

BROOKE LANIER, Artist Statement



These paintings are as much about curiosity, history, memory, and ways of seeing, as they are about boats. Due to lifelong vision problems, I view the world either in large shapes of light, shadow, and color, or in myopic detail. I have spent a good bit of time without my glasses on while enjoying a lake where I grew up in Minnesota, and the more playful paintings in this series, featuring colorful kayaks and paddle boats, are derived from those experiences.

Walking along the Delaware River near my studio in Philadelphia I was first attracted to the huge forms of the colorful historic ships. During the pandemic I was unable to travel home to Minnesota, and I missed the time that I had spent with my family on the water. The harbor and marina at Penn's Landing had sights and smells that felt a bit more like home.

Initially I was attracted to visually dramatic ships like the Moshulu, which is bright red and blue and creates a striking contrast to the more subdued colors of the brackish harbor. I am intrigued by the way that boats and docks frame the natural environment and dictate how we interact with it. The colorful boats clearly do not belong to the scene, but they were built specifically for that place.

The Olympia and submarine Becuna have unusual physical characteristics which give them fascinating silhouettes and textures that pique my curiosity about the purpose of these strange elements. For instance, the distinctive shape of Olympia's bow contains a torpedo tube and a ram bow, a holdover from the age when wooden ships would purposefully crash into the enemy during battle to poke a hole in the enemy ship. However, this proved to be a poor design for a giant steel cruiser as it caused a huge amount of water to spray up over the deck of the ship. Becuna has a lighter upper portion and a darker lower portion that houses the ballast tanks, which flood with water to allow the submarine to sink.

The more time I spent around the ships, the more curious I became about them. I studied their structures and the way layers of weathered paint concealed the metal and wood underneath. I constructed many of my paintings in a way that reflects how the ships are built: They have iron oxide pigments as a base layer, the chemical components of rust. Subsequent layers develop complex textures and get scraped and scratched away. This physical history of the making of the painting mimics physical evidence of things that have happened to the ship.

I became especially attracted to the Gazela, a 3-masted barkentine with a wooden hull partially clad in copper. I could see the dents and scratches from collisions, as well as different patina that had developed over the years as water caused the metal to oxidize differently. I hypothesized about what could have caused these marks on the ship.



After several months of making paintings of Gazela I met one of the people who lives aboard the ship. He invited me aboard and answered many of my questions and confirmed my hypothesis about the origins of different kinds of hull damage, surprised at how much I had observed about the ship. I began volunteering to help with the restoration efforts. After the day's work sanding, varnishing, painting, and caulking, I often climb overboard and sit on the floating dock to contemplate the hull of the ship. As the artist in residence, I bring my watercolors and camera with me to capture my observations as notes to enrich the oil paintings I make in my studio.

People started telling me how much I would love the unbelievably enormous, dilapidated hull of the SS United States. Once America's flagship and the fastest ship in the world, The SS United States has been rotting in its berth in South Philadelphia since the 1990s. It once transported movie stars and foreign dignitaries across the ocean, was also designed for rapid troop transport and has hard points for artillery on the deck. I walked around for hours trying to figure out how to get a good look at the ship. I was dismayed that I was stymied by many fences and had to be content to photograph a small portion of the bow from a distance. It has a fascinating patterning of net-like rusty stains on its majestic bow, and I wish that I was able to appreciate fully how complexly textured the huge chunks of paint and rust are that protrude several inches from some metal. I lamented being unable to see more of the ship or get a closer look, and a student of mine volunteered to take me along with her sailing club to photograph the ship from the river. It was a fantastic experience, and I was thrilled to see the full enormity of the vessel and appreciate the textures in greater detail, as well as the graceful curve of its stern. I have made several paintings based on the experience that are a mental composite of photographs, video, and memory.

With the exception of the Gazela, the historic ships in Philadelphia were intended for battle and traveled at great speed. This seems absurd when contrasted with their current state. They do not move. They function as collaged elements in a larger landscape. It seems implausible to picture them moving with any velocity or aggression. In comparison, little colorful watercraft in my Minnesota paintings line up in formation as if readying themselves for battle. They were never intended for militaristic purposes and are waiting to play.

Boats represent possibility. They facilitate ways of moving that are otherwise impossible. Ghost ships and derelict structures exhibit an unwillingness to relinquish a past grand of achievements and voyages. There's a sort of hopefulness in restoring a historic ship, whether or not that optimism is misplaced.

All of these images are paintings of boats, and none of them are about boats.

