

DANAE MATTES

Under Blue, 2009

Clay, Paper, and Pigment on Canvas, 64.5 x 90 in



COURTESY DOLBY CHADWICK GALLERY

BARBARA TANNENBAUM

Listening to Whales

Sightings inspired
by *The Log from
the Sea of Cortez*

As a reporter, I've written about whales for several publications without ever seeing one at sea. Years ago, for an article about gray whales' changing migratory patterns near the Bay Area, I found myself at Richmond's Point San Pablo, walking around the abandoned, deteriorating buildings of the Del Monte Fishing Company. This was the last commercial whaling plant in the U.S., shuttered in 1971 by the consequences of overfishing coupled with 1972's passage of the federal Marine Mammal Protection Act. Looking across the bay to the distant outline of Marin County, I couldn't spy anything swimming or at play in the surf—not whales, not even sea lions. Somehow, the absence felt right. Good, I remember thinking. Best that you stay away from us.

Despite my travels to far-flung Pacific islands in the intervening years, I always believed that the closest I'd ever get to seeing a giant cetacean was at the California Academy of Sciences. There, suspended from the ceiling of the East Pavilion, between the Earthquake Exhibit and the cafe, are the stark white bones of an eighty-seven-foot-long blue whale. Its skeleton has been arranged with the skull pointing downwards, as if the specimen were in mid-plunge towards the ocean's depths.

Last year, I often found myself standing beneath this creature's remains. I was a contractor assigned to write profiles and web-based content about Academy researchers and their findings. With my laptop and note-covered yellow legal pad tucked under one arm, I would head to the cafe between meetings, contemplating the giant specimen as I waited in line for coffee.

It hung there, static. Though contained within the building and backlit by floor-to-ceiling walls of clear glass, it invited the imaginative visitor to remember just how large the Earth's single largest animal really was. A creature so large that mythologies across cultures have spun numerous tales of a fish that could swallow a man whole—be it Jonah, Sinbad, Pinocchio, or his father Geppetto—with innards large enough to let a man wander around its innards for anywhere from three days to two years with nary a burp.

In truth, the specimen didn't move me despite my eagerness to feel it. Technology, not experience, brought me closest to an emotional appreciation of nature's charismatic giants. Sure, I've gasped and clung tightly to my