

KATHERYN HOLT

Deep Blue, 2019
Mixed media on canvas, 36 x 48 in



COURTESY DESTA GALLERY

JOANNA KADISH Ice Dunking

Confronting my
fear of sharks

Unable to move, struck by a sudden jolt of fear, I stood as still as a tree stump, taking deep breaths of the hyperoxygenated air on an Alaskan beach below Anchorage not long after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami. I couldn't get enough of the wild, sweet smell, breathing so deeply of it I became light-headed. Hovering above me in the deep-blue bowl of a sky that crackled with star-filled light, a dark smudge: a bald eagle's wings poised flat as a board, spreading into a seemingly effortless glide. Around me all sides were rimmed by cold metallic mountains of a bluish-green cast, glittery and snowcapped, dense with hybrid spruce, birch, and alder running to the waterline. Trenches between mountains glittered with ice where active glaciers and ice fields flowed to meet Kachemak Bay.

Southern Alaskan waters looked ominous, a dark purple, with a lot of ripples and crosscurrents, hit by fractal wobbling coins of sunlight, blinding me so I had to avert my eyes. Mark refrained from charging into the water like a wild dog released from captivity, something he might have done in the waters off Hawaii or the Caribbean.

He went in slowly. "Balmy," he said.

"Liar, liar, pants on fire."

"I heated it up for you."

Having swum all my life, practically since the time I could walk, I knew I could do this, I had never felt stronger or more capable, but it doesn't matter how often I dunk myself in ice water, each time I feel trepidation. By August, the air temperature off the coast of southern Alaska dips from an average high of sixty-eight degrees, down to sixty. The water stays roughly the same, midfifties through September, about the same temperature as Bodega Bay, an hour and half north of San Francisco, due to the ocean current moving up the coast bringing warmth northward for a few months.

I immediately began to shiver. It wasn't just the cold I feared.

I brushed aside the things that could go wrong—a sudden squall, losing a fin—instead I focused on the things I had to do well to make it through. Better not to think overly much about the dangers. Mark worried about sharks with all the seals around. I thought it weird that he was voicing what I was thinking. I would never dream of being the one to bring it up to a man's attention, not unless