Making Rave Waves

The Flow Project joins artists and water researchers for unique collaborations BY JULIE JACOBS

▲ Julia Buskirk

AS AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT UNIVERSITY of Wisconsin (UW)-Madison, Julia Buskirk was torn between science and art. A conservation biology and environmental studies major whose work has often drawn from both disciplines, she came to see a lot of similarities between the two and also to believe that scientists and artists could learn a lot from one another.

"Both ultimately come from a curiosity [of] the world and wanting to understand how the world works, helping describe how the world works, and so very often I found that the two really complemented each other. … Artists have their own skill set and way of seeing the world that can bring some really interesting critiques and observations of the science that's being done. And likewise on the other side, scientists, they bring their own way of seeing and understanding the world that can help influence an artist," Buskirk says by phone from her home in Wisconsin.

This thinking led to the creation in 2021 of The Flow Project, which brings together undergraduate art students and water scientists from UW campuses to collaborate on artwork inspired by the scientists' research. Buskirk co-founded the project with Alexandra Lakind, then a UW graduate student and project assistant for Water@UW-Madison, a program that supports water-related research, education and activities at UW-Madison and beyond.

▼ "On the Wisconsin River" by artist Trinity Lee is one of the pieces from The Flow Project at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Lakind had reached out to Buskirk after finding her blog on Twitter. In "Water Lines," she incorporates artistic renderings to communicate the research being conducted on Wisconsin's Lake Mendota. Though Lakind initially inquired if Buskirk would be interested in doing similar work by herself with affiliates of Water@UW-Madison, through conversation they agreed it would be best to facilitate having a range of undergrad artists for this endeavor.

They secured funding from the Higher Education Challenge Grants Program for the first year of The Flow Project, which has since been funded by Water@UW-Madison and UW-Madison's Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research and Graduate Education and Division of Extension Natural Resources Institute; UW-Green Bay's College of Science Engineering and Technology and College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; and UW-Stevens Point's Extension Lakes and Center for Land Use Education. Administrative support has come from Water@UW-Madison and Wisconsin Sea Grant.

To enlist scientists, they put out a call to Water@UW-Madison's network of water professionals. To recruit artists, they reached out to UW-Madison student groups, student advisers and scholarship programs. Three years in, the Flow Project has expanded; for its 2023 cohort, it received 120 applications from student artists for 31 spots, with the participants representing all 13 schools in the state's university system.

So why the focus on water? "Wisconsin is filled with water," shares Buskirk with pride, pointing out that the state has more lakes than neighboring Minnesota, nicknamed "Land of 10,000 Lakes." "We're surrounded by two great lakes, and we are filled with rivers and lakes," she continues. "It is a really important resource here. It's fundamental to recreation, to our economy, and also just to our culture, because most of us have spent our lives in this state somewhere near water." And, she adds, UW-Madison has one of the oldest and richest histories of studying lakes in the country.

Ripple Effect

Buskirk has served as Flow Project Lead Coordinator and Lakind as Flow Project Advisor, with support from Flow Project Coordinators Amy Kowalski at UW-Stevens Point and Collette LaRue at UW-Green Bay, a water professional and artist, respectively, who participated in the 2022 cohort. Artwork emanating from the project — ranging from paintings and

PHOTOS: H TOP BY SYDNEY WIDELL; ARTWORK COURTESY OF THE FLOW PROJECT

drawings, to sculptures and garments, to dance and music — illustrate a breadth of research initiatives. Examples include the breaking down of pesticides in Wisconsin's lakes, potential impacts of high-capacity wells on nearby stream ecosystems, and interconnectedness of trees, water, land use and human life.

Artists must present a portfolio for consideration and are selected based on their artistry, theme of work, uniqueness of medium and enthusiasm for the project. Once chosen, the artists, who receive a nominal stipend, rank the water professionals with whom they would like to work, and The Flow Project's team then matches the participants and facilitates their meetings. At the first one, artist and water professionals review their work with each other; at the second, they discuss the work in progress. Final pieces, which may be used by the water professionals in their own work, are exhibited in galleries on campus and in the community (the work of the 2023 artists were featured in a traveling exhibit across Wisconsin).

"I think of it as an educational opportunity, for the community to enjoy art, but also learn about a lot of the really cool, amazing things that are going on, on behalf of Wisconsin waterways," says Buskirk. Artist Abby Sunde, at UW-Madison, partnered with Geoff Siemering, in UW-Madison's Department of Soil Science, for the 2023 cohort. Siemering studies the behavior of contaminants in soil and water; his *National Geographic*-funded, multiuniversity collaboration, investigating the effect of mercury contamination from artisanal small-scale gold mining on the Peruvian Amazon aquatic ecosystem, inspired Sunde's piece, "Mercury, Suspended." Created from hollow core kiln-cast glass, plaster and mirroring solution on sand, the work, as explained on The Flow Project's website, "depicts this mercury contamination suspended within the water and considers the permeance and lingering impacts of those contaminants."

The pair have a lot in common: Sunde was an environmental scientist in remediation before returning to school to study art, and they share an interest in both community involvement and glass artists. Siemering, also a furniture builder and wood turner, describes their first meeting, lasting 2-1/2 hours, as "organic" and "wide-ranging and free-flowing." He says he enjoys how their collaboration "can expand conversations around environmental issues that are sometimes very hard for people to visualize." Of her takeaway, Sunde offers, "This experience, and the work that Geoff and I continue to do, has really helped me see just how naturally intertwined [science and art] can be."

▲ Geoff Siemering

▲ Abby Sunde

Thanks to a Community-Based Water Research Grant from Water@UW-Madison and UW's Morgridge Center for Public Service, Sunde and Siemering are together supporting a citizen-scientist group, Waadookawaad Amikwag, that is working to detect damages to watersheds stemming from the Enbridge Line 3 pipeline replacement in northern Minnesota. Through a USDA Tribal Student Fellowship, Sunde is further helping this effort and also making art tied to it, with Siemering as her mentor.

Flow's Future

Buskirk notes that, since its inception, The Flow Project has garnered much more interest, particularly from water professionals. She says that at the start, "it was easy to say this was a science communication project. I would no longer want to call it that at all. I think it's a collaboration. It's an opportunity for artists to make art and for water professionals to share their work and to interact with someone outside of their field and to see their work in a new light."

Graduated from UW-Madison in December 2022, Buskirk is now in Ecuador for six months attending a language school to become fluent in Spanish and studying plant specimens at the herbarium of the University of Azuay in Cuenca. She has passed The Flow Project baton to a new leader, a position that has evolved into a graduate assistantship.

"I'm really, really excited for the future of it. It's in really lovely, capable hands," she remarks of the project, which she wishes one day will have a cohort led by its own coordinator at every UW campus. Later, after pondering more about what lies ahead, she emails, "I hope this project can serve as a model not only for the University of Wisconsin system, but for any group of people interested in challenging and expanding the perspectives and skills they have." ■

▲ TOP: "Mercury, Suspended" by Abby Sunde
CENTER: "Entanglement" by Aneesha Zunker
BOTTOM: "Nostoc," representing a cyanobacterial alga, by Ava Padilla; all part of The Flow Project.

PHOTOS: TOP LEFT COURTESY OF GEOFF SIEMERING; TOP RIGHT COURTESY OF ABBY SUNDE; FAR RIGHT FROM TOP TO BOTTOM COURTESY OF THE FLOW PROJECT