

Activism through Art, the Maritime Paintings of Christine Hanlon

by Christine Hanlon

My fascination with the ocean began at an early age. I grew up in the Midwest in a big family, and we traveled to the coast each summer to spend a month at Carolina Beach, North Carolina—living in our bathing suits, falling in love with waves, visiting the historic Cape Hatteras lighthouse, and learning to water ski. Moving to Chicago for my high school years gave me Lake Michigan as a constant backdrop for thunderstorms over the lake, occasional Sunfish sailing, and the opportunity to paint what seemed like an inland sea.

When it came time for college, I headed east to Providence to attend the Rhode Island School of Design, which gave me the chance to explore the Northeastern shores. I have fond memories of painting the salt marshes of Plum Island near Newbury, Massachusetts, with gloves on, holding onto my easel and canvas, to keep them from sailing away.

But it was not until a move to Northern California in the early 1980s that the ocean really became a permanent part of my life and artistic expression. Traditional and urban landscapes have always attracted me, but living in the San Francisco Bay area allowed me to see and experience big ships up close for the first time. Living on boats for several years (my husband is a sailor and repairs and restores boats), I was immersed in the world of working harbors and marinas, adding to my understanding of the waterfront. The vessels I found most visually engaging were not the sleek lined yachts but rather the working craft such as tugboats, cargo ships, oil tankers and fishing boats.

We lived aboard an 85-foot sub-chaser as caretakers, and my painting studio was housed in the bridge. From that vantage point, I saw oil tankers across the Richmond channel, docked for days at a time, exchanging crude with the local refinery and watched the tugboats maneuver them around. It was an eye-opening experience to sail out the channel in a small Rhodes sailboat and pull alongside a docked oil tanker, looking directly up the towering sides of the massive ship. I have always loved the way light and shadow



Import/Export #3

*12 x 12 inches
oil on panel*

An anonymous cargo ship with just few containers aboard, as seen from the shore and silhouetted by the intense reflection of the sunlit water.



Aground

12 x 12 inches
oil on panel

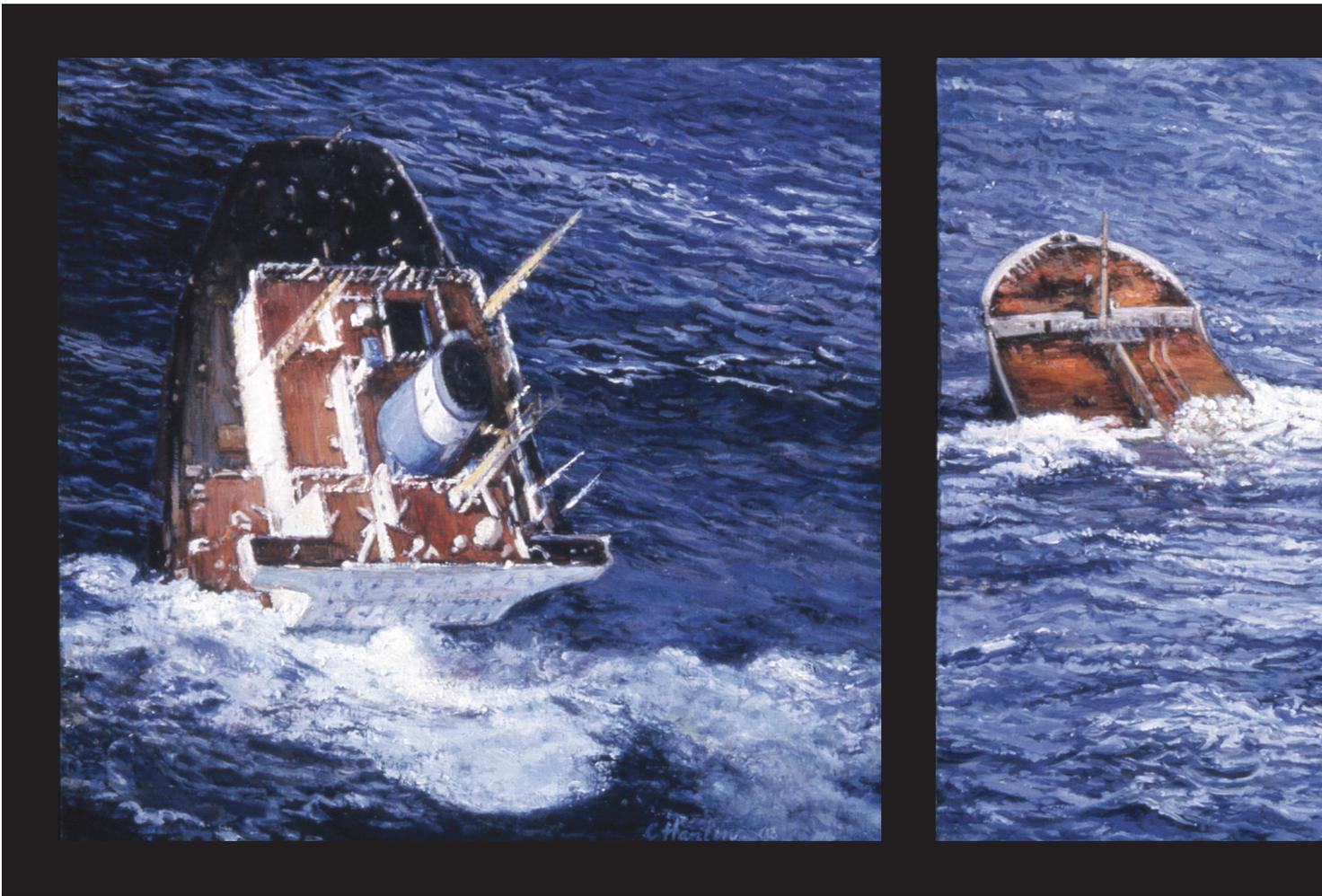
The Jolly Rubino, an Italian 31,362 gross-ton cargo ship, ran aground after a shipboard fire 1,000 feet off the coast of South Africa on 12 September 2002. The ship's location was particularly distressing because it was just off the iSimangaliso Wetland Park, a World Heritage Site and ecologically sensitive wetland and estuary. The Jolly Rubino was carrying 1,100 tons of fuel, plus toxic chemicals including: phenol, alpha-naphthylamine, isopropanol and acetone. An estimated forty containers washed overboard in the heavy seas; a week later, some of her containers were located 600 miles north of the wreck site, presenting a physical and chemical hazard to other ships.



Cargo

5 x 7 inches
oil on panel

The colors of this container ship are washed out by the glare of a late afternoon sun, giving it a surreal appearance as it goes about its work and passes Alcatraz Island in San Francisco Bay.



Death of an Oil Tanker: *Prestige* (1976-2002), triptych, 11 x 11 inches each panel

Winner of "Best of Show" at the 15th Annual Maritime Exhibit, Coos Art Museum, Coos Bay, Oregon, 2008; Juror's Award, Bay Area Annual Juried Exhibition at Sanchez Art Center, Pacifica, California, 2005.

The sequence of scenes depicted in this triptych shows the breaking apart of the 42,820-gross-ton tanker Prestige off the coast of Spain. The 2002 oil spill from Prestige caused the largest environmental disaster in Spain's history. Twenty million gallons of oil poured into the sea when the hull split in half, devastating the fishing industry and ecology of the entire coastline off Galicia. Four years later in 2006, oil slicks in the vicinity of the Prestige wreck site were still being detected.

define the complex lines of these massive seagoing monoliths, especially cargo ships, with their multi-colored container loads. Tugs and fishing boats usually exhibit shapes and character not generally found in recreational vessels.

While I am attracted to the appearance of these large ships and working boats, there is a sociopolitical aspect to them as well, on which I have chosen to comment through my art. In 2010, approximately ninety percent of the world's goods are transported by ship, and the United States has been and is still a maritime nation even if few people consider this fact. These ships and working vessels represent the globally dependent culture and economy that we inhabit, transporting goods from around the planet, while burning the dirtiest crude oil to accomplish their work.



While we enjoy being excessively mobile in our cars, it's the oil tankers that have allowed us this luxury, yet they have also been the source of some of the worst ecological disasters. Several of my paintings show the single hull tanker known as the *Prestige* before and after it broke up off the coast of Spain and Portugal in late 2002. This was an environmental disaster of severe magnitude, and it polluted the entire coastline of Spain, ruining the fishing and shellfish industry for a very long time. Of course, we now have far worse spills, like the explosion of the *Deepwater*

Import/Export #1, 12 x 12 inches, oil on canvas

A fully laden cargo ship whose name is less important than its purpose, to bring goods in and out of US ports.



Horizon oil rig in the Gulf of Mexico. Considering that it took almost twenty years for the fishing industry to recover after the *Exxon Valdez* disaster in Alaska, which is still not fully cleaned up, it is clear that the impact of our global dependence upon fossil fuels will continue to be felt by the oceans and fishing industries for generations to come. Not only are we overharvesting the bounty of the seas, but we are turning them into a toxic soup that threatens all life, both human and marine.

I will continue exploring this subject through my art, as well as the activities of the local fishing harbor of Princeton-By-the-Sea, California, where I live and work in my studio, walking almost daily to our local beach to paint the water and rocks off Maverick's just north of Half Moon Bay.



El Morro
30 x 52 inches
oil on canvas

This scene portrays the interface between the urban and waterfront landscapes seen in many large cities today—including the environmental degradation so common within industrial areas. Ocean-going ships have come to drydock for maintenance and repairs in San Francisco's China Basin, including the El Morro (blue hull), while container ships are visible across the bay in the distance, awaiting access to the Oakland port terminals.



All Washed Up, 5 x 6³/₈ inches, oil on panel

*This image was inspired by a fishing boat that had broken free from its mooring during a storm inside Pillar Point Harbor and was left unclaimed by its owner. It seems to reflect the gradual demise of local fisheries due to depleted fish stocks and the financial stresses fishermen have come under from the loss of income. The painting on the left is the small color study done in preparation for the final version (right) which is four times larger (20 x 25 1/2 inches). This color study is a square root of the “Golden Section,” the same ratio that is used for the final version. Proportions like the square root of Phi (the Golden Section) and the square roots of two, three, and five are used to compose and harmonize the paintings. The side of a square can be divided into the Golden Section cut, thereby creating an actual Golden Section (1:1.618...) within the area of the square—this device was used in the painting **Aground** (page 27). **Decker’s Tug** (right) is a Golden Section; **Cargo** (page 27) is a square root of two; and **El Morro** (page 29) is a square root of three.*



Decker’s Tug



Christine Hanlon received her BFA in Painting in 1976 from the Rhode Island School of Design and her MFA in Painting in 1997 from the Academy of Art University in San Francisco, where she has been part-time faculty since 1997. An activist through her art, in addition to her works on maritime themes, Ms. Hanlon is an award-winning artist for her urban landscapes. Her depictions of homelessness have won awards and helped raise funds and awareness for the Coalition on Homelessness. Her maritime art has won awards as well, including the 2008 Best in Show prize for one of her oil tanker paintings at the Coos Art Museum 15th Annual Maritime Exhibition. For more information on Christine Hanlon and her art, visit her online at www.christinehanlon.com. ⚓