

Internationally recognized Shelter Island artist passes away: Janet Culbertson's work was a message to the world

By [Charity Robey](#)



Janet Culbertson's distinguished career as an artist spanned five decades, most of it living on Shelter Island. (Credit: Charity Robey)

Janet Culbertson, a painter who lived and worked on Shelter Island passed away on Oct. 6, at 91, leaving friends, family and an enormous body of work that was widely exhibited, collected and admired.

For most of her very long and productive career, she was one of Shelter Island's most socially active artists, here and in the wider world. A mainstay of ARTSI, the Island's annual tour of artist's studios, she was socially active and productive even in her later years. Her friends often referred to her as "a force of nature."

The description was accurate on many levels. She was born with a fascination and gift for drawing and painting, and by the time she was nine years old, she found a subject that would motivate her for the rest of her life — the adverse effects of humans on the natural world.

She often painted landscapes, and a recurring image in her compositions is a river that winds through the background; clear and blue-green, gradually flowing into the foreground as it becomes discolored and polluted. It's a scene she personally experienced when she was a child while boating with her father near where she grew up in the coal mining country of western Pennsylvania.

In an interview in 2016, she remembered, "The water started to turn orange, and then it gets a deep brown orange with puffy rocks floating in it, like cinders. I said, 'What's this?' Dad said, 'Don't touch it.' That day was a turning point in my life. I became an environmentalist that day."

Ms. Culbertson's distinguished career as an artist spanned five decades, most of it living on Shelter Island. With more than 35 one-woman shows, and numerous awards, her work is in the permanent collection of museums such as the Galeria-Nacional in San Jose, Costa Rica, The Telfair Museum in Savannah, Ga., the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Mass. and the Library of Congress.

Her painting incorporates many materials on a foundation of skilled drawing, including acrylic and iridescent paint, glitter and found objects. But her inspiration is singular: an interest in the beauty and fragility of the natural world.

She was an activist artist, with a viewpoint shaped by her girlhood in the coal fields, her travels in the American West and the Galapagos Islands, and the environment near the home on West Neck Bay where she lived from 1971 until her death.

After studying art at Carnegie-Mellon University, Ms. Culbertson landed in New York in the late 1950s with some money she won in a bingo game. She moved into a house on Cornelia Street in the West Village which she described as difficult living.

"We spent every evening at the White Horse Tavern, drinking, listening to people fight, and arguing about politics."

She met Douglas Kaften who became her husband; they married in 1964 and moved to Shelter Island in the early 1970s.

Those days were an important period of productivity and success for Ms. Culbertson, with one-woman shows in New York City at the Lerner-Heller Gallery. In the early 1970s, Culbertson created a series of paintings, works entitled "Jessup Pond," "My View" and "Crab Creek," using acrylic on canvas, depicting creeks, islands, and bays around Shelter Island.

In 1980, on a snowy North Fork road, Ms. Culbertson was nearly killed when a car struck the passenger side of the car where she sat. "It took me a year to get over being frail, and another year being depressed," she said. After the accident, she began a series that incorporated billboards and became fascinated with images of traffic. Her view shifted to incorporate darker messages.

When Ms. Culbertson's work began to make strong statements about the destructive effects of humans on their environment, people asked her why she no longer did pretty landscapes.



Janet

Culbertson in her Shelter Island studio. (Credit: Charity Robey)

“My art expresses a specific overt message, that there is something we are doing to the world that is ominous. I'm not thrilled with decorative art. It doesn't mean that much to me. I'm concerned that I get a balance between the message and something interesting texturally — you don't want to just make somebody feel rotten.”

In 2005, The National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington exhibited Ms. Culbertson's series entitled, “Mythmaker.” Dubbed “eco-feminist,” these paintings explored ways to depict women in a more heroic light and show the disturbing reality of our threatened environment.

In 2014, she had a one-woman show, a 40-year retrospective, entitled “Paradise Gone” at Stone Quarry Hill Art Park, in Cazenovia, N.Y.

A few weeks before her death, a group of Ms. Culbertson's drawings called “Creatures” was chosen to be included in the Lunar Codex, a digital archive of art and poetry that will travel to Earth's Moon on a private spacecraft next year, with the aim of representing the creative arts of Earth's people.

According to Vanessa King, a friend and assistant to Ms. Culbertson in her later years, the drawings, which depict endangered species that Ms. Culbertson encountered and drew, will serve as an ark on the Moon for animals at risk of disappearing on Earth.

Shelter's Island's own force of nature lives on.