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+ SISTERS
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1859

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WILD + SCENIC

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photo by Rich Bacon
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(see "Experience Oregon by Land,
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Working with multiple materials allows Sara Siestroom to layer her work with deeper meaning.

Compassionately Fierce

Artist Sara Siestroom confronts viewers through comforting beauty

written and photographed by Daniel O'Neil

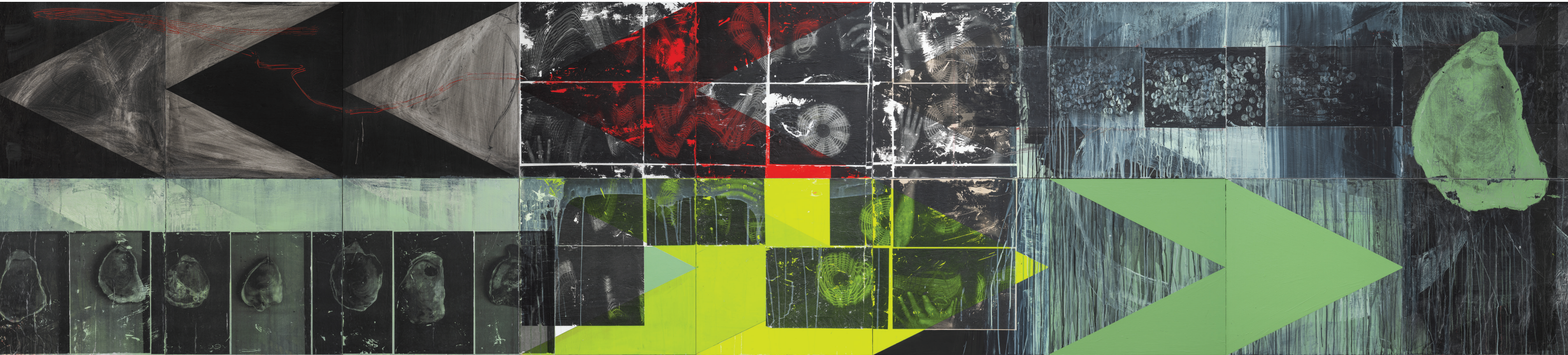
SOMEWHERE IN PORTLAND, Sara Siestroom places culturally significant items on a Xerox machine—buttons, oyster shells from Coos Bay and baskets she has woven, often adding her own hands to the composition—and presses the copy button. More than art emerges from the black-and-white print. Siestroom has lived most of her life in Portland, but she spent her early years living in the territory of her Hanis Coos ancestors in the Umpqua River Valley. As an artist and an activist,

her multicultural background finds fruition in her multidisciplinary approach.

Siestroom's latest public art piece, *night flyers*, a commission for the Vernier Science Center at Portland State University, references this interconnection. With migration as the central theme, revealed through the basket pattern for geese, Siestroom alludes to the patterns and rhythms of animals, people and life in general.

The Xeroxed oyster shells and buttons evoke histories of genocide against the Coos and other Indigenous peoples, and against Mother Nature. Siestroom found the shells at the edge of village sites in the Coos Bay estuary, where ancient oyster beds grew until colonization arrived. Working with these and other elements, and adding paint, water and pencil, Siestroom combines natural materials





with her own energy in an idiosyncratic process that pries open difficult and intertwined themes of social and ecological justice. Her work honors the fundamental interdependence and equality between people, plants, elements, animals and the cosmos.

“My process is based on observations of nature combined with a formal structure and improvisational practice,” she said. “As I create a visual noise through this improvisation, I’m looking for basic forms from nature to emerge. When something elemental shows itself to me, I refine the picture plane to support that event.”

Siestroom likens large-scale works like *night flyers* to a Trojan horse—monumental beauty is the vessel for messages that challenge accepted views of society and the environment. “It’s really important in my work to confront you with excruciating truth, but also give you a way out emotionally and spiritually, a positive endgame,” she said. In *night flyers*, the resilience of nature provides that hint of hope. Oysters, though non-native, grow again in Coos Bay today, for example, and geese continue to migrate.

Composed of eighteen panels, which Siestroom arranges as though weaving, *night flyers* spans 18 feet across a dedicated

space in the atrium of the Vernier building. “I like to work big because of the confrontational nature of the scale. So I want to make works that are bigger than the body of the viewer, to help them understand the enormity of the topics that I’m confronting them with.”

Portland-based artist and curator Mack McFarland has known and worked with Siestroom for more than a decade. In her work he finds a striking ability to converge abstraction, tradition (including Indigenous and DIY Portland punk) and institutional reform, using what he called a “compassionate fierceness.”

“I think *night flyers* is beautiful and multilayered, which is really what you want out of a piece of public work,” McFarland said. “For people who are seeing it multiple times—hundreds of times, even—in spaces like that,

there are many, many things that will be revealed to them over time, and it creates a myriad of understandings.”

Siestroom holds an MFA in painting and has studied with local Indigenous masters like carver and painter Greg Robinson (Chinook), carver Greg Archuleta (Grand Ronde) and renowned Warm Springs sculptor Lillian Pitt (Wasco/Yakama).

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She also teaches art, currently as an MFA mentor at the Institute of American Indian Arts. Working on a commission for a science building made sense for an artist with such a studied yet instinctive technique.

A clam basket features in *night flyers* along with Siestroom’s hands. In some of the images, the two appear natural and whole, a representation of the power and beauty possible when science respects nature and cross-cultural values. In others, the hands and basket are distorted, a suggestion of the dangers science and technology possess when employed for objectification and profit.

“Those people will be doing actual work in the world that will affect the things I care most deeply about,” Siestroom said. “To create something that will speak to those people’s bodies and those people’s morality and spiritual center when they’re at science class, to me this is a really powerful opportunity.”

Siestroom has other upcoming public art projects in the Northwest, and she is busy creating art for the Elizabeth Leach Gallery in Portland and the Cristin Tierney Gallery in New York. Her works, large or small, build upon the same principles as expressed in *night flyers*, because, for Siestroom, art only begins with surface beauty.

“My cultural, spiritual and social belief is that this work is alive, that it’s animate and powerful,” she said. “My hope is that, in the same way we receive an energetic charge from contact with the land, other animals or a natural event, these paintings will affect the viewer.” ■



FROM TOP Sara Siestroom’s *night flyers* spans 18 feet in the Vernier Science Center at Portland State University. Siestroom peels the paper off a Xerox transfer, revealing its nature underneath.