

Column: Offshore drilling a threat to what we see as beautiful

BY LISA ANNELOUISE RENTZ

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Artist Dory Ingram is inspired by the Sea Island ecosystem. While learning about sea turtles with the Hunting Island Sea Turtle Conservation Project, artist Dory Ingram constructed a leatherback-sized shell, light enough to suspend from the ceiling, translucent enough to show the layers of her talent and message.

In my previous column, I asked whether Lowcountry artists have a responsibility to protect our ocean and animals from oil spills.

Then, inspired by a wind turbine demonstration I saw on the beach at Ocean Drive a few hours north of here, I attended a panel discussion at the Technical College of the Lowcountry about oil exploration on our coast.

Hamilton Davis of the Coastal Conservation League was there and drew applause; a maritime lawyer tried to use the "short skirt" blame game regarding whales "beaching themselves"; and aesthetics entered the debate when another panelist asserted wind turbines would be ugly on our horizon compared to more distant oil rigs.

This ocean vs. oil conflict is about aesthetics -- the principles we have about what we see as beautiful.

Some want to look down (through the ocean floor for oil) and some people want to look up (for renewable wind energy).

Artist Dory Ingram moved to Dataw Island from Atlanta two years ago.

"My ongoing project, Carapace, explores the frailty of our defenses," she said. "The innate quest for safety and security is fundamental to all species."

Ingram is inspired by the Sea Island ecosystem. While learning about sea turtles with the Hunting Island Sea Turtle Conservation Project, she built a leatherback-sized shell, light enough to suspend from the ceiling, translucent enough to show the layers of her talent and message.

"They're so ancient. They've overcome so many hardships; we've almost wiped them out," she explained.

Now she's creating similar, shutter-sized pieces inspired by spartina grass. She works with clear gel emulsions to create layers that look like sheets of hai zhe, dried edible jellyfish. In these layers, she embeds images and pencil-scrawled text for light to filter around. The images include fire hydrants and warning signs.

"A lot of what we see around us is related to protection," Ingram noted. "We are in a closed system here. The stuff we throw into the ocean and landfills isn't going away. If we start drilling, there's going to be an accident, no matter how careful they are. It seems ill advised."

Louis Bruce is a self-taught artist with a studio on Beaufort's Bay Street whose work can be found at Martin Gallery in Charleston. His paintings can be impressionistic. The day I visited, he had three versions of the same rosy sunset over the marsh, in ascending sizes. He's lived in Port Royal for 10 years, and his wife, Kit, started the farmers' market. Louis got his degree in biology; his brother works in oil exploration, and if he were a knight of the arts table, he'd be Louis the Reasonable.

"Everyone is going to burn energy, but our coast is the last place to be looking because it makes such a mess. I'm more worried about the barges carrying diesel and jet fuel to the air station," he said. He then questioned the landside impact of ocean oil. He doesn't want to see it in Port Royal.

"It's heavy stuff," he said. "Finding a big deposit here is the worst-case scenario. We live in a world of tradeoffs. Let's do this the cleanest way, which to me doesn't include offshore drilling. This is a really pristine area," he said.

Both these conversations took place in the artists' studios, protected spaces of quiet and human-made beauty.

As Louis and I spoke, one of his collectors arrived, so our question-and-answer time about the Lowcountry's future made way for commerce.

I still have plenty of questions: What about the official protections already endowed to coral reefs and historic districts? What about hurricanes? How will landscapes, the dominant genre here, change with a disaster?

But I am sure about one thing: Around here, we do a lot of good work with our fuel. Now let's make sure our fuel is good to us.

Lisa Annelouise Rentz lives in Beaufort.

http://www.islandpacket.com/2015/02/16/3594974_column-offshore-drilling-a-threat.html?rh=1