

Grace Marquez



P O R T F O L I O

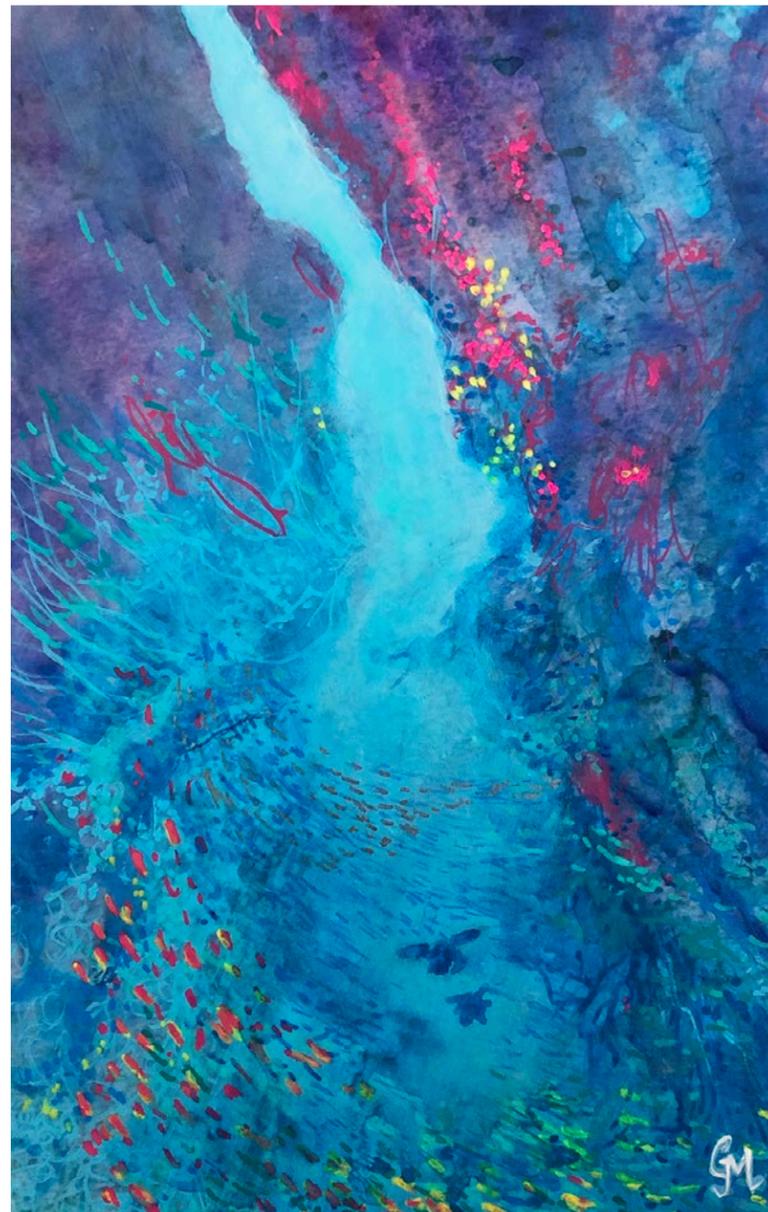




Night Dive, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 40.64 x 30.48cm (above); *Swimming Through*, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 40.64 x 30.48cm (right); *Inside the Vickery*, acrylic on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96cm (top right); and *Circling*, acrylic on canvas, 1.2 x 1.5m, by Grace Marquez (previous page)

Interview by G. Symes
Artwork and photos by Grace Marquez

Artist and technical diver Grace Marquez, who is based in Canada, creates dynamic paintings of sublime underwater scenes, with a keen eye for how to capture on canvas what it is like to dive on wrecks, reefs and in caves and caverns. X-Ray Mag interviewed the artist to learn more about her creative process and how technical diving has influenced her artwork and perspectives.



X-RAY MAG: Tell us about yourself, your background and how you became an artist as well as how you got into diving and later, technical diving.

GM: I was born on a tiny island dubbed, "The Heart of the Philippines," called Marinduque, so I am an island girl at heart. My family immigrated to Canada when I was four, and I have lived my entire life in Canada. I have painted or drawn since I was a child and have a fine arts degree in art making, but I ended up working on the design side of advertising, marketing and tech for my career. In 2020, I left my

career as a creative director to pursue my art full-time.

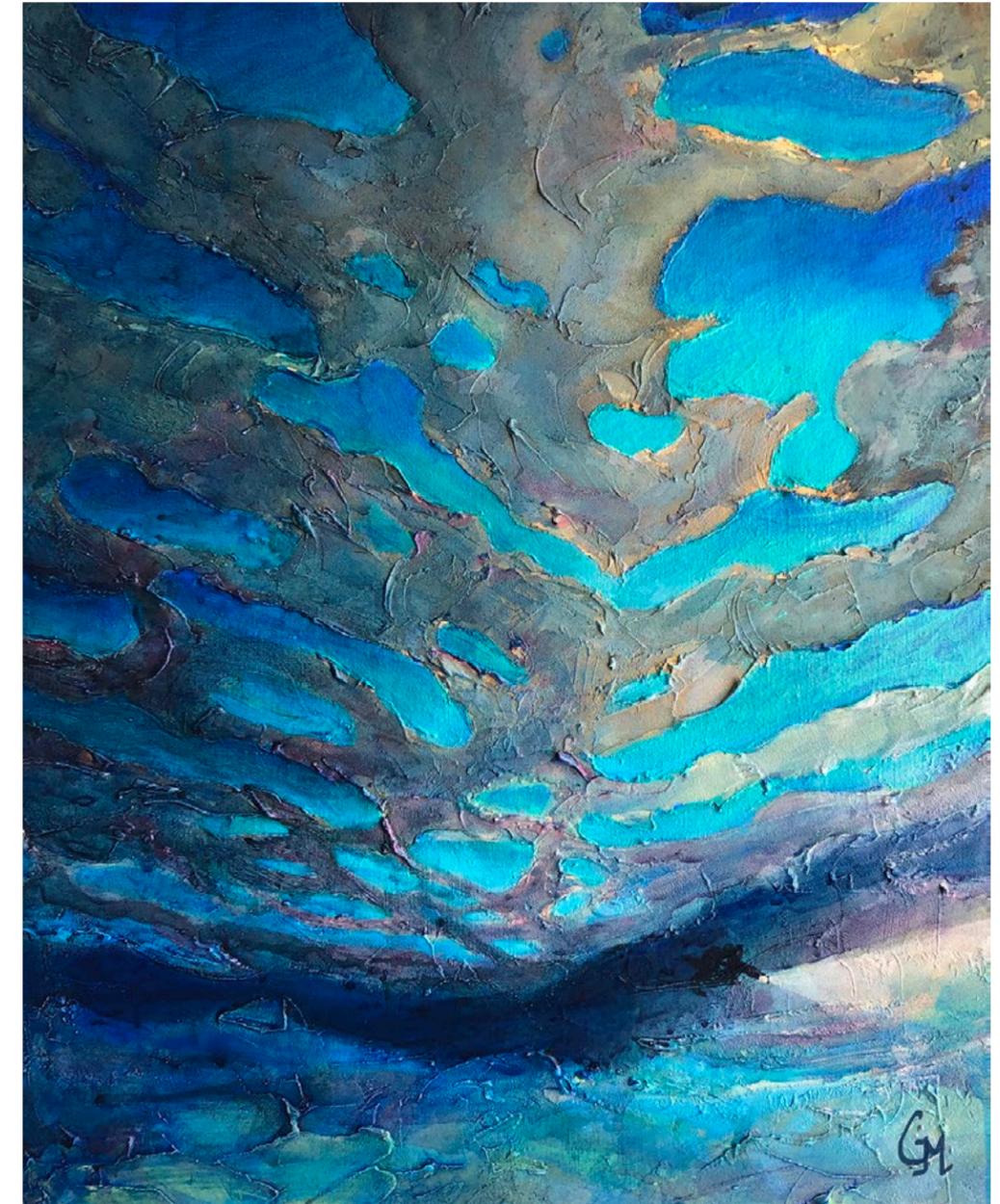
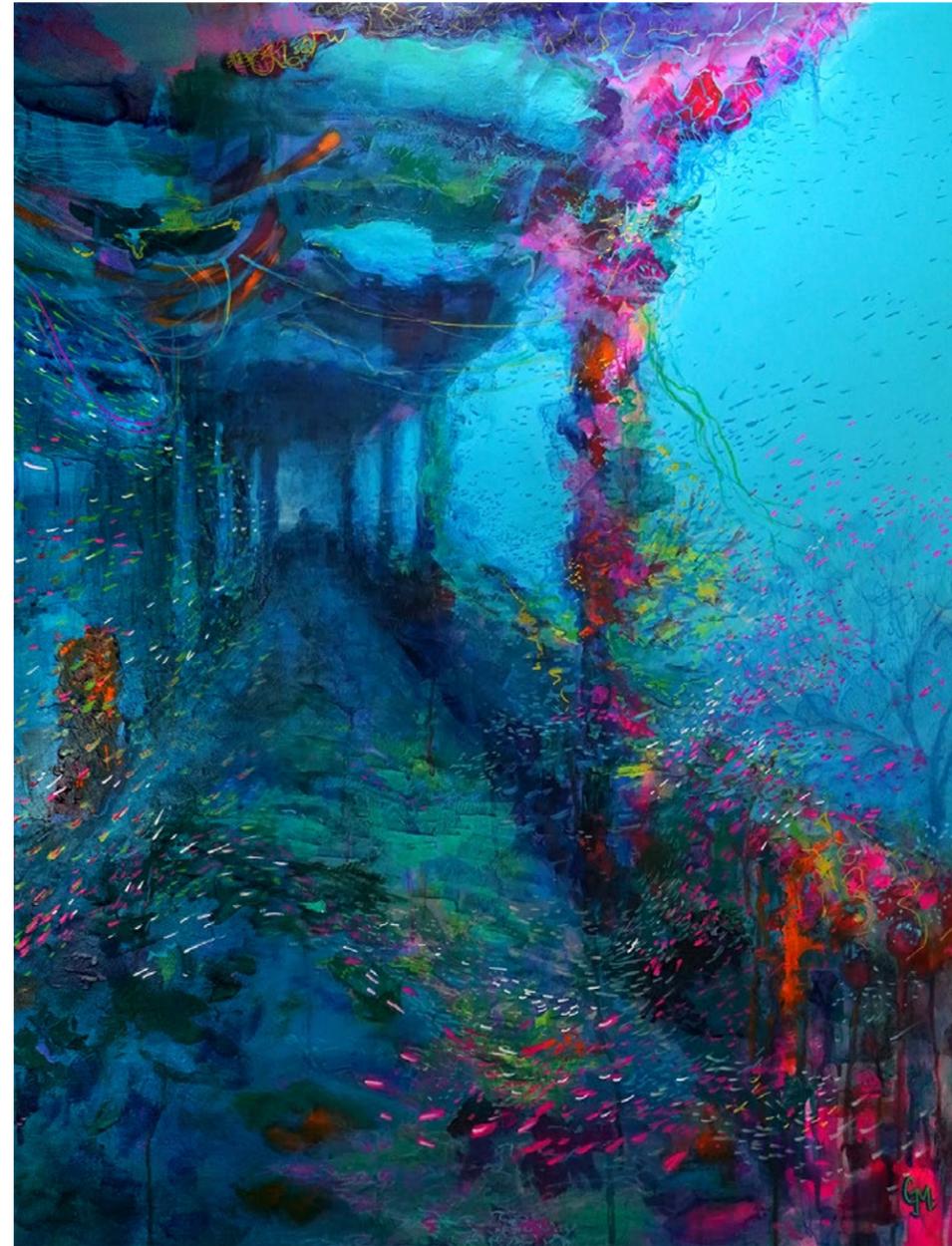
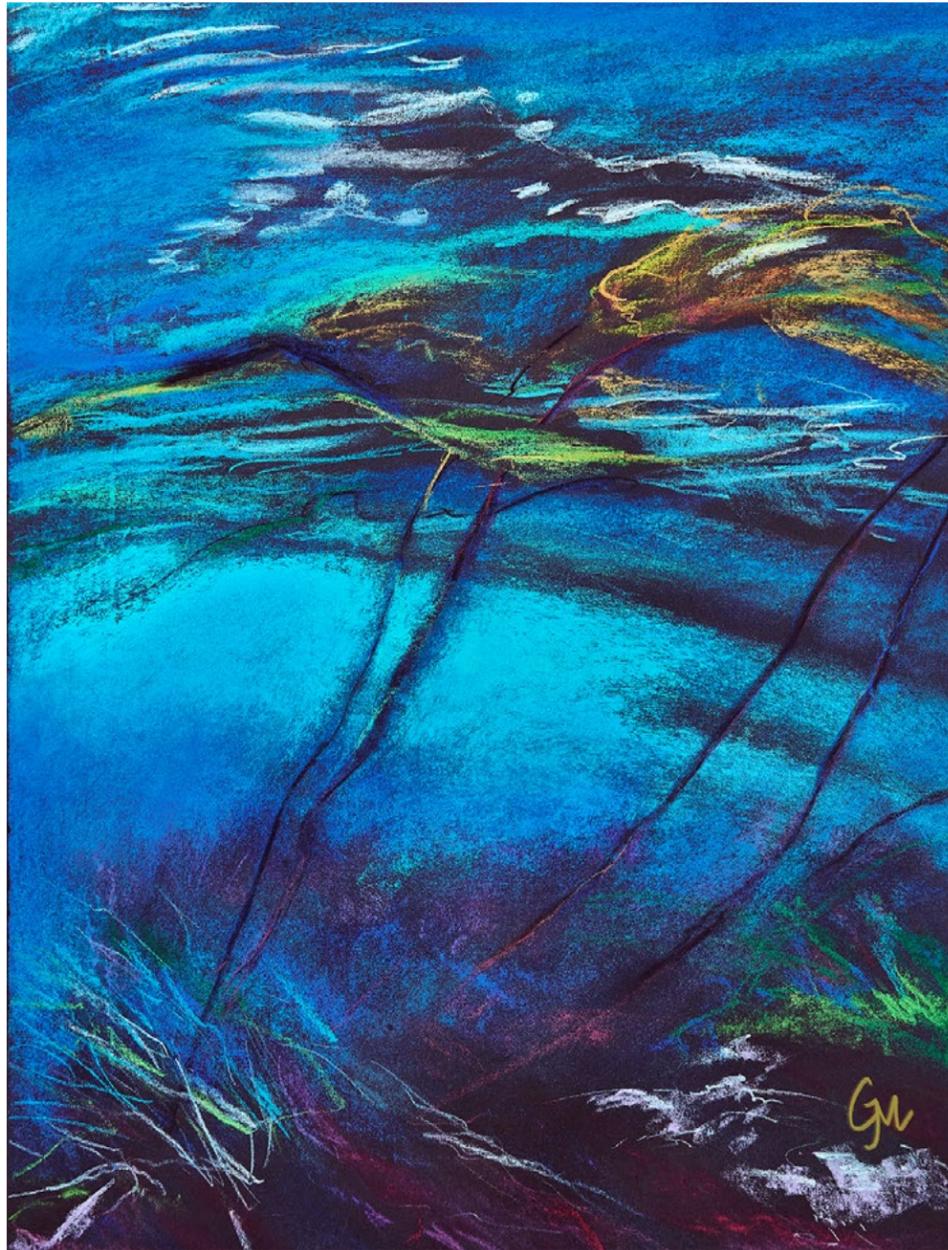
My first experience with diving was during a family trip to the Philippines in 2008 (returning for the first time since leaving the country). In only 20ft of gin-clear water, I saw a clownfish in an anemone, and I was hooked! As soon as I went back home, I got certified in Lake Ontario.

Most of my diving has been in the cold freshwater of the Great Lakes, diving walls and shipwrecks. I enjoyed diving so much that I became a PADI scuba instructor. I got into technical diving because I wanted to be able to stay down longer and enjoy a long-

er dive. As I got more comfortable with each level, I got into cave diving and eventually into rebreather diving as a means of lengthening dives.

X-RAY MAG: Why marine life and underwater themes? How did you come to these themes and how did you develop your style of painting?

GM: I have such a passion for the water world, and initially, only took photos of my dives. But I always felt like they were missing the true essence of the experience. My memory of the dive was different from what my little GoPro captured. An artist friend of mine actu-



Submerged in the Shallows, acrylic on paper, 60.96 x 45.72cm (left); *Reclamation: The Fujikawa Maru*, acrylic on cradled wood panel, 101.6 x 76.2cm (centre); and *Look Up*, acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 40.64cm (right) by Grace Marquez

ally pointed out the obvious—to paint my underwater world. So, I started!

There are aspects of being on a dive when different areas come into and out of focus, and I try to capture that in my paintings, which is why they are somewhat abstract and somewhat representational in areas. I paint my impressions of the dive, rather than create a photographic record.

X-RAY MAG: Who or what has inspired you and your artwork and why?

GM: My earliest influences came from the work of the masters J.M.W. Turner and Monet. I love their use of colour and light. More recently, I am loving the unexpected use of materials to create colour in the work of Gabriel Dawe, a Mexican installation artist who takes fibres of thread and

arranges them in large spaces to create light and spectrums. The installations are really moving and such an original way to make light and form. I am also inspired by Canadian artist Claire Desjardins' work, which is bold and full of joy in her use of colour and mark-making. I have learnt to love pure colour from these two artists and have been integrating more and more of it in my own art, even in the

dark spaces of the underwater caves that I paint.

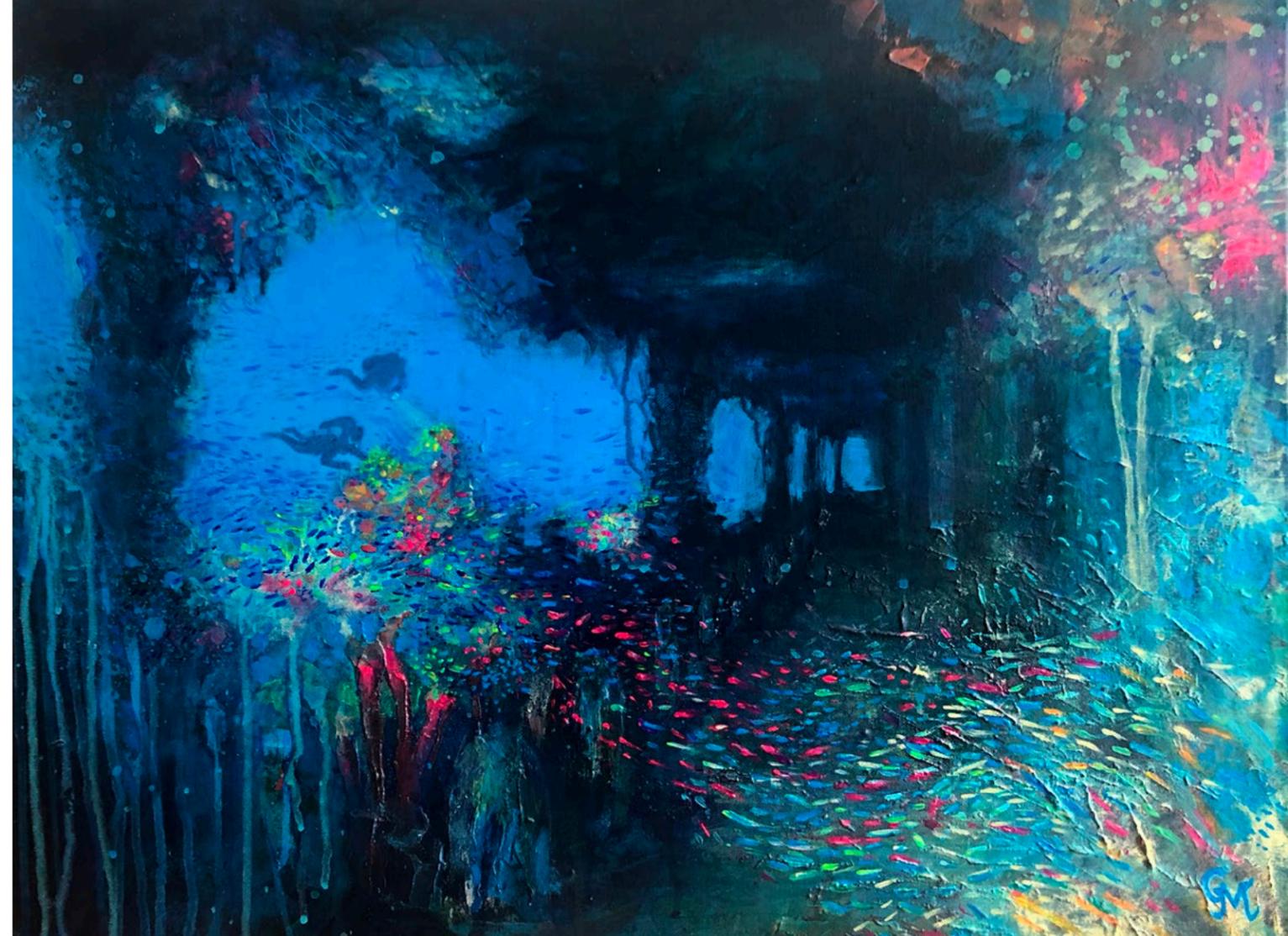
X-RAY MAG: What is your artistic method or creative process?

GM: My artworks often start while I am on a dive. While I am underwater, I experience things and see sights that I immediately want to capture in colour and composition. On my dives,

I take my GoPro with me to record what I see. Back in the studio, I review the footage and pull still shots from it. I use the still shots as a jumping-off point and reference. Then I sketch some different ideas until I come up with a composition that I like. I then start to work on the canvas.

I do not like working from a white canvas, so the first layer I paint on a canvas is a vivid colour, like fluo-

Through the Promenade of the Nippo Maru, by Grace Marquez. Acrylic on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96cm (right)



I Moved Through It as if in a Dream, acrylic on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96cm (left); and *Ice Tunnel*, acrylic on canvas, 27.94 x 35.5cm, by Grace Marquez (right)

rescent yellow or hot pink, or even lots of splashes of leftover paint on my palette from a previous work. This underpainting peeks through in some spots and always gives the painting more vibrancy and life. I then build colours on top, using lots of glazes, so that you can see the colours underneath coming through and anchoring it.

I often work with acrylic paint pens to help shape the composition with lines, and draw

on top of them, over and over again. I also tend to obliterate what I paint a lot, using rags with glazes of colour. It is the building up of many layers of glazes that gives my paintings their light and depth.

I work intuitively, and at a certain point, I will abandon my photo or video reference and start to work purely in terms of the composition.

X-RAY MAG: *What underwater equipment do you use to cap-*

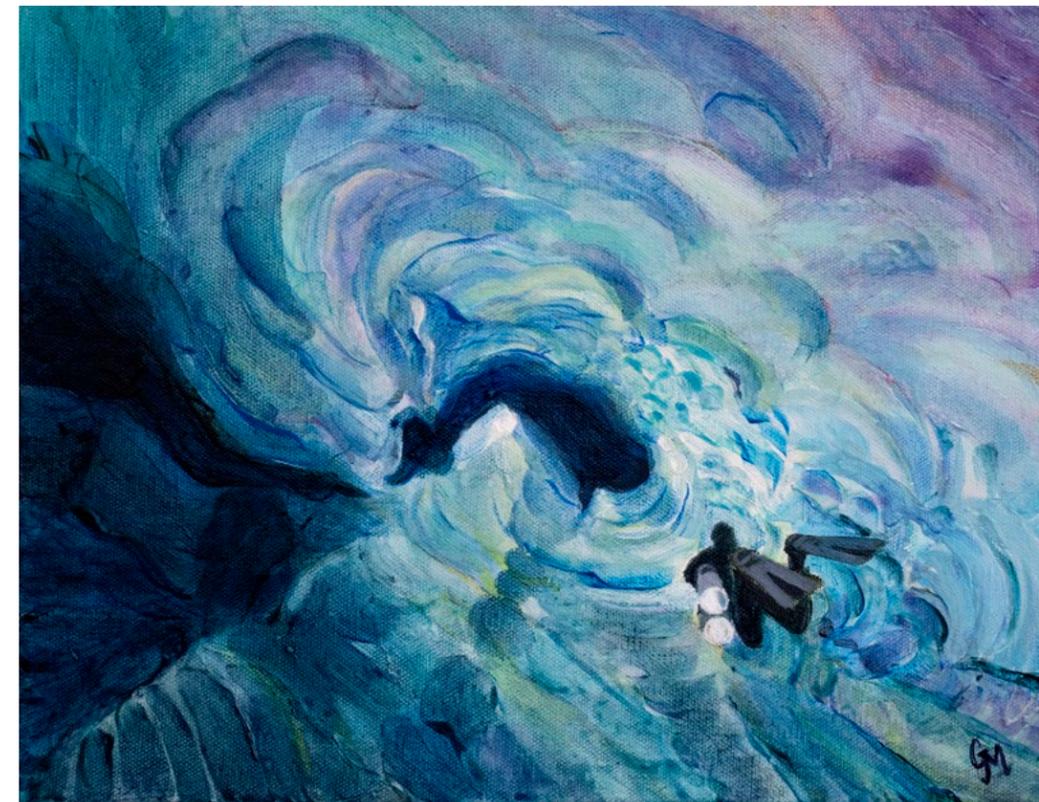
ture source/reference imagery used in your creative process?

GM: I use a GoPro Hero 9, mounted on a tray, with two Kraken Sports Hydra 1500 WSR lights.

X-RAY MAG: *What is your relationship to the underwater world and coral reefs? In your relationship with reefs and the sea, where have you had your favourite experiences?*

GM: Being underwater is a place of complete wonder for me. I feel very much in harmony with the world when I am underwater. As I have progressed in my training from recreational to technical diving, the different dive environments have opened up to me.

It is hard to really say which is my favourite experience in the sea because every place is special for something. But for reef diving, I really loved diving the Sea of Cortez from





On the Deck of the Arabia, acrylic on canvas, 60.96 x 76.2cm (above); *Stern of the Forest City*, acrylic on canvas, 45.72 x 60.96cm (top left); *First Dive on the Acme Propeller*, acrylic on canvas, 30.48 x 40.64cm (left), by Grace Marquez

a liveaboard. The marine life was incredible, with a non-stop highway of fish, even on the shallow reefs. There was also the added bonus of a huge pod of hundreds of dolphins, dramatic sea mounts that rose up from the ocean floor, and a sea lion colony.

I had an amazing interaction with a massive bull sea lion, which roared loudly at me and swam inches above my head, as he passed over me. I have amazing video footage

of his massive wide body and belly passing over me. He blew a line of bubbles to warn me not to come any closer to the many pups and females swimming nearby, and that was enough for me to start back-finching away!

X-RAY MAG: *Your artwork shows an intimate knowledge and perspective of what it is like to be on a dive. Please tell us how you go about composing a scene and choosing*

a point of view or angle, and if and how you use divers as models for your artworks.

GM: Oftentimes, while just letting my GoPro record key features of a dive, I will take a “mental snapshot” of a scene that I really like—kind of like bookmarking that moment in my mind. I try and pan around to capture as many angles as possible of a scene that I like, so that I have a lot of reference material for later.

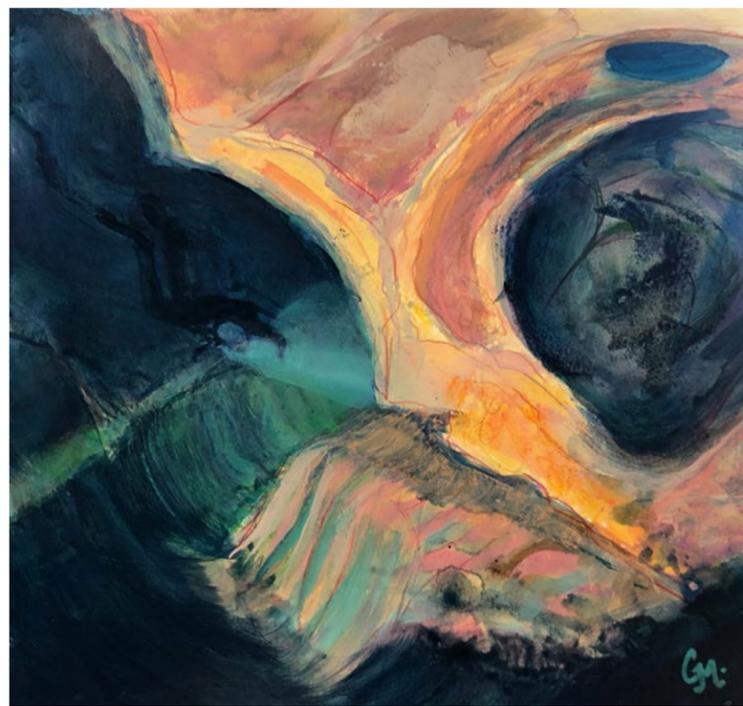
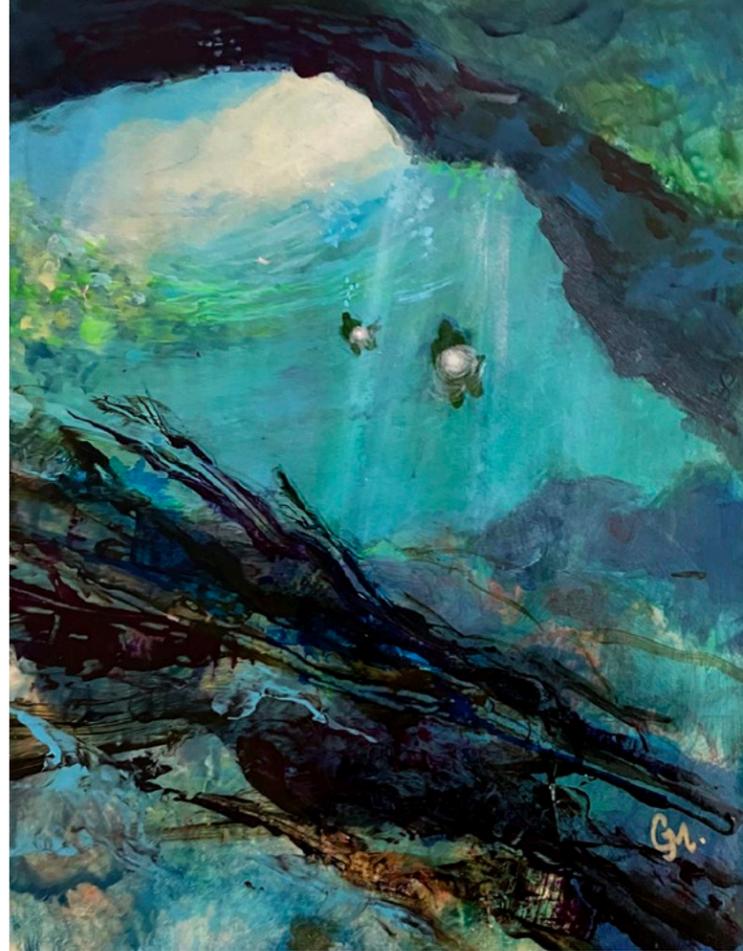
Gliding Past the Rock Curtain, by Grace Marquez. Acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 35.56 x 27.94cm (below)



I almost always know what angle I want to paint when I see it, and it might be because it is a feature of a wreck that is interesting or the way the marine life is moving.

Unless it is a commission in which I want the diver to be recognisable in some way, when I have divers in a composition, they are there for scale or depth in a painting. It is not so much about the diver in the scene as it is about the uniqueness of the place. The divers are there, secondary to the environment itself.

X-RAY MAG: *As a technical diver, what experiences in technical diving have found their way into your artwork? Compared with recreational diving, how has technical diving influenced or expanded your painting style and subject matter?*



Descending, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 27.94 x 35.56cm (above); *Descending into Jackson Blue*, acrylic on canvas, 76.2 x 60.96cm (top centre); and *Follow Me*, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 45.72 x 45.72cm, by Grace Marquez

GM: Were it not for technical diving, I would not be able to dive the wrecks and caves that I have been fortunate to dive, and I

would not have those experiences to paint. Technical diving really opened up a window for me into another level of experiences. As opposed to recreational diving, I have been able to capture more footage as my refer-

ence material, because I am able to stay down longer. I am able to paint some really unique environments because of the technical training that allows me to safely dive there.

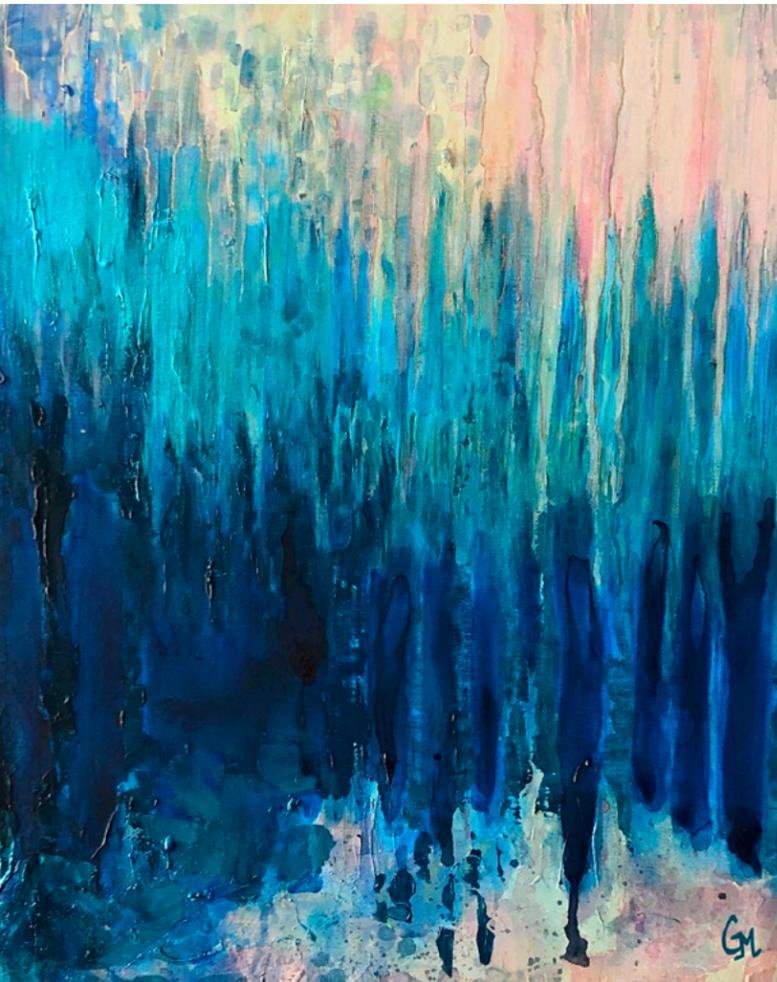
I am also one of those people who reliably gets narked at 30 metres. It sounds a bit crazy, but breathing trimix has also allowed me to have greater clarity and alertness during my dives, and as a result, have a greater recollection of the dives, which I bring into my paintings. My earlier works tended to be darker but my later works, as I progressed into trimix diving, revealed to me that even at great depths in a cave, wreck or reef, there is an abundance

of colour and detail that I can capture in my paintings.

X-RAY MAG: *What is it about wrecks and caves that captivate you and inspire you to create artworks of them? How is the process of painting wrecks and caves different from painting reefs and marine life?*

GM: I love painting wrecks because each one has a story to tell. Each once served a specific purpose. Then, when it was wrecked, it transformed at the hand of Mother Nature, becoming an artificial reef. My latest series, *Afterlife*, explores this—how even a battleship that had served



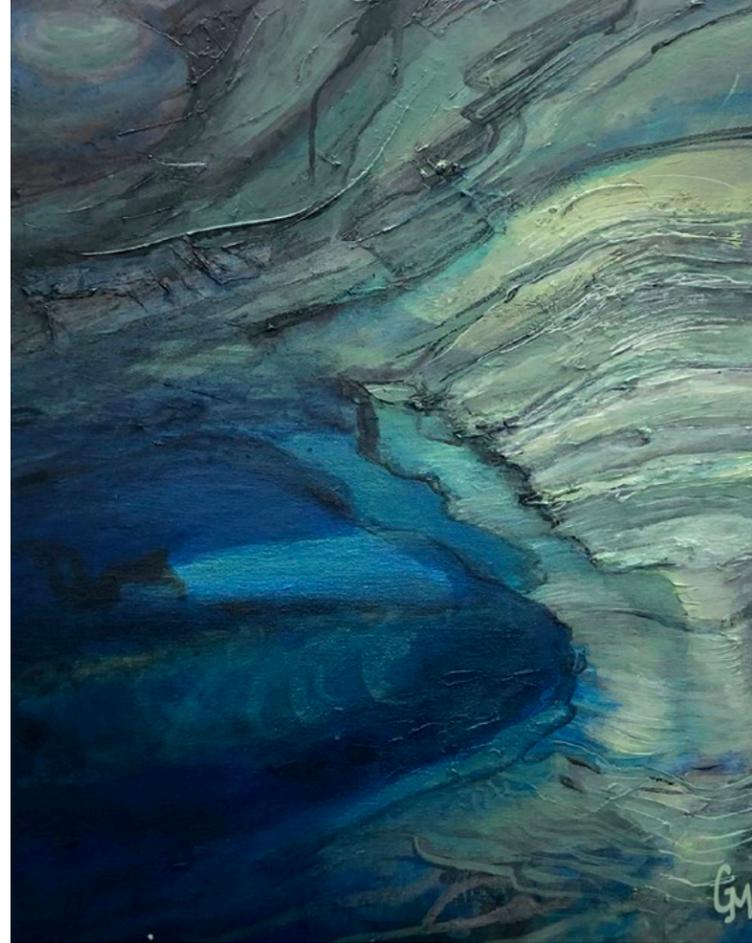


as a weapon of war in WWII, transformed in its afterlife to become a safe place for marine life, full of life and colour.

With caves, I am fascinated by the patterns of rock that show directly how water has carved and shaped it into being over time. I suppose it is seeing the hand of Mother Nature at work in these places that captivates me to record the effects through my art.

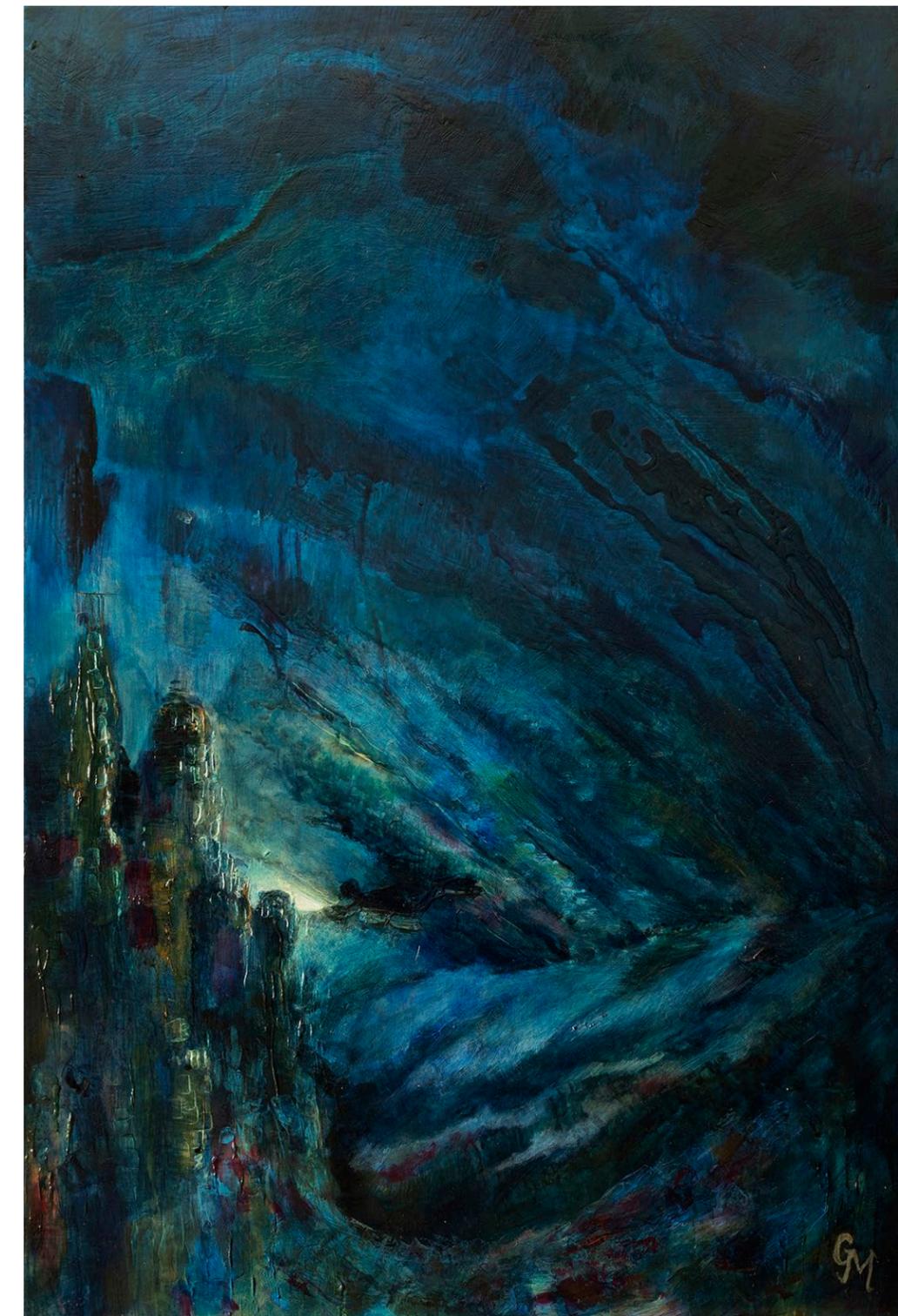
Painting reefs and caves are actually very similar because they are from nature, made by nature. Caves and reefs have beautiful patterns and a certain orderly randomness to the lines of rock or movement of schooling fish. There is colour that is visible and there is a feeling of "flow" in them, which I like to capture in my art, so that it is not a literal rendering of every single fish or coral in detail.

Wrecks, on the other hand, have a human presence, which is eventually covered over by



Oleg's Bat Cave, acrylic on canvas, 50.8 x 40.64cm (top right), and Welcome Back to the Light Zone, acrylic on canvas, 121.92 x 60.96cm (top left), by Grace Marquez

Grace Marquez



The Next Turn, acrylic on cradled wood panel, 101.6 x 76.2cm (above); and The Bedding Plane, acrylic on canvas, 27.94 x 35.5cm (left), by Grace Marquez

Afterlife: Swept Away, acrylic on canvas, 60.96 x 76.2cm (right); *Afterlife: The Service of Sara*, acrylic on canvas, 60.96 x 76.2cm (below); *Afterlife: Majestic*, acrylic on canvas, 76.2 x 60.96cm (bottom right), by Grace Marquez

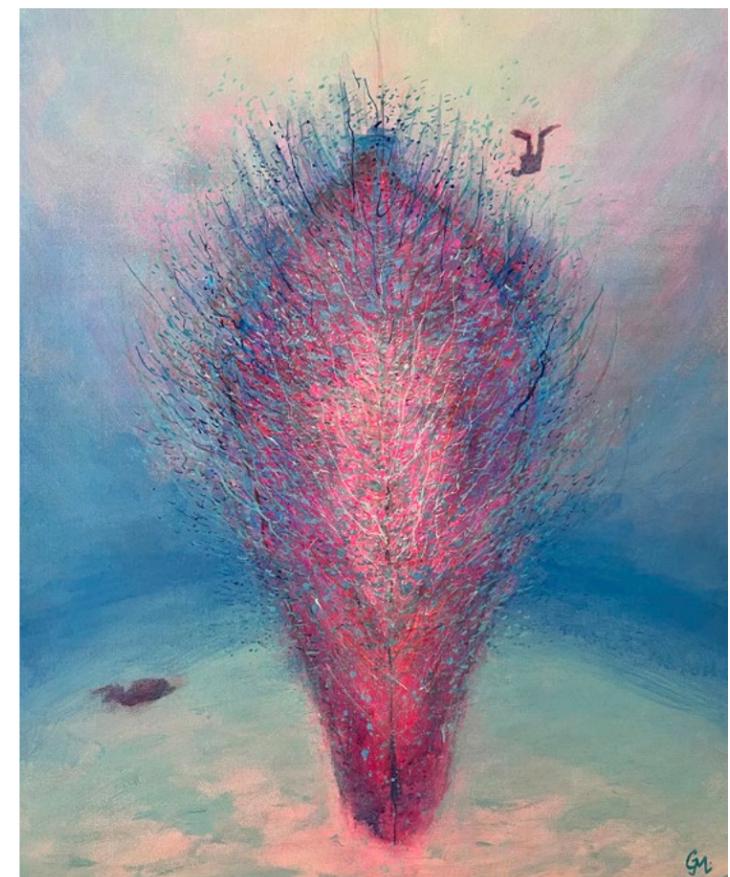


that integrate reef management and reef nurseries into the dive programmes for their guests.

As an artist, I tend to reuse and repurpose everything into and in my studio—yogurt containers and glass jars become paint-mixing bowls or storage, and dish sponges become excellent mark-making tools on a painting. Old canvases, with paintings I am no longer attached to, are gessoed over, or their stretcher frames are reused to prep for new work.

I try to buy paints in large quantities, so that there is less packaging over time, and the packaging is large enough to reuse in the studio, thus avoiding the waste basket. If something does go into waste, I try to ensure that the packaging is fully recyclable.

When it is time to clean my brushes, I let the acrylic particles settle



time. This is truly the impression I get when seeing them. Painting wrecks is a similar process, but I like to stay true to some recognisable features. So, wreck paintings tend to have more of the manmade lines of form and structure, rather than the elegant and flowing shapes and lines of reefs and caves.

X-RAY MAG: *What are your thoughts on ocean conservation and coral reef management and how does your artwork relate to these issues? How you source materials for your artworks and address sustainability?*

GM: It is hugely important. Awareness and education play a

big part in this. I try to talk about these things through the storytelling behind my art. When I speak with people about my art, it is the perfect moment to share some interesting facts or experiences, and things I have seen or know about these issues. I also applaud the efforts of resorts around the world

The Playground, by Grace Marquez.
Acrylic on canvas,
121.92 x 60.96cm
(below)



The Gateway, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 35.56 x 27.94cm (above left); *Curious Kitty at Palancar Caves*, acrylic on canvas, 16.96 x 45.72cm (above right); *Looking Back on the San Francisco Maru*, acrylic on canvas, 60.96 x 45.72cm (right), by Grace Marquez

overnight to the bottom of the container. I pour the clean water that is on top out into a new jar to use and wipe the remaining sludge with a cloth rather than pour it down the drain. Any rags I use to dry my brushes, or wipe with, end up being used in applying paint during my painting process. Old rags, with different textures from paint drying in it, can add beautiful textures to a painting! It is kind of like the reusing of bathwater in olden days—I just keep using each material until it is really dirty, and then, and only then, dispose of it.

I also try to source eco-friendly materials. For example, for smaller works, my table easel is made from bamboo, which is a renew-

able and sustainable wood. I am picky with my art supplies, but where possible, I choose low-toxicity brands, without sacrificing the quality of the paint mediums.

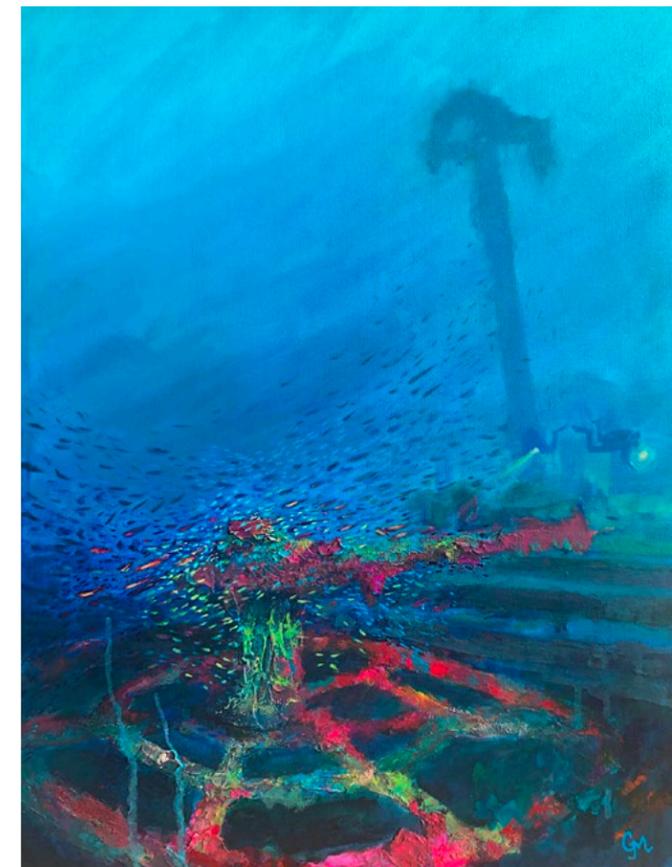
X-RAY MAG: *What is the message or experience you want viewers of your artwork to have or understand?*

GM: There is magic right here in our world, and it is underwater. Through my paintings, I want viewers to feel the same sense of wonder and awe that I have—and get curious about the water world. I think when people are curious about it, they learn about it, and that is the first step in protecting it.

X-RAY MAG: *What are the challenges or benefits of being an artist in the world today? Any thoughts or advice for aspiring artists in ocean arts?*

GM: Artificial intelligence (AI) can be seen as a challenge or a benefit for artists today. I truly believe that people want the life story behind the work and the artist, as much as the art—otherwise, it is just decoration. AI is interesting to play with, visually, to help test ideas.

I think in a world that can often be about a quick fix or a short attention span, art still has the ability to make people pause and find moments of calm, inspiration, pride, joy and even reflection. Art



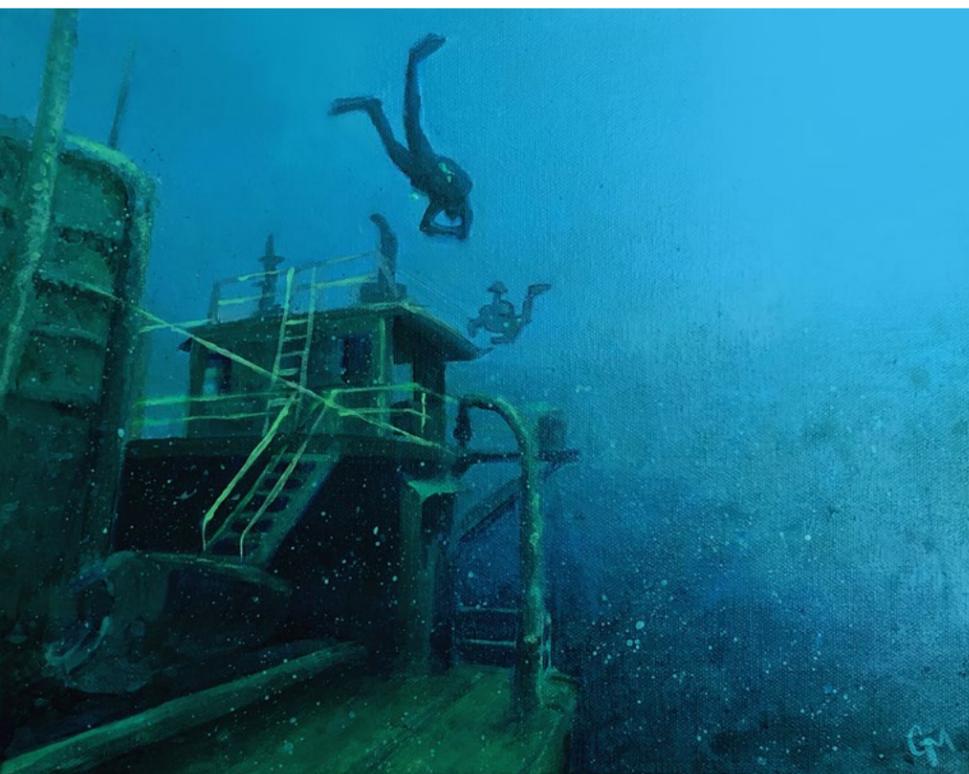
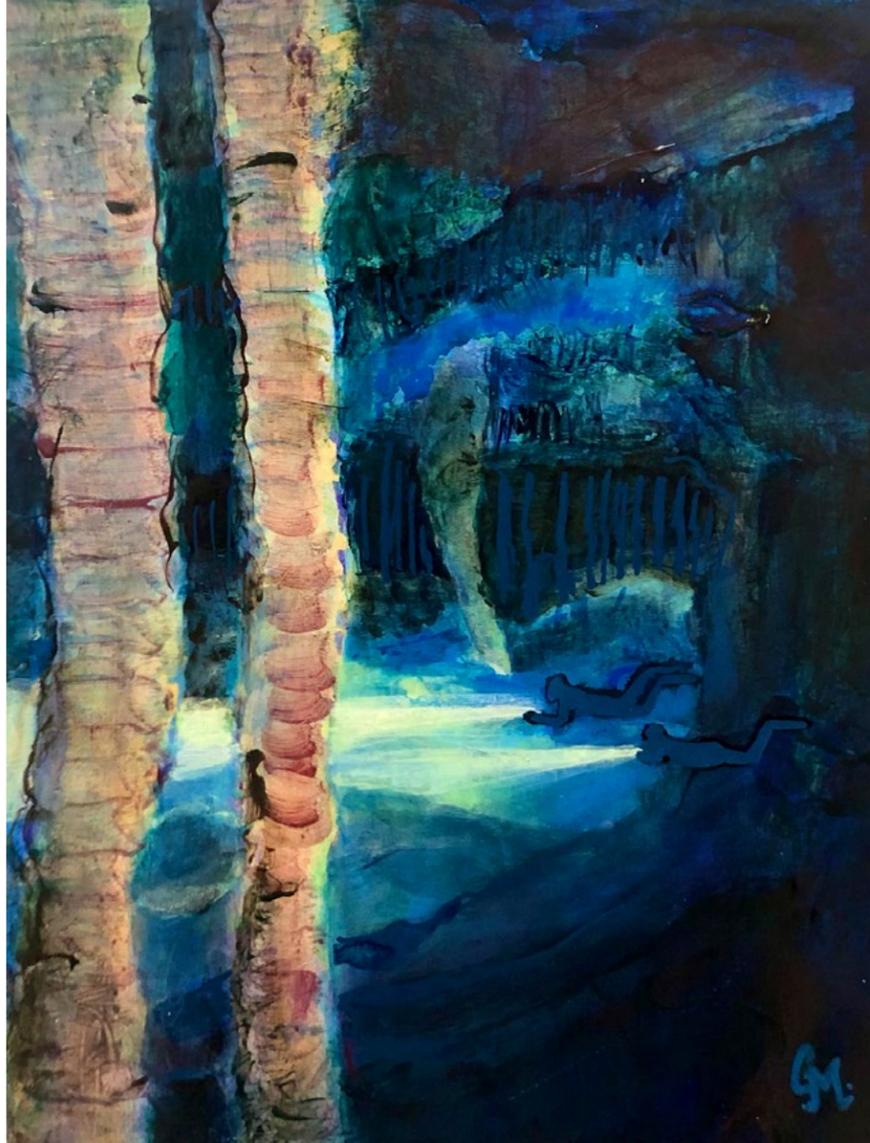
portfolio

Together We Went Through It, acrylic on paper mounted on canvas, 35.56 x 27.94cm (right); *Down the Wall*, acrylic on paper mounted on cradled wood panel, 45.72 x 60.96cm (far right); and *Flying Above the Niagara 2*, acrylic on canvas, 27.94 x 35.5cm (below), by Grace Marquez

can be very powerful for artists—to connect with people. To artists in the ocean arts, I would say: Experience the ocean first-hand, if you are able. Immerse yourself in it. It will permeate your art in a unique way that will yield richer and more original results than just using a photo reference.

X-RAY MAG: How do people—adults and children—respond to your works?

GM: People typically respond to my art with curiosity and wonder. They can appreciate the beauty of the



underwater world and want to know more about it. They ask a lot of questions about the things I see underwater. Those who are divers have told me that my work gives them goals to work towards in terms of their diving, so that they too can experience these things. Once, a woman who came to one of my shows told me that my art made her less afraid of the water.

My most memorable interaction with a child viewing my painting of the bow of the *Saganaga* wreck in Newfoundland was her interpretation of it. Even as young as she was, she said that my painting was really beautiful, with all the colourful soft corals growing on

it, but that she could also see the sadness in it, because it sank. So, it was like a circle of life for her. Deep thoughts, for a child!

X-RAY MAG: What are your upcoming projects, art courses or events?

GM: I am looking forward to a large solo show in 2024. In addition, I have a few projects that are related to my art, including writing and illustrating a children's story book, which features the adventures of a shark, as well as an adult colouring book in which my drawings can be used to help people unwind and relax with a little creativity.

X-RAY MAG: Lastly, is there anything else you would like to tell our readers about yourself and your artwork?

GM: I would say that my paintings are a direct result of pushing myself out of my comfort zone. When I first started diving, I was not comfortable or confident. But I found the right dive shop and people to support me in my training. This allowed me to keep expanding my circle of comfort to the point where I was not only comfortable in the water, but I could take the time to really enjoy what I was experiencing.

If it were not for continuing to challenge myself and develop my abilities as a diver and mas-

ter my own mind, I do not think I would be painting these scenes today. My art is 100 percent intertwined with each step of my growth as a diver.

So, if there is something you have been wanting to do, something you have been wanting to push past, to take yourself to that next level—why not go for it? You might open up a bunch of new possibilities for yourself! □

For more information and to purchase original artworks, prints and commissions, please visit the artist's website at: gracemarquezstudio.com. Or follow her on **Facebook**, **Pinterest** and **Instagram** @GraceMarquezStudio.

