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ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

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Sky's the limit for Alfstad's latest exhibitor Heather Hutchison



Artist Heather Hutchison draws inspiration from the natural world through her series of light-capturing boxes at Alfstad& Contemporary.

By Niki Kottmann

Heather Hutchison has experienced many different skies in her lifetime, and for the past 10 years, she's spent much of her time trying to capture them in a box.

"I grew up always reading the sky," Hutchison says. "Then we lived in Laguna Beach, we lived in Oregon, all these places where the sky was very important to me. When I moved to New York, there wasn't really much sky, so the first pieces I did in this reality were just making blocks of sky."

Hutchison's latest exhibit, "Forever Changes," is a collection of 13 works in her series of reflective boxes displayed at Alfstad& Contemporary that teeter between sculpture and painting.



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LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER

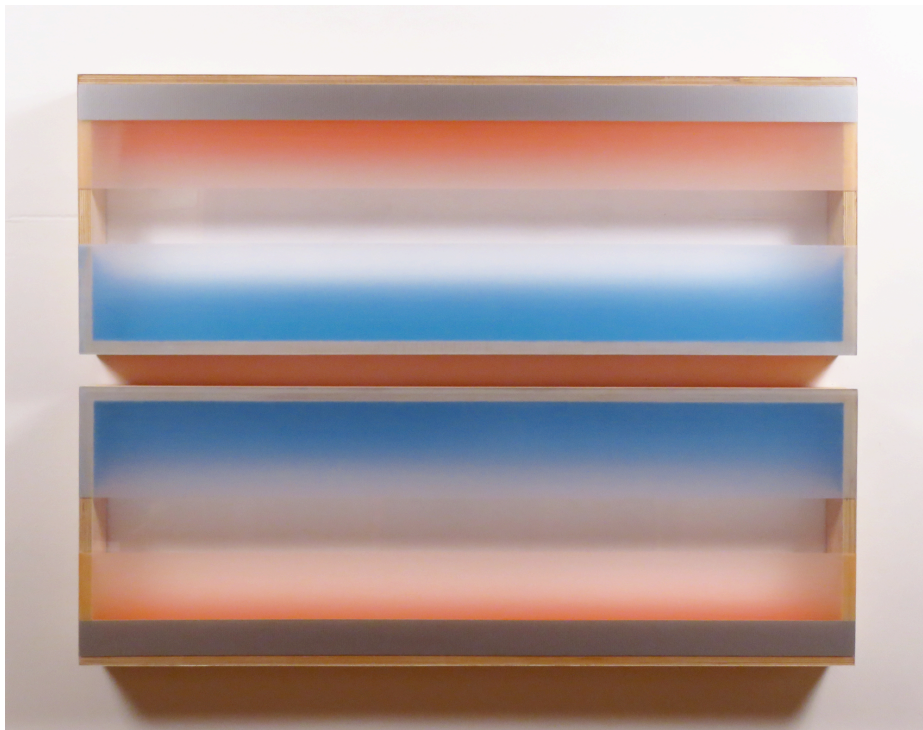
The artist grew up in Bisbee, Ariz., an old mining town that is now an artist colony. Ironically, it wasn't artistic when she was a child. However, that didn't stop Hutchison from becoming the next chapter in a long lineage of artists — some six generations — in her family. Her dad was a caricature artist, and growing up, Hutchison felt like she was given a sort of license to be an artist. She always knew it was a possible path, and after “carving out” a studio for herself around the age of 6 in one of the buildings her dad owned, she was set.

“I’ve just kept it up,” she says. “I think everyone should have a studio.”

In Bisbee, Hutchison recalls being able to see weather patterns more than 100 miles away, and it was that vast western sky that has remained one of her biggest artistic inspirations.

EAST MEETS WEST

When she was 22, Hutchison moved into an apartment in what would become (many years later) the center of the art world in New York City — 24th Street between 10th and 11th avenues in Chelsea.





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Hutchison's inquiry into light started in 1988, when she was assisting artist Joseph Amar, who was using beeswax in his paintings. In exchange for her help, Amar taught her how to use the unique medium and gave Hutchison a corner of his studio.

At the same time she was learning and creating her earlier works, Hutchison says there was a Donald Judd retrospective at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and his minimalist box structures became a pivotal inspiration for her.

Hutchison identifies as somewhat of a self-taught artist because she isn't formally trained, and much of what she knows today she learned through spending a great deal of time in art museums learning from "dead artists."

So naturally, when she went to the Whitney and saw that one artist she admired was able to capture and essentially direct light, something clicked in her mind.

Hutchison didn't have to look hard for her materialistic inspiration. Her work was made entirely using materials from her immediate environment. She lived above a Plexi-Craft factory that was throwing away plexiglass, next to Metropolitan Lumber, which was throwing out plywood, and upstairs was an antique store with a full wood shop.

After an antique store employee taught her how to use a table saw, Hutchison was able to combine all these materials and put to the test her idea of creating wood boxes that light moves through

THE PROCESS

Hutchison works in three or four different modalities now, but this box format has remained somewhat the same process since she first developed it 20 years ago.

Nature photography and time lapse are key preliminary elements in her creative process, she says, because she uses such imagery to inform the design of the piece. By using time lapse, she can see how the sky, water patterns and colors change in a particular space over a long period.

Once she's feeling inspired, the first step is to build a box.



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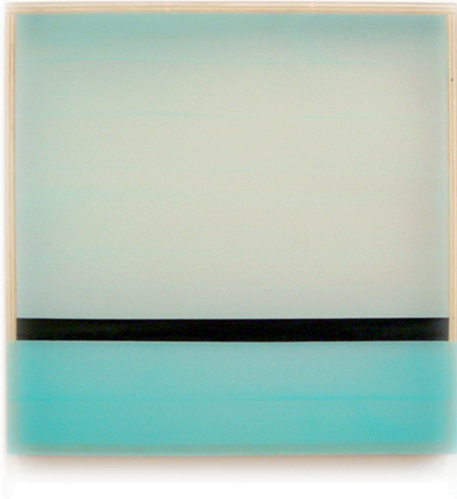
"I chose a sheet of birch plywood and then I rip it down with a table saw," Hutchison says. "From there I choose the boards — there will be a bow or a little sway, and I like what the materials are doing. And then I build a box. I mount plexiglass and then I route it. I make my form and then I start playing with how colors on the inside will react with colors on the outside."

Hutchison used to primarily use reflective paint on the inside of the boxes to make the color shine through once it caught the light, but lately she's using Duck Tape (not duct, but the brighter, more modern Duck brand) both on the outside and inside of the box as a reflective (and less toxic) surface.

The result is a multicolored experience that takes place when light comes in to the box, picks up the color from the inside, takes that color back to the surface and meets the other color that's on top of the plexiglass.

"Then the problem is how to transcend these very mundane materials and turn them into something that's ideally sublime," Hutchison says.

If she splatters some paint on the edges in the process or the white thread of the Duck Tape shows after she tears it, Hutchison doesn't mind.



"They're really quite messy, but I think it makes it more human," she says.

A NATURAL CONNECTION

For Hutchison, creating art always brings her back to that big, open sky — even if it takes some added effort.

"When I lived in the city, I would take the A train out to Coney Island, go out to Far Rockaway — I'd try to get as far as possible," she says of avoiding the crowded, obstructed city sky.

Now, she and her husband live two hours north of the New York City in Woodstock, which is wooded and remote enough to provide more of the sky that moves her to create.

Hutchison describes her work as atmospheric, and she thinks this is all a reflection of her fascination with nature.



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“Like Jackson Pollock said, ‘I am nature, we are all nature,’” she says. “And I think we’re in a time where we need to be reminded of that in particular because there’s something really incredible about it.”

Shortly after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, Hutchison was inspired to create several works displaying the darker colors that ensue when natural disasters strike. A couple of these are included in the Alfstad display, and they’re easy to spot by the dark black bands at the bottom.



“I left San Francisco and the next day the fires started,” Hutchison says. “I landed here in September, two days after the hurricane. It’s just like everywhere I go, I feel this urgency to go and see it in its state now ... things are changing so fast.”

DIGITAL ADAPTATION

Hutchison says her works are best experienced in person because of the importance of light and how it interacts with the pieces, so her biggest challenge is presenting her work to the digital world.



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“The challenge to me is to get across what the work is actually doing to a viewer that isn’t in front of the work,” she says. “Which is very common now, to think you understand a work without ever standing in front of it.”

To combat this, she uses time lapse videos to show online viewers how light affects the work in its exhibition space over a long period — hence the appropriate name of the exhibit, “Forever Changes.”

She adds that despite the challenges, her work continually brings her a sense of happiness that never falters.

“Making these works is a complete and total joy. I really dig it.”