**Krisanne Baker** (00:00): Yes.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:01): We both had microphones on mute.

**Krisanne Baker** (00:03): Gotcha.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:04): That doesn't help in a podcast, does it?

**Krisanne Baker** (00:07): No, it doesn't.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (00:09): Today on the Women Mind the Water podcast I'm speaking with Krisanne Baker, an ecological artist and art educators. She identifies her mission as "cultivating environmental consciousness about issues related to the water." The Women Mind the Water podcast engages artists in conversation about their work and explores your connection with the ocean. Through these stories, Women Mind the Water hopes to inspire and encourage action to protect the ocean and her creatures. Our guest today is Krisanne Baker. Krisanne is both an ecological artist and an art educator. During the school year, Krisanne teaches art to high school students. Her personal concern focuses on unsustainable practices and their impacts on water. As an artist, Krisanne creates work that merges science and art. For example, one of her installations put drinking water samples on display. Krisanne enclosed locally sourced water samples in large clear containers and invited viewers to get a closeup look at their drinking water.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (01:13): Welcome Krisanne. Thank you for joining me on the Women Mind the Water podcast. I am looking forward to hearing about your efforts to call attention to sustainability and water using art. Let's begin by discussing what motivated you to get an MFA in Ecological Arts. Maybe you could begin by defining ecological arts.

**Krisanne Baker** (01:36): Yes, I will. Thank you, first of all, for having me, Pam. I'm honored to be here today. The ecological art network that I've been part of for the past 12 years is an international group, and I want to read you the specific beginning of the definition of ecological arts, because there's been so much debate on, "what's the difference between ecological art and environmental art?" So specifically, ecological art is an art genre and an artistic practice that seeks to preserve, mediate, and or vitalize the life forms and ecology of earth. And the difference, I think, mainly between ecological art and environmental art is that ecological art is functional and is a systems-based intervention, and a major goal with most of the ecological artists is some type of systems remediation.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (02:52): Thank you for that explanation. What motivated you to become an ecological artist?

**Krisanne Baker** (03:02): Well, I've always been drawn to water. I was taught to swim as a teeny-tiny, with my eyes open underwater, thanks to my father. Because of that, I've always known that there's this whole other world below the surface that has just filled me, personally, with wonder and I've always been conscious of it. So I grew up spending a tremendous amount of time on the water in a sailboat because my father was a sailing fanatic. And as a child, being on a boat with not a whole heck of a lot to do, I spent a lot of time studying the water, and the sky, and the wind, and it was really most formative for me and gave me a huge amount of time to contemplate my surroundings.

**Krisanne Baker** (04:04): Specifically in my family, we were not allowed to be bored children. No, you don't go there. You entertain yourself. I spent a lot of time looking at the water. I started painting, doing plein air before I even knew what plein air was, painting on the boat as a child. And I found that when I wasn't near the water that I craved it. As I proceeded through my life, I've made a point of making sure to be close to it, because there were a few times in my early twenties when I could not be near the ocean and I found myself growing depressed. And the minute I got back to the ocean, I found that I felt whole again.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (05:01): So Krisanne, you're telling me what drives you to be interested and interact with water, but why not simply paint pretty pictures of water? It might be more lucrative.

**Krisanne Baker** (05:14): Well, that's a great question, and I actually did start out that way. Water has always been a source of calming for me and meditation. And so I spent a lot of hours on the boat or near the water, just staring at the patterns of the water and found them to be infinitely calming to me. And I did start off, as an artist, creating images of water, the surfaces of water. But I found that that observation led me back to my swimming roots of being under the water, and wanting to understand and learn more about what's going on below the surface. And that curiosity and being able to incorporate the science, if you will, and science that I learned through classes. Also, my mother was a scientist, and that was extremely formative for me. You could say that I still paint pretty pictures here and there, but they're underwater scenes of endangered ocean creatures.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (06:42): You brought up the science. So you had the opportunity to do a residency at Bigelow Lab for Ocean Sciences in East Boothbay, Maine. How is it that a science-based institution offers an artist residency, and how did the scientists at the Institute react to your artistic creations?

**Krisanne Baker** (07:03): Okay. To answer your first question, it was a difficult process for me to get the Artist in Residency at Bigelow. It wasn't something that they advertised, but I had seen an article in one of the Maine newspapers about some artwork that had been done in relationship to Bigelow. It's not that far from where I live, it's about 45 minutes away. I just kept pursuing it, and every time I had a show, all my shows have to do about water and specifically those shows had to do about our relationship to ocean and about phytoplankton, I kept sending them invitations. I received a really lovely solo show in this very tiny gallery in my very tiny hometown on the coast here in Maine. And it got statewide recognition in the newspapers, and I sent that to them and I just kept contacting them and contacting them, because another artist had told me that, "'no' doesn't mean 'no.'"

**Krisanne Baker** (08:34): As an artist, you can't let "no" mean "no", or you stop or you give up, and you just keep on. But I was taught as a child, "no" meant "no", so it was a really difficult struggle to be able to do that. But I kept on and I found that once I did get the residency at Bigelow, it wasn't until after I started putting the work up, about eight months after I began the residency, I started putting the work up with the help of another fellow who was in charge of facilities. And almost everybody who worked there that went through the atrium was stopping and they were "oohing" and "aahing" and they were trying to identify the different phytoplankton that they could see. And, "Oh, that looks like a such-and-such," and, "Oh, that's a [coscinodiscus 00:09:31]," "No, no, no, that's a-" It was great hearing them comment, and they were asking me questions, and it was such a really rewarding and confirming reaction to-

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (09:47): That's a nice counter-play, that the scientists taught you, and you taught them to have new eyes.

**Krisanne Baker** (09:54): Right. Yeah, it was fantastic. It was really a great reaction.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (09:59): Great. So can you tell me a story about one of your installations? Describe the thought process and picking the subject and deciding how to deliver the related message. And for those who are listening to an audio-only version of the podcast, can you describe the installation so they can visualize it?

**Krisanne Baker** (10:20): Sure. Well, I'll tell you a bit more about the Bigelow installation, for instance, it actually-

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (10:28): Maybe you can begin by telling our listeners what phytoplankton is.

**Krisanne Baker** (10:32): Okay. So phytoplankton, as I learned in this formative experience that I had... About a dozen years ago, I was on a residency learning glassblowing at Haystack Mountain School of Art up in Deer Isle. And it was August and it was hot, like it is today as we're talking, and we were just wanting to get in the water. But I hadn't swum at night in the water since I was a teenager because of Jaws. If you've ever seen the movie, you know what I'm talking about. So I went swimming with this group of people and the first person who got in, the water lit up electric blue with every single movement that the person made, and when I got in the water, I swim with my eyes open underwater, and so every single movement just felt like I was Tinkerbell and Jacque Cousteau combined.

**Krisanne Baker** (11:45): It was just a moment of absolute wonder, and I wanted to know more about these phytoplankton. So I started researching from other science that was posted on the internet. Thankfully, the internet was in existence at that point, and I found that, not just trees as I was taught, but phytoplankton are responsible for 50 to 70% of the oxygen that we breathe on a daily basis, no matter where you live on the planet. And that they also were responsible for forming the atmosphere, the livable atmosphere on the planet, so that evolution could continue to take place.

**Krisanne Baker** (12:32): But they're microscopic, and it's the invisible. We don't know about the invisible, we don't know that we don't know. So I decided to make phytoplankton my focus, and bringing this invisible thing to visibility. And so I started looking at phytoplankton, and drawing and making sculptures of it that were a thousand times larger than what they actually are in reality, so that people could see them and be drawn in by their beauty and go, "What is this, and why is this little gem so beautiful?" And want to know more about it. Then I had the opportunity to bring in the education, which seems to be a major focus of both my personal work and my teaching career.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (13:25): I've had the wonderful experience of kayaking in phosphorescent phytoplankton, and it really is miraculous. Your paddle hits the water and it's like lightning. How did you and your installation create that? You said you learned glassblowing. How did you have your glass many time bigger than the phytoplankton... Let's try that again, the phytoplankton express that phosphorescence?

**Krisanne Baker** (13:58): The residency that I had, began with me working with the lead scientist, who's the director of the National Marine Center for Microbiota and Algae, and I had access to hundreds of live samples of phytoplankton from all over the world. I started with samples that were indigenous to Maine waters that I was familiar with, and I started by just looking through a microscope and drawing them, day after day after day, to get familiar with their forms. I know that certain phytoplankton were ones that emitted the phosphorescence, and so I started focusing on those, and I also found through research that I could use utilize a phosphorescent powder that was non-radioactive, because a lot of people immediately, "Oh, that's radioactive!" There's a non-radioactive phosphorescent powder that you can use that people seem to be using a lot now for different things, for Day-Glo or whatever, but it's just activated by natural sunlight.

**Krisanne Baker** (15:22): It's not anything that you have to view under a black light or whatever, but it's activated by natural sunlight. And I learned with experimentation how to add that to some of my oil painting pigments, and then I started playing around with the glass pipettes that Bigelow very generously gave to me that I was able to use in my sculptures and some of the test tubes. And I coated them with glue and then poured in this phosphorescent powder, so that if you viewed it at night, these little sculptures of phytoplankton would actually be glowing the same way that they would be glowing in the water.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (16:09): So what are you working on these days?

**Krisanne Baker** (16:13): I'm about to go to a residency at Shoals Marine Laboratory out on Appledore Island off of Portsmith, and I'll be teaching a couple of classes with scientists and teaching them some tricks that I know about observing things in nature, and how to draw things in nature that are moving so that they can complete their science journals to, I'd say, a more intriguing degree than just photographing something. Because when you observe something in real life and have to record it yourself, you're much more keen on observing the details. So I'm really excited about that. And then I'm working specifically on a new large installation of endangered coral reefs that are in peril, and I'd like to do that in glass like I did the Bigelow installation, but have a really small studio so I have to find a home for it first, really, before I can jump into production for that.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (17:34): Thank you for sharing that. So what advice can you offer listeners who want to express their concern for the ocean and encourage others to take action to protect the ocean and her creatures?

**Krisanne Baker** (17:46): There's so many things that people can do, people that are concerned can do. The whole climate change problem is so enormous that it can be overwhelming, but when I work with my students at the high school, I tell them to start with one thing. That, I definitely took from the movie, Racing Extinction, that I show them, and they learned that by using less energy and living more lightly upon the Earth that we can lower our carbon emissions.

**Pam Ferris-Olson** (18:29): Well, it's been great to talk to you and hear your philosophy on art, science, and sustainability. I'd like to remind our listeners that I have been speaking with Krisanne Bakerfor the Women Mind the Water series. The series can be viewed on womenmindthewater.com. An audio only version of this podcast is available on the Women mind the Water website, on iTunes, and Spotify. Women Mind the Water is grateful to Jane Rice for the song Women of Water. All rights to the Women Mind the Water name and logo belong to Pam Ferris-Olson. This is Pam Ferris-Olson.