

SHELF LIFE



FINAL REPORT MARCH 1993- JULY 1993

"SHELF LIFE"

THE INSTITUTE OF MARINE AND COASTAL SCIENCES
RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

At the onset, conceptualizing a design for the interior wall at the Marine Institute was a difficult problem. To view the artwork, spectators enter the lobby and look directly upwards 30' to the right. The greatest distance from that wall without obstruction from the overhead balcony is approximately 13'. This meant that 2-D forms could not be seen in the heights and 3-D forms would block higher forms. At the same time the audience can view the work on the opposite balcony from a mere 12' away.

When I became aware that most of the work done at the Institute and its satellites dealt with the continental shelf, I knew that a shelf, literally a shelf, was the perfect image. Luckily the thematic solution of a collapsing shelf solved the problem. Any dimensional form would seem to fall onto the viewer, while at the same time, with the shelves at oblique angles, many of the elements could be viewed from below. All other elements could be seen straight on from the balcony.

The solution worked but it left little room for visual suggestion, everything had to be totally dimensional and completely painted as if it were viewed in the round.

A construction like "Shelf Life" is as much about process as it is about the final visual piece of art. Using real fish makes it difficult to make firm plans about the actual dimensions of the elements of a sculpture. Sizes and varieties of fish vary from year to year and what information one gathers in one year can vary in the next fishing season. My work is "environmental" even in the conception. Man's influence on the environment effects my subject matter and theme, as well as my actual elements. The ecological changes that alter the fishermen's catch also effect the elements I use in the art.

Because my art relies heavily on seasonal catches of specific species, it made finding certain varieties of fish a difficult experience. I wished to cast real fish and wanted to wait as long as possible to obtain them before sculpting alternatives. For the first three months I spent many hours on the docks at 4:00 AM in Philadelphia and Cape May. Fishermen along the Jersey coast as far north as Barnegat were on the lookout for various species. At one point I had a fish watch in four states.

Along with the aid of these fisherman many others were involved with the production of the work. I employed several of my neighbors, to sand, to prime, and to help fiberglass the work. A few of my ex- high school students assisted in moldmaking. Artist Marilyn Keating designed and implemented the installation of the work with the assistance of a few fearless friends unafraid of heights.

In a small rural community like Port Elizabeth word spread quickly that something unusual was in the works. A constant stream of people came through to help or observe the process. Friends, fisherpeople, commercial crabbers, aquarists, and even my insurance agent came to check out the artwork. Kid's in the neighborhood checked in daily and gave surprisingly informed tours to their friends.

Shelf Life contains over 60 individual elements, 10 species of fish, 2 echinoderms, 10 varieties of mollusks, and 4 types of arthropods. The construction of "Shelf Life" took over 1800 hours by the artist and another 400 hours in outside labor. Add to this number another 100 hours of tall fish stories.

On July 23, 1993, "Shelf Life" was installed on the interior lobby wall of the Marine Institute at Rutgers. Although tedious at times, installation went smoothly and within deadline.

For the next few weeks, the artist reserves the right NOT to go fishing.



"SHELF LIFE"
CONNIE JOST
20' X 17'
ACRYLIC ON FIBERGLASS
INSTITUTE OF MARINE AND COASTAL SCIENCES
RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY
1993

Shelf: A flat, usually rectangular structure of a rigid material fixed at right angles to a wall and used to hold objects. Shelf: A reef, sandbar, or shoal.

Continental Shelf: A shallow submarine plain forming a border to a continent, extending to a steep descent to the ocean floor.

Shelf Life: A period of storage time that a material will remain useful. Shelf life: The flora and fauna inhabiting the continental margin.

"Shelf Life" is a bas-relief wall sculpture designed for the interior lobby wall of the Institute of Marine and Coastal Sciences at the Cook Campus of Rutgers University. It includes representative images of the many facets of marine research undertaken by the University.

Visual and literal (littoral) pun intended, the piece makes reference to the imminent danger of the continental shelf ecosystem being pushed toward collapse. This concept of the continental margin as a physical wooden shelf conjures the image of a library shelf storing resources on genetic and biotic diversity, a pharmacy shelf holding a limitless inventory for future biomedic discoveries, or a museum shelf stocked with relics and artifacts of our earth's history and geology.

Above the shelf hang charts and computer generated images of the temperature and phytoplankton content of the Mid-Atlantic area. A diagram of marine protozoa remind the viewer of the microscopic world that is the life blood of the marine community.

Precariously on the shelf, sit the mollusks and crustaceans that make up the greatest percentage of our sea food resources. Horseshoe crabs hang on tightly for their place in the complexity of the ecosystem.

Silently, the fish seem to fall, swim, float downward, disappearing from sight on the ledge of the wall. Fish included in the artwork range from those that spawn in the bay to those inhabiting the outer slopes. Each of these species faces its own extinction from overfishing, pollution, or loss of wilderness. Ironically, across the lobby from the artwork, fish swim calmly in a life sustaining aquarium.

This Institute brings mankind closer to solving the problems of preserving our environment. The intent of "Shelf Life" is to function as a reminder to each scientist, student, and visitor who enters, that saving our resources literally "*falls on their shoulders.*"