The page is framed by a decorative border of red line-art flowers. The flowers are stylized with multiple layers of petals, each petal containing fine, radiating lines that suggest texture and depth. The border is consistent in color and style throughout the page.

Dive into the Depths: Exploring Underwater Art through Affective Response and Phenomenology

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Don't hold your breath.

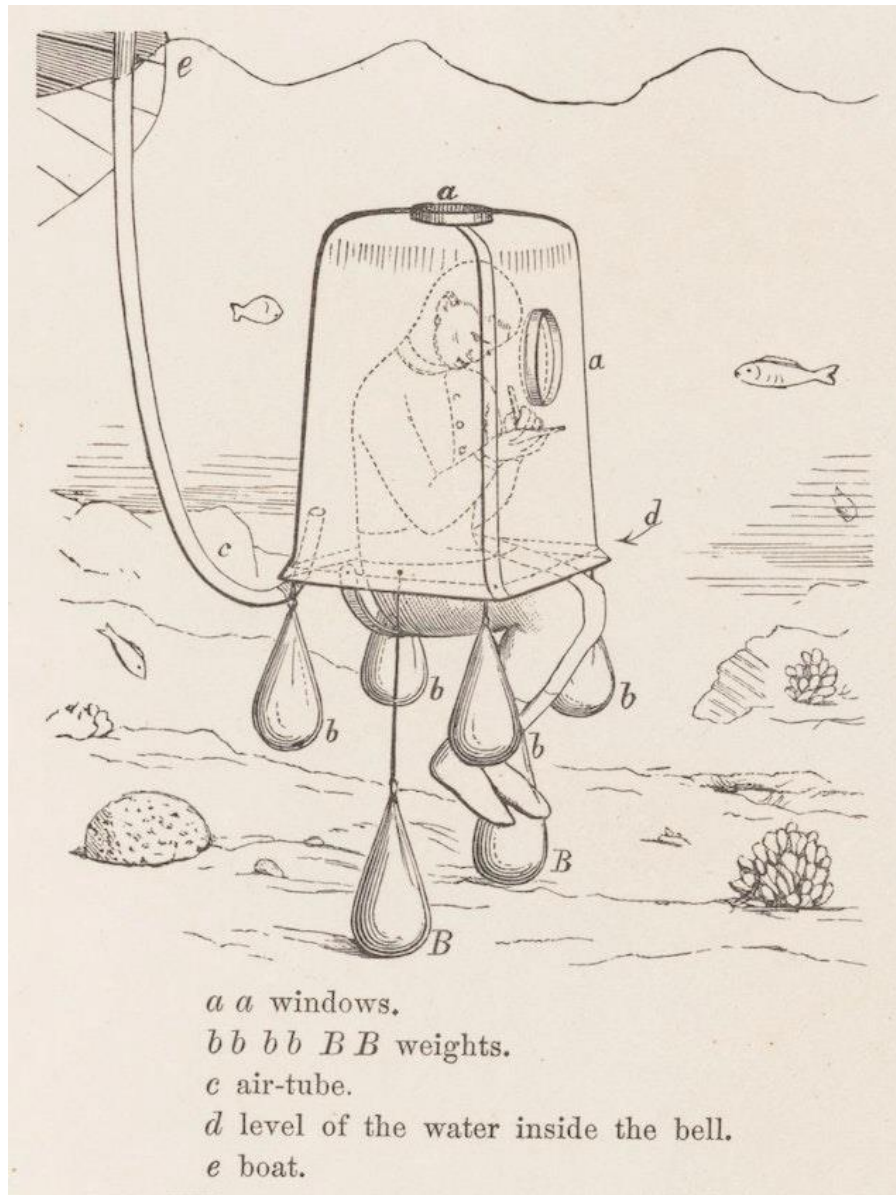
With the press of a button, you slowly begin to sink into a much darker world. A cold world. One where breathing is not as easy; it's regulated by the piece of plastic in your mouth, which is attached to thin tubes leading to a large tank on your back. The only thing keeping you alive is that tank and the measure on your waist of how much air you have remaining. Now, you're hyper-aware of your breathing, something you're rarely aware of on land. The faster you breathe, the quicker you'll run out of air. The faster you move, the more oxygen you use (and once again), the faster you'll run out of air. Surrounding you is a thick liquid with higher resistance; it takes more effort to move quickly, so you're better off with slow, decisive movements. As you sink into the water, you watch as the surface slowly fades until it's further, further, and then . . . gone. The first dive is both exhilarating and terrifying. Once you realize you're okay and totally not dying, the underwater world is stunningly beautiful. You begin to discover why so many artists (in various media) have depicted this world that's so different from our own.

Underwater art is a significantly overlooked area of art historical research. As a niche subject, thinking about Underwater art in terms of philosophical ideas can provide a framework for understanding the significance of the art form. This way of understanding the art offers one way of contextualizing it within a broader historical context, which can be especially beneficial for niche subjects that don't fit into the art canon. Since the art is actually crafted under the waves, two philosophical ideas become essential for understanding Underwater art: affective response and phenomenology.

But what is Underwater art?

When considering the category of Underwater art, it's essential to distinguish between art that was created of the underwater, and art that was *crafted* underwater. This essay focuses on art crafted underwater. If you haven't heard of this art historical niche, you're not alone. The traditional art historical narratives prioritize the

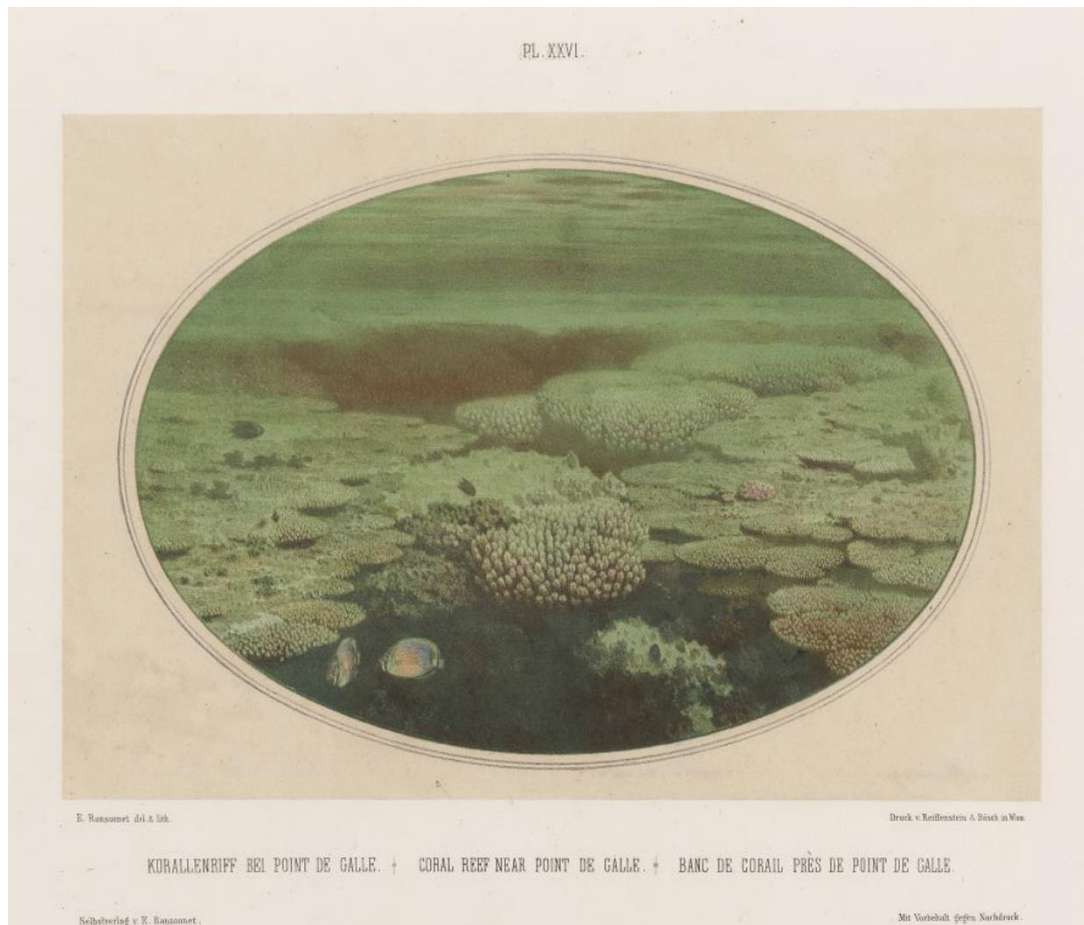
classification of art within types and established “schools.” Since very few artists have traveled deep beneath the waves to create art below the surface, Underwater art is a unique and tiny category.



[Figure 1. Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, the diving bell, from *Sketches*, 1867.]

Moreover, as these artists are separated by vast stretches of time, this contributes to their marginalization. It’s also worth noting that since this subject is rarely discussed, there’s no simple name for it. It could be called sub-marine art, diving art, or, as *Scientific American*

suggested in the early 1900s, “undersea-landscapist.”¹ Arguably, any of the proposed titles would work as they emphasize the essential underwater aspect of the artistic creation process. For this essay, I’ll be sticking with Underwater art, since that feels the most straightforward.



[Figure 2. Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, lithograph made from colored pencil sketches from *Sketches*, 1867.]

As a brief overview of this field, it began in the 1800s with Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, the first artist to sketch underwater, doing so in a diving bell!² This structure encloses a person in a small space while pumping air in from the surface. (See Figure 1.) The bell offers

¹ “Painting Pictures Under the Sea,” *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette*, June 18, 1922.

² Melissa McCarthy, “En Pleine Mer: The Underwater Landscapes of Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez.” *Public Domain Review*. Accessed December 10, 2023.

the viewer a tiny glimpse (through a small window) of the underwater world. Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, inside his aquatic cocoon, created sketches of what he saw. Afterward, he returned to the surface with the sketches and created oil paintings in his studio. His first images were published as lithographs in the book *Reise von Kairo nach Tor zu den Korallenbänken des Rothen Meeres* (Journey from Cairo to Tor to the Coral Banks of the Red Sea).³ The diving bell (of the 1800s) is unique compared to the subsequent diving apparatuses since the bell could only be used at shallower depths.⁴ And because of the depth, there's a horizon line present in the created images, much like you'd find in traditional fine art. (See Figure 2.)

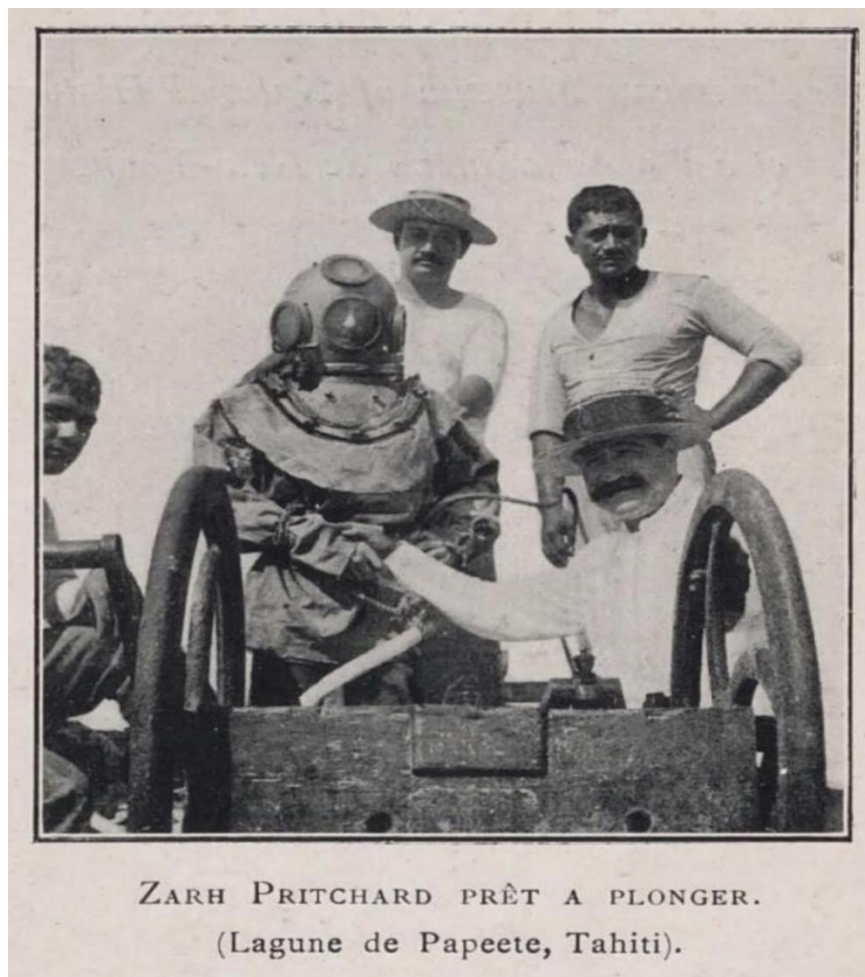
After Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, another Underwater painter entered the scene: Zarh Pritchard. Although he was not the first to create Underwater art, he was the first to paint underwater while wearing a diving suit. (See Figure 3.) But before that, he spent years free diving for his artistic creations, where he would hold his breath, dive deep underwater, and then swim to the surface to create his art from the memory of what he saw. "After having made several descents in this manner, he completes a sketch and takes sufficient color notes to enable him to finish his picture in the studio."⁵ Eventually, he gained access to a diving suit, which radically changed his process of artistic creation. Because of the diving suit, Zarh Pritchard could stay beneath the surface for an extended period and create (and finish) the art underneath the surface. As described by the *Arizona Republican*, "Mr. Pritchard left his painting under water until such time as it was finished."⁶ Notably, compared with Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, linear perspective is not present in Pritchard's work; this is likely because Pritchard submerged deeper

³ Eugen von Ransonnet-Villez, *Sketches of the Inhabitants, Animal Life, and Vegetation in the Lowlands and High Mountains of Ceylon: As Well as of the Submarine Scenery near the Coast, Taken from a Diving Bell* (Vienna: Robert Hardwicke, 1867).

⁴ John L. Phillips, *The Bends: Compressed Air in the History of Science, Diving, and Engineering* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

⁵ Robert H. Moulton, "A Painter Under the Sea," *The Bellman* 24, no. 599 (June 22, 1918): 683–85.

⁶ "Artist Paints Under Water," *Arizona Republican*, September 8, 1921.



[Figure 3. Image of Zarh Pritchard in his diving suit from Galerie Georges Petit. "Exposition de peintures sous-marines par Zarh Pritchard." *Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art*, collections Jacques Doucet, 1921.]

than von Ransonnet-Villez. Unlike on land, where distance is gauged naturally, the underwater world presents difficulties due to poor visibility.⁷ Underwater conditions also contribute to the tonal contrast in Pritchard's images. The low contrast blurs perception, so rocks appear much larger in the dim light.⁸ (See Figure 4.) The very environment impacts the artistic creation.

⁷ Margaret Cohen, "Seeing Through Water: The Paintings of Zarh Pritchard," in *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge*, eds. Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁸ Malcolm L. M. Vaughan. "Painting Beauty Under the Sea." *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1928.



[Figure 4. Zarah H. Pritchard, *Bream in 25 Feet of Water Off the West Coast of Scotland*, 1910.]

There are a few later Underwater artists, such as André Leban and Olga Nikitina. Still, when considering Underwater artists, Zarh Pritchard will act as the case study as he was the most popular of the bunch during his era and offers the most to discuss in relation to affective response and phenomenology. (But these ideas can be applied to all Underwater painters.)

Affective response: What is it?

The affective response is the immediate emotional reaction from stimulated senses.⁹ For example, this can occur when your favorite food is in the kitchen, and you smell it and smile in response. Here, the sense of smell is stimulated, and you immediately react to it emotionally and physically. At its core, this philosophical idea suggests that our emotions are not cognitive, but instead arise spontaneously from environmental and sensory stimuli. This stimulation is distinct from normal sensations, since the latter deal with physiological processes in which our sensory organs detect the environment and then translate them into neural signals that our brain interprets.¹⁰ This is how we perceive the world: through the reception of information through those senses, such as sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell. By contrast, the “affective response” goes beyond the mere reception of sensory information, and involves the emotional (and personal) reaction to those stimuli. This way of thinking aligns with a more instinctual understanding of emotions, emphasizing the direct connection between emotions and the sensory experience. John Locke was one of the earliest thinkers on this, describing pain and pleasure as “simple ideas” learned and understood “only by experience” of “what we feel in ourselves.”¹¹ Without using the term, he distinguishes the affective feeling from normal sensation.

⁹ “affective response,” Oxford Reference, accessed May 20, 2023.

¹⁰ Mahesh Gadhvi, Marlyn J. Moore, and Muhammad Waseem, “Physiology, Sensory System,” in *StatPearls* (Treasure Island: StatPearls Publishing, 2023). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK547656/>.

¹¹ Locke, John, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (London: Rivington, 1689), Book II, Chapter XX.

Affective response and art

Art is not only representation or imitation; artists aren't only depicting what they see visually. Art is fundamentally an act of expression, a manifestation of the artist's inner state.¹² Art is deeply intertwined with the feelings of life. It serves as a medium to convey emotions, ideas, and states of being. This idea adds a layer of complexity beyond the tangible elements on canvas.¹³ Artistic creation relies heavily on the affective response. The emotional resonance transforms a mere visual representation into a profound expression of the artist's subjective experience. The affective response also bridges the artwork and the observer, creating a shared emotional experience. (Both between the artist's affective response, which was translated to the canvas, and the viewer's affective response when viewing the art.) However, the way in which the traditional surface environment affects surface art differs from how the underwater world impacts Underwater art.

Affective response and Underwater art

When artists submerge themselves to create, they engage with the environment in a way that goes beyond the visual. Other senses, such as touch and sound, also contribute to a deeply emotional encounter. As this scene, never seen before and starkly different from the land above, evokes emotions, these feelings are then translated to the artistic surface. The term "translate" is employed intentionally, emphasizing the transformation of emotions into a visual language rather than a straightforward transfer. As with translating from one language to another, something is almost always lost in the translation process. The feeling itself is never fully expressible through art. The experience itself is personal, and we don't yet have the power to experience another's experience. The closest thing we have is art.

¹² Hospers, J. "Art as expression." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 4, 2022.

¹³ Canvas or any other artist medium used.

As an example, Charles B. Hudson, an official of the California Academy of Sciences, catches this idea beautifully when he describes the art of the underwater painter Zarh Pritchard. He eloquently described it as “[. . .] its tranquility and utter remoteness from the everyday terrestrial [. . .]. One knows too that you were not only able to see, but to feel.”¹⁴ In this quote, Hudson not only acknowledges the visual allure of the underwater scenes but also underscores a crucial dimension—the ability to feel. This suggests that Pritchard’s art, painted beneath the waves, offers not only a visual representation of the underwater world but also becomes a conduit for the artist’s emotions and their affective response when encountering the mysterious underwater fairyland.

Phenomenology: What is it?

Phenomenology is a philosophical lens that we can use to understand the world. To do this, it’s essential to consider our consciousness and the act of experiencing the world in the first-person point of view. This way of understanding the world focuses on how our direct experiences impact our minds and bodies. The term phenomenology originates from the Greek words φαινόμενον (phainómenon, "that which appears"), and λόγος (lógos, "study").¹⁵ The term was introduced into the English language in the early 18th century and gained direct association with Husserl's philosophy¹⁶. After its initial conception, phenomenology studies have evolved to cover a wide range of experiences ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and embodied action. Based on Husserl’s understanding, these experiences are understood as our thoughts being directed toward things in the world. Husserl termed this "intentionality" (meaning the directed nature of our

¹⁴ Nancy Dustin Wall Moure, *The World of Zarh Pritchard* (Carmel, CA: William A. Karges Fine Art, 1999).

¹⁵ "Phenomenology (philosophy)," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, accessed December 2, 2023.

¹⁶ Edmund Husserl was an Austrian-German philosopher who established the idea of phenomenology. See Christian Beyer, "Edmund Husserl," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman.

consciousness toward things in the world). According to this way of thinking, our experience is directed toward things only through particular concepts.¹⁷ Then, these make up the meaning of a given experience. However, this meaning is distinct from the thing that is actually present or from the meaning which the thing is intended to hold. This distinction is because phenomenology emphasizes the first person, personal experience of the object/environment, and not the actual representation or intended meaning. This idea is directly related to art.

Phenomenology and art

In the realm of artistic creation, phenomenology becomes a powerful lens through which to understand the process of making art. This philosophy offers a way to delve into the first-person, subjective experience of the creative act. It asks the viewer to consider how the artist engages with the medium and how they use it to explore their personal experiences. It considers the artist's thoughts and feelings. It offers a view of how their unique perception of the world impacts the art that's created. Husserl's term "intentionality" also applies to art since artists deliberately choose a creative direction in the process of creating art. These decisions directly shape the meaning and content of the work. The artist's emphasis is not only on the representation of an object (or direct mimesis¹⁸) but on the artist's direct encounter (and the emotional expression of that encounter). So essentially, phenomenology asks us to try and see through the eye of the artist, and in this case, through the eye of the mer-artist.

¹⁷ David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. by Edward N. Zalta.

¹⁸ *Mimesis* comes from Greek, which means to imitate. The mimetic image is one that imitates a visual representation or at least closely resembles its subject. Mimetic images focus on accurate representation, often by using proper proportions, shading, perspective, and by paying attention to tiny details. Phenomenology focuses less on this mimesis and more so on the emotions and how emotions are translated into what's depicted. See the entry, "mimesis," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 22, 2011.

Phenomenology and Underwater art

When submerged in an underwater realm, where everything is radically altered, it's logical to assume that the art produced under those environmental conditions would differ from the art created on the surface. An artist's breathing patterns are more noticeable as every breath of air is precious to their lungs, knowing that anything could go wrong and that, at any second, they could suffocate. Colors are also altered through the eyes of mer-artists since a different spectrum of colors is visible in water.¹⁹ Then there's also the viscosity of water, cloudiness of the water and visibility, the pull of buoyancy against weights, and the constant motion of the ocean. That's only considering normal underwater environmental factors, but there's also the weather and how surface weather affects an underwater environment. Zarh Pritchard discussed in a newspaper article that, "On days when the sea was too rough for descent, he painted in his studio [. . .]"²⁰ Given the unpredictable nature of the sea, Pritchard had to adapt his approach to artistic creation in a similar manner to plein air painters. So, all of these underwater environmental factors impact the artist and thus alter the art that's produced. The immersive experience (personal to the artist) of the submerged world creates a bodily physicality that transcends the boundaries of studio work.

Additionally, when thinking about Zarh Pritchard directly and how the phenomenological experience impacts his artistic creation, Pritchard himself claimed that painting from the surface is less than ideal: "He holds that it is impossible to catch the colors and what might be called the atmosphere of Underwater scenery, by any

¹⁹ For example, the color red very quickly disappears underwater, since it has a long wavelength and therefore, low energy. By contrast, colors at the blue and violet end of the spectrum have shorter wavelengths and higher energy. When submerged in water, colors with lower energy, such as reds, oranges, and yellows, are swiftly filtered out, whereas blue and violet light penetrate water more deeply due to increased energy, and our eyes can still see these shades when submerged. That's why when the art is created at a deeper depth there's a tonal aspect to the works, as only few colors come across to the human eye. See "Light and Color in the Deep Sea," *Deep Ocean Education Project*, accessed December 27, 2023.

²⁰ Malcolm L. M. Vaughan, "Painting Beauty Under the Sea," *Los Angeles Times*, July 8, 1928.

method of observation from the surface [. . .]. Everything appears unnatural and distorted to the beholder.”²¹ From a phenomenological standpoint, Zarh Pritchard's preference for being submerged in the underwater realm (rather than above it) aligns with the idea that firsthand experience is preferable. The experience itself enriches one's perception of the underwater world.

Moreover, when considering Husserl's concept of the intentionality of the phenomenological experience, Pritchard's emphasis on the impossibility of capturing the colors from above, refers to the directedness of Pritchard's consciousness toward the submerged world. His stance also rejects the detached, objective point of view in favor of, instead, a subjective encounter. This personal experience of an underwater fairyland is depicted on the canvas, inviting the viewer to see through the eyes of the artist. In 1928, William Beebe, an admirer of Pritchard's work, wrote that his art contained an “aquatic perspective” and was something that “no aquarium tank can ever show.”²² That's because an aquarium tank brings the viewer to the underwater world for themselves, one they can see and admire. Pritchard's art offers a unique perspective since the viewer sees the artist's personal experience translated visually onto the canvas. Rooted in the experience, it's truly a perspective that no aquarium tank could ever show.

Conclusion

While Underwater art is an art historical niche, it's valuable and unique as it is rooted in personal experience and the act of creation. As an overlooked area of art history, thinking about it in terms of philosophical ideas can provide a framework for understanding the significance of the art form. Given the underwater aspect, dealing with the philosophical ideas of affective response and phenomenology offers a way to understand the intersection of art, emotion, and the mysterious depths below. This art form is rooted

²¹ “He Paints at the Bottom of the Sea,” *Evening Star*, June 13, 1915.

²² William Beebe, *Beneath Tropic Seas; a Record of Diving among the Coral Reefs of Haiti* (New York: Putnam, 1928).

in the personal experience of the artist and offers something that an aquarium is incapable of capturing. This aquatic realm is captured on the canvas as a loosely mimetic image but, more importantly, offers the artist's immediate reaction and the phenomenological experience of being underwater.

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