

SUZANNE HOWES STEVENS



OIL ON MAP PAINTINGS

Suzanne Howes Stevens continues to build her national reputation as a painter. A widely-travelled and extremely literate artist, Howes Stevens draws upon her extensive experience to create highly intelligent works of remarkable sensitivity. She quite literally grounds her work in the real world via her trademark of painting over maps mounted on canvas or panel. The geography of the underlying map relates to the subject of her painting for which it forms the support. The artist works in a delicate, romantic style, her landscapes literally running over their borders. Her skillful and sensitive renderings thus become feasts for the mind as well the eye.

Direct descendent of a Provincetown whaling captain, painter Suzanne Howes-Stevens' sense of place runs deep. You could say her fixation with water and its healing qualities is as elemental as the oceans her ancestors once hunted.

Howes-Stevens' most recent work is part of a show, "Undercurrents," opening Friday, July 31 at Provincetown's Rice Polak Gallery. The show also features works by Blair Bradshaw, Larry Calkins and Adam Graham.

Treasured maps of the seacoast, layered onto panel board and often combined with calligraphy, have long been integral to this artist's meditative process. The result, instantly recognizable as a Howes-Stevens', combines the mysticism and magic realism of a Persian miniature with the precision of an Andrew Wyeth. In a painting from her "Portal Series," a radiant sky creates a deep, reflecting shimmer within a body of water reminiscent of Provincetown's Black Water Pond and its trail of lily pads. Brown elm leaves, traces of the natural world that Howes-Stevens paints trompe l'oeil style, enter from the upper edge of the painting, signifying the arrival of autumn.

Like her ancestors, Howes-Stevens has long been on a hunt — more like a quest — for New England's hidden marshes and estuaries. Their precarious situation is what she captures in "Marshscapes." "I like to think of these paintings as gentle reminders of the unseen fragility of wetlands, life-giving places that today are the most threatened," she says, speaking from her studio in eastern Connecticut.

For Howes-Stevens, awareness of life's fragility has taken on a personal urgency; marshes and the oceans beyond are now where the artist turns for her own healing.

Howes-Stevens' newest work addresses a more personal fragility: she is receiving treatment for stage four lung cancer, "treatable," she says, "but not curable." One new painting depicts a woman on her back at the edge of the ocean, cradling a giant horseshoe crab. In what can only be the most appropriate of ironies, Howes-Stevens still looks to the waters for fragile sources of life. But a new narrative element is added — the painter's avatar herself seeks to be restored.

"I've always had a great connection to horseshoe crabs, so vulnerable and yet with such hard backsides. I found out by accident that the blood of these crabs is used in most infusions [for cancer treatment], so when I get treated, I'm getting that wonderful help" from one of the planet's most ancient, mysterious creatures. Howes-Stevens is also creating paintings of her grandchildren, playing with and cradling sea creatures.

The marsh-scapes continue, now with the artist's Haiku poems as calligraphy. A series of paintings titled "Echo Memories" contain poetic phrases intended, in the artist's words, to graphically replace or neutralize foreboding language common to patient reports. "I've taken both sets of words," she says, "strung them together and upside down, the medical terms overlaid by haiku poems and dissolving" into the water.

The result is both poignant and hopeful: the painter's careful, emotional brushwork lets us witness the waters as an active force for healing, as toxic chemicals (medical words) disperse and float away, replaced by lines like "Soft undercurrents / Returning like old memories / Beneath the grasses."

Marla Rice, owner-director of the Rice Polak Gallery, where Howes-Stevens has showed since the mid-1990s, believes this series of marsh-scapes is the artist's strongest. "Suzanne's work has always been unique and has taken collectors on a journey and voyage of sorts. Now with Suzanne's personal journey, the pieces take on an even deeper meaning," Rice says.

Howes-Stevens "Echo Memory #2" is both reflection, with branches and moss mirrored in water, and reflective, revealing a painter's meditation on being and becoming. "Words scatter like falling leaves" is inscribed over floating greenery. Branches, delicate as lace yet insistent, hover top to bottom, their vein-like tendrils disappearing into misty blues, echoing the sky and a passing cloud. Small bronze leaves, some lip-shaped, scatter like kisses. The mottled, ancient map is gently torn on the top, breaking the fourth wall. Here Howes-Stevens paints her own journey, responsive to each shift in the luminous atmosphere, a messenger whose signature is in the work.

- <http://artatuconnhealthcenter.blogspot.com/>
- <http://ricepolakgallery.com/artist/suzanne-howes-stevens/>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZegrmGZEI9U>
- <http://provincetown.wickedlocal.com/article/20150731/ENTERTAINMENTLIFE/150739873>