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Civil Geeks: When Science And Art Intersect

"We can reach a whole new audience," says a representative of one of the research projects hosting artists in residence.

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Image courtesy of Rebecca Rutstein and Bridgette Mayer Gallery



When I look at art I dream. I dream about the setting the artist was in, the thoughts that inspired the artwork and the feelings and message behind the piece.

Art evokes a different reaction depending on who you ask. But that is the beauty of art, it gets you to dream and ponder.

Science, on the other hand, can be viewed as objective and calculated, although I would argue that science is our human attempt to understand the art of nature.

So what happens at the intersection of art and science?

Several science organizations conduct artist-in-residence programs. For instance, [CERN](#), the European Organization for Nuclear Research, invite artists, to reside at the super collider in Switzerland for three months and create works of art inspired by the physics of smashing high energy particles together.



[SETI — Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence](#) — grants artists access to scientists from NASA Ames Research, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Google and the National Science Foundation. I can image the number of exoplanets being discovered by [Kepler](#). [A Search for Habitable Planets](#) as fertile ground for artists' creations.

Here in Hawaii, we are fortunate to be a frequent port for the international Schmidt Ocean Institute research vessel Falkor. Since 2015 the institute has maintained an active [Artist at Sea program](#) enabling artists to spend extended periods of time on the Falkor as it surveys and explores the Pacific Ocean.

I caught up with two of those artists who spent time on the Falkor; fiber artist and illustrator [Michelle Schwengel-Regala](#) and painter, sculptor and mixed-media artist [Rebecca Rutstein](#).

Rebecca Rutstein was also captivated by the opportunity to explore the ocean on a voyage from Vietnam to Guam aboard the Falkor. Rutstein told me, "During my 2005 Hawaiian residency, while studying the active Kilauea volcano, I came across maps of the ocean floor developed through multi beam sonar, and discovered Loihi, the submarine volcano slated to emerge as the next Hawaiian Island when it breaches sea level. That this hidden world could exist underneath the ocean's surface stoked my curiosity about the vast mysteries of the deep ocean."

Using the medium of paint on canvas, Rutstein created works that incorporated satellite imagery. She said, "On my Falkor residency, I was also drawn to satellite data collected by the science team of the Mekong River plume as it disperses into the South China Sea off the coast of Vietnam. I developed a series of paintings based on this data, which is a new direction for my work, influenced by the scientific data I had access to."

As much as the experience working with scientists on the open ocean will benefit the artist, an organization like the Schmidt Ocean Institute must also derive some value investing in an artist in residence program.

Carlie Wiener, communications manager at the institute, told me, "The Artist at Sea program idea came from one of our co-founders Wendy Schmidt, who believes that we can reach a whole new audience by sharing the story of science with a new medium. She has been very supportive of the program. Like scientists, artists

conceptualize and put together ideas in new ways. We believe that the cross fertilization of disciplines through our Artist-at-Sea program will result in a broader awareness of the important research occurring on Falkor and a better understanding of the complex ocean issues facing us today."


And it doesn't stop there. There is an opportunity for all of us to ponder this artwork and dream about the sea. Next January, the Schmidt Ocean Institute will feature its artists at a showing at the [Arts at Marks Garage](#). The show will showcase the artwork of Michelle Schwengel-Regala, Rebecca Rutstein, David Fries, Leslie Reed, Baltazar Bell and Ben Cosgrove and will run from Jan. 17 to Feb. 3.

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"I just want to get along," by Rebecca Rutstein, acrylic on panel.