

John Megahan's nautical artwork at Pierre Paul Gallery is dazzling

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John Megahan's "W is for Waves" at the Pierre Paul Gallery isn't just a single letter exhibition. It's a whole new alphabet, including, among other things: "D" for dramatic, "E" for educational, and mostly "A" for great art.



"H is for Horse", by John Megahan

Megahan, a senior biological illustrator at the University of Michigan's Museum of Zoology, has been commissioned in the past by St. Martin's Press, MIT Press, The American Fisheries Society, Arizona Highways magazine, and Oregon State University for nature-themed artworks. But "W is for Waves," featuring 26 nautical illustrations painted for Marie and Roland Smith's Chelsea-based Sleeping Bear Press book by the same title, takes his art to an entirely different realm.

The alphabet series, a Sleeping Bear Press specialty that now has 34 volumes, features topics that, through word and image, blend entertaining text with educational content.

Which brings us back to the "W is for Waves" paintings on display at the Pierre Paul Gallery. Each of Megahan's works for this book - as well as an additional 15 paintings rounding out the display - is dedicated to the wonder of nature by way of land, by way of sea - and, surely enough, by way of sheer imaginative fancy.

Indeed, artworks like this would be heartily endorsed by Artists for Conservation, a Canada-based group of worldwide artists dedicated to raising awareness about ecology and conservation issues. And it's a good thing, too, since Megahan accepted membership in their ranks last year.

Each of his 26 "W is for Waves" artworks is accompanied by a gallery tag that adapts material from the book. And the book is a prime example of how writers and artists can merge their talents seamlessly to reinforce an overarching theme.

The book's cover alone announces Megahan's spirited contribution to the project through its handsome orca joyfully crashing through the wash of a swelling wave. Other plates in the series move within touching distance of maritime fact and fantasy through an A-to-Z tour of the ocean's depths.

An additional 15 paintings in the exhibit find Megahan working out an idyllic view of nature in Michigan's countryside and other wilderness settings, conveying the beauty he finds in nature.

Of these additional works, the 2005 "Female American Kestrel" best illustrates Megahan's commitment to environmental affairs. He paints this striking falcon sitting on the edge of a lichen-draped limb overlooking a background pine forest draped in mist. The bird's self-assurance belies its magnificence as this artwork, like the "W is for Waves" series, portrays Megahan's steadfast optimistic view of the natural world around us.

"W is for Waves" will continue through Sept. 14 at the Pierre Paul Gallery, 3370 Washtenaw Ave. Gallery hours are 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays; 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday; and noon to 5 p.m. Sunday. For information, call 734-975-1050.