

## STEPHANIE HEIT

*Vanishing Line*, 2016  
Oil on canvas, 60 x 46 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

## RON EBY

# Going Mainstream with the Sea Otters

A citizen scientist makes  
an important discovery  
monitoring otters

It was midnight at Moss Landing and I was out to spy on sleeping sea otters. I had just pulled into the parking lot at Moss Landing State Beach Park, at the mouth of Elkhorn Slough, lights off before turning in and careful not to slam the door. It was another cold and foggy night in April 2007 and Robert Scoles, my partner and friend, was waiting as we took turns watching the otters coming out of the water to haul out on the sandy beach below the bluff at the edge of the parking lot. We had to be careful. The otters were nervous while on the beach. A garbage truck across the harbor, noise from the power plant, a boat blowing its horn, even a squirrel could easily flush the otters off the beach. Normally, when one otter flushed, the others followed suit. Only when they felt the danger had passed would they gradually return, if they did at all. Otters are clumsy and slow moving when hauling out or coming ashore, but when they are flushed, they move quite quickly. Robert told me there were twenty-four otters on the beach. We were elated and excited to see so many of them. We knew we were seeing something rare that few had ever observed.

Our adventure together began when Robert asked for volunteers at one of our Team OCEAN training sessions.

Robert had retired from the sheriff's department in 2005 and began volunteering as a guide at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. In 2006, he joined the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) volunteer programs Team OCEAN and Bay Net, managed by the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Volunteers for the Team OCEAN program patrol Monterey Bay and Elkhorn Slough by kayak to inform citizens of rules aimed at preventing disturbances to marine mammals. Bay Net is the land-based counterpart to Team OCEAN. Robert's experiences in the sheriff's department and as a military policeman in the army groomed him to investigate and question human behavior and ultimately the natural world. His investigative skills, our friendship, and the synergy of our experiences and skills led us on a magical journey we never anticipated.

The suspects in our new lives as citizen scientists were otters. The crime was going ashore or "hauling out." Hauling out was normal for northern sea otters and was not a violation for southern sea otters if only done occasionally, but the training we had received told us that this was rare and usually in small numbers. Robert's observations led him to question the frequency and number of otters hauling out.

Robert asked for volunteers to help him at the 2007 training for Team OCEAN and Bay Net. I was the only volunteer that raised his hand and "wanna watch some otters" became our mantra. His plan was to take turns monitoring the beach at Moss Landing State Beach Park. Robert had seen enough signs of otters hauling out that he was convinced that southern sea otters hauled out on a regular basis. Standing watch for long periods was nothing new to Robert or me: Robert from his career in law enforcement and me from my twenty year career as a naval officer during which I spent as much time as possible on ships at sea.

Together, Robert and I began monitoring the beach and found otters hauling out almost every night. We took turns doing six-hour shifts and despite the cold and sometimes wet weather, we were thoroughly enjoying our new roles as citizen scientists. We kept notes, recording the number of otters that hauled out every half hour and shared our observations with friends and scientists alike. We met Dr. Daniela Maldini in June of 2007. Dr. Maldini took us under her wing and designed an observation