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The Artist at Sea
at the Schmidt Ocean Institute

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Contributor

In 2009, Eric Schmidt, then executive chairman of Google, established the Schmidt Ocean Institute. Founded in response to a national crisis regarding the advancement of the standards of critical seagoing research infrastructure and a lack of ocean access to scientists and engineers, the Institute seeks to work with the best innovators to accelerate the pace of ocean science aboard its global research platform, R/V *Falkor*. To date, the Institute has completed over 36 research cruises resulting in numerous discoveries including the third deepest hydrothermal vent, the world's deepest dwelling fish, and several new underwater seamounts.

Unique to the Schmidt Ocean Institute is the Artist–at–Sea program, introduced by SOI's co–founder Wendy Schmidt, and launched one year ago. The goal of the program is to expose artists to ocean science so that they may use their artistic proclivities to share the significant work done at the Institute thereby reaching an audience that typically might not be exposed to this area of research.

Like scientists, artists conceptualize and amalgamate ideas in new ways. This joining of disciplines has the potential to broaden awareness of the important research being done aboard the *Falkor* and generate a better understanding of the complex ocean issues facing the world today. By providing a platform where experts from different disciplines can work together, the resulting cross–pollination of ideas provides an opportunity to transform both the scientists' and artists' work. The program also strives to bring artists of all types and backgrounds aboard. Thus far, they have hosted a photographer, a digital artist, a visual performance computer programmer, a painter, a fiber artist, a musical composer, and later this year a cartoonist will join the team.

Rebecca Rutstein, a multimedia artist whose work spans painting, installation, sculpture, and video sailed with the *Falkor* this past summer from Southern Vietnam to the island of Guam. Her work stems from a long held interest in geology, biology, topographical maps, and the fractal geometry of nature and she found the crew's use of the ship's multibeam sonar technology to collect data of the ocean floor terrain ideal inspiration. During a two–week transit, she set up a studio in the wet lab of the ship and created eight 18 by 18 inch paintings. Being at sea motivated not only the content of her work, but also the process of her creation. "I responded to the movement of the ship by pouring paint on the canvas and letting the rocking motion of the ship guide the flow and dispersion of the paint," Rutstein said. "This new technique in my creative process happened as a result of being at sea."

Ben Cosgrove, a composer and nonfiction writer, also completed a residency aboard the *Falkor*. Interested in the human experience in connection to landscape and place, Cosgrove found himself deeply affected by the basic phenomena of sea travel. "I had never been at sea before," he said, "and so I was mesmerized by all that went into keeping the ship moving forward as well as the realization that the ground had just continued below us as we sailed out to sea. I wanted to write music that would use scientific data to express these overwhelming human sensations." His residency culminated in a piece of piano music that was based on the difference between the ship's speed through water and its speed over ground. Neither speed ever quite matched up with the other, and these changing rates of movement were translated into rhythm, resulting in a piece that strives to suggest something of the profound immensity of all the water that sat between the crew and the ground.

In 1831, Charles Darwin set sail for South America aboard the H.M.S *Beagle* and spent his journey alongside two different artists. Darwin himself spent