

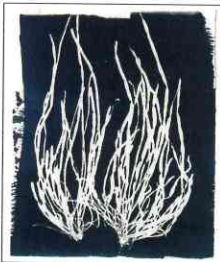
NATURE

The Fine Art of Flotsam

An exhibition at K Gallery recalls a popular Victorian pastime: seaweed collecting.

By Anneli Star Josselin Rufus

When Alameda artist Ginny Parsons roams a beach, plucking strands and fans of seaweed from the sand to use in future works, she looks every bit the modern mom-of-two. Yet whenever she takes such walks—"almost every day," she says—Parsons follows in the dainty, pointy-toed footsteps of 19th-century ladies who sought the same ocean-borne treasures, installing



their seaweed collections in the ornate leather-bound scrapbooks that were part of a then-popular, now-nearly-vanished fad.

Well aware of this quaint hobby, whose adherents included even a young Queen Victoria, Parsons cherishes vintage photographs of wide-hatted, long-skirted wanderers on Alameda's shores. Those early seaweed collectors are partly what inspired *Happenstance*, an exhibition running until Nov. 4 at Alameda's Rhythmix K Gallery, featuring new works by Parsons and fine-art photographer Josie Iselin exploring random chance as manifested by flotsam.

"I often curate shows at Rhythmix and had been wanting to do a show about

chance when I saw Josie's seaweed scans in the *San Francisco Chronicle*," Parsons explained.

"I was attracted to her work because she has an affinity for nature, but approaches things from a scientific perspective. I'm an intuitive painter using common household materials like borax and peanut butter, and Josie is a Harvard-educated photographer and book designer. So we make art in different ways but are both interested in the process of cyanotypes and the natural world."

Ginny Parsons by Clayton J. Mitchell, seaweed courtesy of Josie Iselin



Victorian-clad Parsons inspects seaweed for possible use in future works.

especially among young women who sought brisk, wholesome pastimes while vacationing at newly trendy seaside resorts. Today, their seaweed scrapbooks are rare, but prized, auction-house finds.

Our relationship with nature has intensified since then.

"Amidst a world of environmental woe, I am grateful to live on an island sitting in the middle of the bay, an important stop in the migratory corridor," Parsons mused.

"Because environmental agencies have ridded us of invasive grasses in the last 10 years, there's more room for birds, and the native salt-marsh plants have returned. During my walks, I am grateful we are working to restore our marshland, a breathing space for us all.

"I like to walk barefoot through the mud and wade out into the low tide pools. I'm intrigued that there is an entire world of life" in the sea and bay and along their verges "that exists far beyond me. These walks also connect me to history."

If you're inspired to start collecting seaweed, be careful where you do it. Along the Alameda shoreline and other East Bay Regional Park District-maintained waterfronts, "it is absolutely not legal," said James Frank, supervising naturalist at Crab Cove.

The park district's Ordinance 38 specifies "no person shall damage, injure, collect, or remove any plant or tree or portion thereof, whether living or dead."

"Seaweed is a crucial part of the environment," Frank explained, "providing food for microinvertebrates that are at the base of the food chain for the entire bay ecosystem."

In all its sleek, streaming slipperiness, it's pretty, too.

At an Oct. 16 workshop, both artists will teach visitors how to make cyanotypes, or "sun prints." This is placing objects onto photosensitive paper to create haunting white-on-blue reverse-images, which was popularized by early seaweed collectors.

"I first got interested in making sun prints because I teach art to kids and use them in my classes," Parsons said. "It's magical to put an object down on paper and watch the sun turn it into a photo."

For the *Happenstance* exhibition, she collaged cyanotypes onto landscape paintings whose coral reds, mustard yellows, and slate blues evoke the East Bay reverently.

Charles Darwin spurred a 19th-century craze for collecting and preserving wild specimens,



Happenstance, through Nov. 4, K Gallery at Rhythmix Cultural Works, 2513 Blanding Ave., Alameda, 510-865-5060, Rhythmix.org.