

Vittoria Chierici boarded a cargo ship, the Isolda, from Holland to Ohio, to paint ... the sea. An exhibit in Manhattan, at the SUNY Maritime College

On The Pirate's Table

by Francesca Tarantino

A hand-painted captain's log. This is how you can define artist Vittoria Chierici's work (<http://vittoriachierici.com>, or www.sunymaritime.edu) exhibited until 14 November at the Luce B Stephen Library of the SUNY Maritime College (NY), in a show by the title "**Sailing Away to Paint the Sea**" – in Italian "*Voglio viaggiare su una nave per dipingere il mare*", containing twenty paintings from the entire collection.

For years Vittoria has been living with one foot in Italy and one in New York. Last year, she "embarked" on a truly unusual adventure when she decided to sail from Amsterdam (Holland) to Cleveland (Ohio) on a cargo ship, the Isolda, to describe through art the experience of traveling by sea. The painter, who studied in Bologna where she earned her degree from DAMS in 1979, continued to broaden her education in New York at the Columbia University and at the School of Visual Arts, where she studied photography, video and painting. In the 1990's she completed her art studies with a two year program of film production at the New York Film Academy. The paintings from her latest collection, totaling 100, express the great power of traveling, the sea and movement. The goal of her experience, which brought together sailing and art, was exactly that of communicating the strength of nature and its irrationality, as well. We meet her at a café in the center of New York. She arrives full of enthusiasm and with a bag containing some pieces from her collection, which she shows us during the interview.

"My best means of expression is painting, but I don't define myself an artist. I studied art history in Italy but I have always wanted to paint, since I was a child, just like a game. Then, after I earned my degree, I decided to take some visual art classes here in New York. I started with photography and then I continued with painting".

When I ask her about her latest project, Vittoria immediately gets her bag and shows us a piece from her collection. The painting she shows us is a homage to French painter Gustave Coubert "*He is a figure I studied before leaving, he's truly fascinating*". We ask her what technique she used, "*I use printed photographs which*

are then integrated in the canvass. Every canvass is painted or mounted on a board. I wanted to use a wood support, to give the idea of a captain's log. If you look in the back, there is a label that says "Special Edition" because the paintings were sold before I left."

That's how it was. Vittoria was able to finance her project thanks to her supporters – 85 of them, some in the US and some in Italy - who believed in her and bought the paintings before her departure.

In March the exhibit will move to Italy, at the Frigoriferi Milanesi (Milan). On that occasion the paintings will be taken away a few at a time, throughout the week, so the show will be "disassembled" by the buyers themselves.

Vittoria is a true original. Fascinated, we ask her how it was to sail for such a long time, and what a typical day at sea was like. *"The project was born in the summer of 2011, I had little funds, but I strongly wanted to have this experience. So, blindly (no one knew how these paintings would turn out) some people believed in me and financed the project",* she continues, *"I chose the route between Holland and Ohio, first of all because I wanted to go back to the US on a ship and not on a plane and then because there are three forms of water - the ocean, the river and the lake. Three very important ways of getting around, very different from each other. "*

So she tells us how she boarded the ship, with her portable studio, a suitcase full of paint brushes and a palette, two video-cameras and a camera. *"A ship has a pace of its own, then since it was a cargo ship there were only four passengers and the crew. A globetrotting Canadian, a 20 year old Dutch girl chasing the American Dream and another Belgian traveler. I would get up early in the morning and first thing I did was filming the bridge, hours and hours of filming the sea and everything that surrounded us."*

She did her work on the stern of the ship, on a little wood table she called "The pirate's table" because, as Vittoria explains, it was full of words scratched on by sailors that had traveled on the Isolda before her.

"I did my paintings watching the sea, but I wasn't trying to copy it. Actually I was not imitating it at all. I was inspired by my own rage and the raging sea. Because out of 14 uninterrupted days of sailing, we had seven days of rough sea. I like it a lot, mostly because it gives the idea of movement that I wanted to capture, given by the direction of the waves and the wind. The sea was at 8 degree of the Douglas

scale when we were off the island of Shirley, and the boat was inclined by 15 degrees. I just loved these situations. I painted mostly those moments, trying to cover myself as a protection against the extremely strong wind that was blowing . My idea was to understand and represent the rage of the sea. Water has a type of movement that can be scientifically studied, but what we see is so random. So what fascinates me is that there is a scientific basis and then there is chaos.

Can you tell us how it was sailing over the Atlantic Ocean?

“You don’t see anything, for days and days, only the curved line of the earth. When we were going towards Newfoundland I even cried. For me the Ocean finally represented stability. I was on a ship – which is like a great mother because she is protective – but around me I sensed an infinite space, where there was no shore and therefore, no responsibility. You don’t have to get anywhere. You can stay there without having to have a final destination.”