Bonnemaisonnia californica

The Curious World of Seaweed

"The seaweeds and kelps (or marine algae) are the eco-engineers and primary producers of the near-shore ocean waters. They form the building blocks of an ecology that supports innumerable other organisms—the rich biodiversity we treasure—and yet their stories are seldom told. My artwork aims to bring this hidden flora to light and celebrate their stories."

Seaweed seems to be on the tip of people's tongues these days. While only yesterday seaweeds were considered slimy and undistinguished by most Americans, they are now regarded as an answer to many of our oceans' ills. Yet the kelps and seaweeds remain unfamiliar to even the most ocean-loving beachcombers.

Marine algae have a long and culturally-rich history. Indigenous peoples have used seaweeds for thousands of years. Naturalists plucked ocean flora during exploratory expeditions in the 1700s. One century later, female scientists living along the coast partnered with international collaborators to study seaweed. And in the last 50 years, further exploration has led to the identification of a plethora of species. This legacy of the study of marine algae has been the entry point to my own journey into the science of seaweeds.

As I have come to know seaweeds in all their complexity and ingenuity, I continue to fall deeper and deeper in love. My photographer's eye is captivated by their palette, from olive green to golden brown to deep purple. They can be smooth or bumpy, complexly delicate or magnificent in their simple architecture. Seaweeds are passionately of their world, the marginal world at the edge of the sea. And by looking with focused intent and a scrupulous eye, I hope to uncover the largely unseen forms of ocean flora as a nexus where art and science converge to reveal their poetry and magic.

– Josie Iselin

The Curious World of Seaweed is a traveling exhibition from author and artist Josie Iselin in partnership with Exhibit Envoy. The exhibit is based on the book of the same name by Iselin (Heyday Books).

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Macrocystis pyrifera