kathleen Piercefield keys in on the psychological aspects of the novel's characters. Noble characters from various cultures, ancient fish and tattooed natives are pictured in dreamlike states. Her poetic images evoke an aura of mystery that pervades the novel. In fact, the physical layering inherent in printmaking techniques seems to parallel the complex masterful layering of Melville's storyline.

Not surprisingly, former Rockford resident Robert McCauley's approach to the subject is more conceptual. McCauley, like Melville, explores the elusiveness of the ocean and the whiteness of the whale. Nature, distilled but ever present, is at the core of his oeuvre.

It has truly been a pleasure to work with the three exhibiting artists. A special thank you to the collectors who have graciously loaned artwork, and to Victor Armendariz and Ann Nathan from Ann Nathan Gallery for their tireless assistance. Lastly, I have been fortunate to have the insight, expertise and support of scholar Robert Wallace. His enthusiasm and knowledge of the subject matter is an inspiration.

Patty Rhea  
Curator, Rockford Art Museum

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## Guest Lecturer's Statement

Here in the heartland of America visual artists continue to pursue Moby Dick and the men who chased him. The three artists in this show respond quite differently to Herman Melville's 1851 novel.

George Klauba, a native of Chicago, has created 38 paintings inspired by *Moby-Dick* since 2003. He depicts individual crew members, the excitement of the chase, and the tension of men at war with nature and with themselves. Klauba's bird-men with tattooed bodies and exposed souls make us wonder where we are going, whether we have lost our way, where salvation might be found.

Kathleen Piercefield is a native of Chicago who has raised a family in northern Kentucky. She has created 28 prints inspired by *Moby-Dick* since 2004. Piercefield is less concerned with the physical drama of the chase than with the spiritual essence of the natural world in which humans have a place. From Captain Ahab to the cabin boy Pip, from Queequeg to Moby Dick, her multi-media prints explore the inner story.

Robert McCauley taught at Rockford College for nearly 40 years before returning to his native Puget Sound. Between 1986 and 1993 McCauley created more than 50 paintings and sculptures inspired by *Moby-Dick*. He has created new work specifically for this exhibition. Some of his works relate to the novel directly, others in more abstract or tactile ways. They ask: What are we made of? How do we relate to the world around us?

Each artist is deeply drawn to the alluring surface and treacherous depths of Melville's novel. By wrestling with the book, each symbolizes some of the fears, opportunities, and choices that we face as individuals on the globe today.

Robert K. Wallace  
Regents Professor of English, Northern Kentucky University

## Artist Statements

### George Klauba Artist Statement

An Epilogue

In 2003, I began what I thought would be a "simple series" of avian-styled portraits of characters from my favorite book *Moby-Dick*, beginning with Ahab as an American eagle. Little did I realize that it was the beginning of a six year voyage that would carry me on a turbulent hunt for the white whale and into my own past.

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The series combined the threads of my life: a child who read first Melville's novel as a Classic Comic, a boy in awe of a whale's skeleton in Chicago's Field Museum of Natural History, a young sailor in the Navy, being tattooed and being a tattooist, a continuing love affair with starry nights and stormy seas, respect for whales, and fear of what we as humans are doing to the natural world.

I have gone around Cape Horn and into the Pacific and, finally, into Japanese waters – with tarry sailors at my back as I painted. The drama is done. I am in home port.

## **Robert McCauley** **Artist Statement**

*A BRIEF HISTORY OF AMERICAN POST-WAR PAINTING: CHAPTER 42, "THE WHITENESS OF THE WHALE"*

### Notes

Pollock named his dog "Ahab." For a post-World War II artist, it is a gesture revealing connection, ambition, and homage. Not unlike wearing a sports icon T-shirt today.

The connection was made when Pollock, like so many first- and second-generation Abstract Expressionists, read *Moby-Dick*. Often attempted, the task of directly fusing visual art and literature (other than images illustrating text) is elusive at best. For the artists of mid-twentieth century America, Melville's novel provided fertile ground. Having emerged from the war as the most powerful nation on the planet, artists searched in those heady times for a true American identity. Ishmael's (sic) novel, arguably the "great American novel," became a catalyst for ambitious artists seeking the "first (and great) American painting." (All American painting prior to this pirated European form and content. For that reason, from Peale to Stuart to Homer to Hopper were dismissed). As if chasing his own white whale, Pollock pondered if he would be the first (and greatest) American painter. Melville writes of the American experience (whaling) with an all male cast (macho). We "see" the story through Ishmael's narration. Ishmael is the isolated, lone individual mimicking the isolationism of the North American continent. Robert Motherwell testified that in *Moby-Dick*, Melville had inspired by devoting an entire chapter to the color *white*. For these artists, the focus on a single color that has abstract and ambiguous meaning paralleled their daily ritual of reduction, seeking, as Rothko said, "a simple image of a complex thought."

For me, the significance is clear: that the hybrid minimal reductionist painting of post-war and later was not the product of pure intellectualism but rather the distillation of the American Landscape (read: "nature").

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## **Kathleen Piercefield** **Artist Statement**

I have always been a reader, and my earliest efforts in art-making revolved around creating my own illustrations for favorite stories – or my own stories. While the methods and motives have changed, I still find books and writing to be vital partners in much of my work as a visual artist. I'm fascinated with the way literature evokes images in the mind of the reader, and conversely how visual imagery can not only illustrate, but illumine the written word with deeper levels of meaning.

In 2004, while finishing coursework for a BFA in printmaking, I read Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* for perhaps the fourth time, and began a series of drawings, paintings and prints in response. Five years later I am still discovering fresh resonance in *Moby-Dick*, and the series continues to grow. Melville's novel, with its collage-like complexity, seems to mesh well with the physical processes of printmaking, in which imagery is built up through overlapping layers of line and tone and texture. Unexpected things happen; the marks and multiple layers change each other as they are combined, making printing itself a metaphor of the way time and relationships – and great books – mark and alter our lives.

Captain Ahab, speaking to Starbuck, exhorted his first mate to look beyond the surface impression of things and see "the little lower layer." It is that lower layer, very present in Melville's writing, that I try to touch in this body of work – seeking the transition from the particular to the universal; from the singular character to human nature itself; from the tale of the *Pequod's* crew to the story of all humanity as one crew, inextricably bound up with each other and with the sea of living things on which we sail.

## **Moby-Dick Character Descriptions**

**Ishmael** - The narrator, and a junior member of the crew of the *Pequod*.

**Ahab** - The egomaniacal captain of the *Pequod*. Ahab lost his leg to Moby Dick. He is single-minded in his pursuit of the whale, using a mixture of charisma and terror to persuade his crew to join him.

**Moby Dick** - The great white sperm whale. Moby Dick, also referred to as the White Whale, is an infamous and dangerous threat to seamen, considered by Ahab the incarnation of evil and a fated nemesis.

**Starbuck** - The first mate of the *Pequod*.

**Queequeg** - Starbuck's skilled harpooner and Ishmael's best friend.

**Stubb** - The second mate of the *Pequod*.

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**Tashtego** - Stubb's harpooner.

**Flask** - A native of Tisbury on Martha's Vineyard and the third mate of the *Pequod*.

**Daggoo** - Flask's harpooner. Daggoo is a physically enormous, imperious-looking African.

**Pip** - A young black cabin boy on the *Pequod* who goes insane after being left to drift alone in the sea for some time.

**Fedallah** - A strange, old Parsee (Persian fire-worshipper) whom Ahab has brought on board unbeknownst to most of the crew. He is an almost supernaturally skilled hunter and also serves as a prophet to Ahab.

**Father Mapple** - A former whaler and now the preacher in the New Bedford Whaler's Chapel. Father Mapple delivers a sermon on Jonah and the whale in which he uses the Bible to address the whalers' lives.

## Exhibition Related Vocabulary

*Found object*: An object, not originally intended as a work of art, that is obtained, selected, and exhibited by an artist, often without being altered in any way.

*Narrative art*: Art which represents elements of a story.

*Printmaking*: A print is a shape or mark made from a block or plate or other object that is covered with wet color (usually ink) and then pressed onto a flat surface, such as paper or textile. Most prints can be produced over and over again by re-inking the printing block or plate. Printmaking can be done in many ways, including using an engraved block or stone, transfer paper, or a film negative. The making of fine prints is generally included in the graphic arts, while the work of artists whose designs are made to satisfy the needs of more commercial clients are included in graphic design.

*Scrimshaw*: The art of carving or incising intricate designs on whalebone or whale ivory.

## Classroom Activities

### *Moby-Dick Stable*

In this lesson, students will investigate mobiles and stables, and will create their own stable based on characters from *Moby-Dick*.

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George Kluba  
*Moby Dick, The Hunt in Japanese Waters*  
2008  
acrylic on panel  
Courtesy of Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago

## Discussion Questions

- Describe what is happening on the surface of the water. In the boat, do the sailors look brave or terrified? What clues led you to that answer?
- Look closely at the other sea creatures pictured here. What objects are they holding? Who are they protecting?

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## Activity

- Have students investigate the difference between Alexander Calder's mobiles and stabiles (Mobiles are constructions made of objects that are balanced and arranged on wire arms and suspended so as to move freely; a stabile is an abstract sculpture that has movable parts similar to a mobile, but that is attached to a solid, unmovable base rather than suspended).
- Using 9" x 12" white sulphur paper that has been folded in half, have students draw their own interpretations of Moby Dick, the *Pequod*, and a character of their choice. Once their sketches are completed, have students cut out their shapes along their outlines.
- Have students decorate the front and back of their whale, ship, and character. Once they are finished decorating, have students line up their pieces so that they are back to back.
- Using glue, attach a chenille stem between each back-to-back character. Clip them together with a paper clip until dry.
- Using Crayola Model Magic to create a stabile base for the whale, ship, and character. Mix colors. Form waves, coral, shells, and other authentic sea plants to add to your base. Stick the chenille stems with the characters into the Model Magic.
- Your students' stabiles are now ready to display.

## Materials

- 9" x 12" white sulphur paper
- Markers
- Crayons
- Colored pencils
- Crayola Model Magic
- Chenille stems
- Glue
- Paper clips

## ISBE Standards

2AB, 4AB, 12B, 25AB, 26AB

## Under the Sea Watercolor Resist

The theme of surface and depth is explored throughout the novel *Moby-Dick*. The sea itself is a perfect example of how we can only see what is revealed on the surface, and what is below remains a mystery. In this lesson students will decide elements they might find above and below the ocean and then create a watercolor resist.

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George Kluba  
*The Symphony*  
2007  
acrylic on panel  
Courtesy of Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago

## Discussion Questions

- The creatures swimming in the ocean are all animals of prey. How are they similar or different to the animals in the sky?
- What elements create two distinct areas of the painting (horizon line, color contrast, background vs. foreground, etc)?
- What symbol might the eye represent?

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## *Activity*

- Have students brainstorm things that they might find on the ocean (an island, ships, surfers, the sun, etc). Then have them brainstorm what they might see beneath the surface (fish, dolphins, whales, plants, sunken ship, scuba divers, etc).
- On watercolor paper, have students draw their own interpretation of an ocean scene, above and below the water, using the ideas generated in class.
- Have students outline and color their underwater animals and plants using crayons or oil pastels. Students may look at pictures of ocean life for inspiration about color and pattern for their underwater life. Students should also color their above water scenes.
- Have students paint the water using a wash of blue color. To get different hues of water, students may mix blue with green or purple watercolor paint. While paint is still wet, sprinkle paper lightly with table salt. Allow to dry overnight.

## *Materials*

- Watercolor paper
- Watercolor paints
- Crayons or oil pastels
- Table salt
- Pencils
- Underwater images

## *ISBE Standards*

2AB, 4AB, 12B, 25AB, 26AB