

## RAN ORTNER

*Untitled, 2012*  
84 x 108 in.



courtesy: Ran Ortner studios

## WALLACE J. NICHOLS

# Outré Banks of the Mind

*outré* |ōō'trē| adjective. Unusual and startling, violating convention or propriety: “in 1975 the suggestion was considered outré—today it is orthodox.” ORIGIN French, literally “exceeded,” past participle of *outrer* (see *outrage*).

I'm standing on a pier fifty feet above the Atlantic. Ocean to the left and right, forward, back and below. I'm wearing a light blue hat, like a bejeweled swim cap. A heavy black cable snakes down my back like a ponytail. I look like an extra in an Esther Williams swim troupe who wandered into Woody Allen's *Sleeper*.

Water fills the light, the sound, the air, and my mind. Waves steadily arrive under the pier, crashing to the beach and suspending their salt mist and negative ions which I rhythmically inhale with pleasure. It smells like summer to me.

I'm a human lab rat. The cap is the nerve center of a mobile electro-encephalogram (EEG) unit. I'm just trying it on for size. The cap is not yet recording anything, but soon sixty-eight electrodes plugged into my head will measure my every neurological up and down. The sum effect of the cap, the grandeur of nature, our imaginations, and the academic and experiential gravitas of those with me is one of beautiful

absurdity. A somewhat ridiculous high-tech costume masking some seriously interesting—you might even say revolutionary—scientific potential.

An unlikely agglomeration of talent—neuroscientists, big wave surfers, psychologists, educators, seafood experts, veterans, marketers, realtors, conservationists, evolutionary biologists, filmmakers and writers—have schooled up on Jennette's Pier on the Outer Banks of North Carolina to consider the science behind our emotional connection to water. It's about time we figured out how the words dopamine and amygdala meld with the words ocean and wave.

The Outer Banks, or OBX, are the long, narrow strips of mostly sand separating the Atlantic from the sounds, and from the mainland of North Carolina behind that. The Outer Banks are a sandbar, really. Gordon Jones, a realtor for twenty-two years who knows these edgy dunes as well as anyone, calls them a “speed bump” for the Atlantic hurricanes, squalls, and relentless waves that batter her banks. As a result the beaches—literally, the entire place—are inching incrementally westward, grain by grain.

Living on the Outer Banks requires a certain tenacity, but there is a powerful and unmistakable draw to this place. The twin phalanxes of cars coming and going that queue up every summer Saturday and the two hundred percent premium tacked on to the most sought-after homes in the “front row,” directly adjacent to the beaches, are ample evidence of the draw.

My hunch, as I stand there on the pier, is that hidden beneath the surface of the water we will find massive, yet to be quantified, but irrefutable cognitive benefits. I believe the ocean irresistibly affects our minds. It is a force that for millennia has drawn people all across our watery planet to camp out on windswept bumps of sand like the Outer Banks.

A set of questions and hypotheses has begun to flow from the consilience of neuroscience and water studies and the sharing of personal—sometimes intimate—experiences. It is a conversation I call “Blue Mind.”

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