

## Ansel Adams water photos featured in Mariners' show in Newport News

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Not long after walking into the newest exhibit at The Mariners' Museum, your eyes and feet will tell you that "Fragile Waters" is no ordinary collection of black-and-white pictures.

Even from far across the completely revamped space that was once the Chesapeake Bay gallery, a series of unusually large landscape views by famed photographer Ansel Adams grabs your attention with three riveting river channels that swoop and curve across the earth as if intent on carving out some epic pattern.

Then they hand you off to his still more majestic shot of an immense sky, a thin horizon line of far-off mountains and what seems like an infinite series of clouds reflected in the still waters of California's spectacular Mono Lake.

What happens next may be unexpected as curator Jeanne Adams switches gears, shifting from landscapes of magnificent scale to much more intimate studies of slender mountain creeks and secluded beachfront coves. But not long after she pulls you in with this diminutive change of pace, she pushes you back with another big image that explores the world from a grand perspective.

Holding all of the 117 photographs in this encyclopedic collection of works by Adams, Ernest H. Brooks II and Dorothy Kerper Monnelly together is the boundless idea of water, she says.

But it's water as seen in more varied and evocative ways than many viewers may have encountered before in a single continuous stream of pictures.

"We don't think enough about water. We don't think enough about how significant it is — and I wanted to change that," says the photography curator and consultant, who put the traveling exhibit together as a response to the 2010 BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"I went through thousands of pictures. I looked at water as oceans and river. I looked at water as sky and vapor. I looked at water as icebergs and as waterfalls. And then I picked out what you see here so you could really put your arms around the idea and see the bigger picture."

Prompted by Barbara Cox of the Seattle-area Photokunst photography consulting and marketing firm, Adams began her project with two large collections of work by Brooks and Monnelly, planning to combine Brooks' underwater images with Monnelly's studies of the Great Marsh in Massachusetts.

But it wasn't long before she expanded the original concept to include an additional collection of works by her celebrated father-in-law, whose arresting pictures of mountain streams and coastal surf could combine with the other photographs to trace the path of water from the snow-covered highlands down to the shore and then the depths of the ocean.

In many places on that journey, the works of one photographer dominate, as in the trio of wide, sweeping Ansel Adams river landscapes that anchors the entrance to the exhibit.

Another cluster of his images explores the close relationship between water and air through iconic views of the pulsing Old Faithful geyser at Yellowstone National Park and the wind-whipped mist that blows off the top of El Capitan falls in mountainous Yosemite National Park.

Brooks' distinctive photographs of life underwater command an extended amount of wall space, too, providing an elegant and illuminating glimpse into the world of the graceful sea lion as well as the realm of startlingly beautiful oceanic corals and plants.

In one eye-catching image, he simply aims his camera up, capturing the foam-filled turbulence of a tumbling wave as it breaks apart over his head.

"He took this shot from 85 feet under the surface," the curator says, "and when the wave crashes, it looks just like a cloud."

Monnelly's nuanced studies of the sprawling marshlands along the Massachusetts coast also get their moment in the sun, working together in a way that gives each successive glimpse of creeping tides, stranded islands of pine and textured expanses of wind- and water-blown salt-marsh grasses a noticeably cumulative impact.

In "Stillness at Dawn," "Long and Hog Islands, Moonrise" and "Great Blue Heron, Sunrise," in particular, the water, mist and landscape forms combine to create a world that seems timeless and primeval.

"They're very still, very gentle and very serene," Adams says.

"And it's clear she's looking at all sorts of shapes and forms as well as the effects of light."

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Still, the curator paid careful attention to how her artists' works would mix and match, too, creating a stream of pictures that pulses not only with changes of subject and vantage point but also evocative connections and patterns.

Among her most compelling sequences of images is a series that combines Monnelly's shots of the rocky Maine coast with Ansel Adams' views of rocky creeks and eroded desert canyons.

Another group pairs their studies of the near-abstract designs created by the freezing, melting and refreezing of water into ice.

"These three are such great photographers that you can hardly go wrong by playing them off each other," the curator says.

"They're really the best at what they do."