

MARGARET ROSS TOLBERT

"Resist (Free the Ocklawaha)," 2023
Oil and shellac on canvas, 48 ¼ x 36 x 2 ½ in.
Gift in Honor of Frances and E.L. Tolbert

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INTRODUCTION

This teaching poster features Margaret Ross Tolbert’s painting, “Resist (Free the Ocklawaha),” and is provided by the Appleton Museum of Art as a source of inspiration for any classroom to promote thoughtful discussion, creative thinking and artmaking.

Use the information on this poster as a way to introduce students to the Appleton before a class field trip and as a tool to enhance students’ visual literacy. Before you start a discussion, give the students a few minutes to really look at the poster. Ask students to tell you what they see. After you have spent a few minutes discussing all the recognizable items, have the students dig for deeper meaning and understanding. Having students verbalize their thoughts when examining a piece of art improves critical thinking.

DESCRIPTION OF THE ARTWORK

“Resist (Free the Ocklawaha)” is a four-foot by three-foot painting of a body of water. A bright blue oblong shape draws the viewer’s eye to the center of the painting where a slightly transparent plant floats above a patch of white. The plant has five green leaves and the hint of a brownish-red root. Framing the edges of the painting are swatches of darker colors, like browns and reds. Spots of white are blended into other colors throughout the painting.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Margaret Ross Tolbert (American, b. 1954) is a multimedia contemporary artist based out of Gainesville, Florida. After earning her BFA and MFA in painting from the University of Florida, Tolbert traveled internationally studying and painting. Over the past several decades, her focus has been more local. In her work with the natural springs of North Central Florida, she studies the aquifers, flora and fauna, diving the waters to explore the headsprings. She writes about her observations and sketches ideas, creating paintings both in her studio and on location. A Florida Book Award winner, she is also a highly informed and passionate advocate for the ecological importance of preserving Florida’s unique freshwater resources.

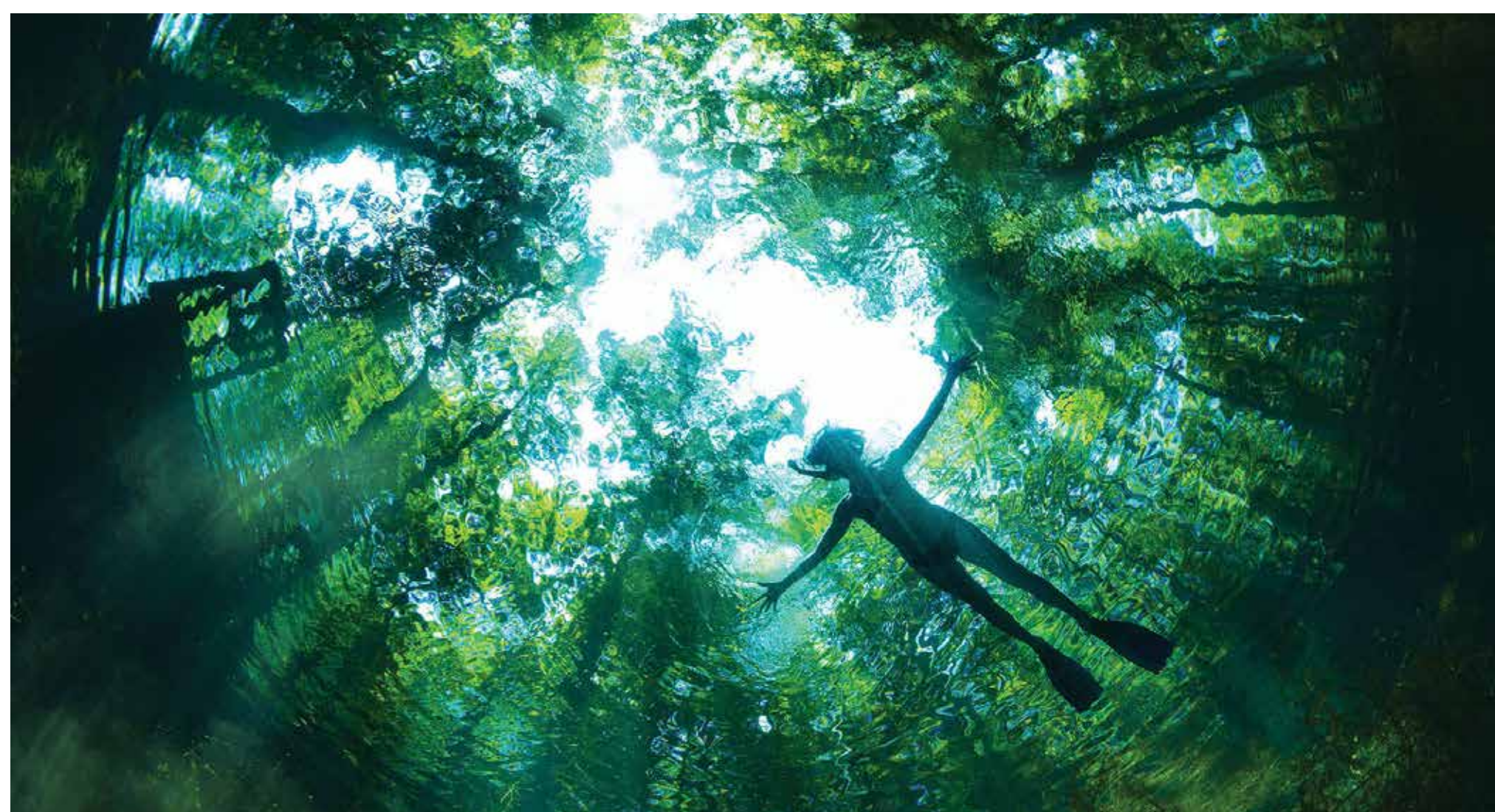


Photo by Mark Long, “Joy in the Sun and Spring” (November 2015)
Margaret Ross Tolbert at Little Blue Spring, Ruth B. Kirby Gilchrist Blue Springs State Park, Florida.

PLEIN AIR PAINTING

“Plein Air” means outdoors in French and thus, Plein Air painting is the art of painting outdoors. Popularized in the 19th century, the invention of the collapsible metal paint tube in 1841 made it easier for artists to transport their supplies and paint outside.

Margaret Ross Tolbert frequently paints outside and quite literally on the water. She places her canvas in front of her in a canoe or floats canvases in containers while kayaking next to them.

VOCABULARY

Artesian spring

Free flowing freshwater from an underground layer that is brought to the surface through high pressure.

Aquifer

A layer of porous rocks and minerals under the earth that contains freshwater.

Deep percolation

Also known as groundwater recharge, it is part of the water cycle in which surface water re-enters the earth to become groundwater.

Invasive species

A plant or animal that is non-native to a particular area.

Nitrate

A chemical that comes from fertilizers and livestock waste.

Porous material

A material that has a skeletal structure containing holes that can be filled with a liquid or gas.

Tributary

A stream or river that flows into a larger body of freshwater like a river or lake, but not the sea or the ocean.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Tolbert, Margaret Ross. 2010. *Aquiferious: 12 Florida Springs with Art and Narrative*. Gainesville, FL: Margaret Ross Tolbert.

Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Springs Division
floridadep.gov/springs

Florida State Parks, Springs at Florida State Parks
www.floridastateparks.org/learn/springs-florida-state-parks

Suwannee River Water Management District, Springs & Recreation
www.mysuwanneeriver.com/35/Springs-Recreation

U.S. Geological Survey’s (USGS) Water Science School
www.usgs.gov/special-topics/water-science-school



Appleton Museum of Art
4333 E. Silver Springs Blvd.
Ocala, FL 34470-5001
352-291-4455
AppletonMuseum.org

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why do you think Tolbert has titled her work, “Resist (Free the Ocklawaha)?” What, if anything, is being resisted?

How has the artist used color and texture to convey the movement and flow of water?

Without the title, would you be able to guess the location of this body of water?

What do you think the darker colors on the edges of the painting represent?

Why has Tolbert included a plant in middle of this painting? What artistic techniques has she used to draw the viewer’s attention to the plant?

DID YOU KNOW?

Water often appears blue, but if you cup a handful, it is clear. This is because water can absorb the wavelengths of colors in the red spectrum, so the color blue is reflected back.

Rivers can also appear brown because of the tannin from leaves and other organic material in the water

OCKLAWAHA RIVER

At 310 miles long, the St. John’s River is the longest river in Florida and used heavily for both recreational and commercial activities. The Ocklawaha River is the principal tributary or offshoot of the St. John’s River. The Silver River is a tributary of the Ocklawaha River and is fed by the springs of Silver Springs. Thus, the Ocklawaha River has historically played an important role in connecting the St. John’s River to Silver Springs for transportation and commerce. The Ocklawaha River also serves as a wildlife corridor for native plants and animals.

Fertilizer run-off and initial development of the now-defunct Cross Florida Barge Canal have caused ecological damage to the Ocklawaha River. Nitrates cause algae to bloom, which harms the native aquatic plants. Both nitrates and low dissolved oxygen alter the natural balance of the rivers and springs. Consequently, the water is no longer as clear as it once was.

SILVER SPRINGS

Silver Springs, a nature park surrounding the headwaters of the Silver River, is located east of Ocala in North Central Florida and less than two miles away from the Appleton Museum of Art. Now known as Silver Springs State Park, and operated by the state of Florida, Silver Springs has been a tourist destination since the 1870s with its peak popularity in the 1950s. Silver Springs, the largest artesian spring in the world, is known for its crystal-clear water and glass-bottomed boats that allow visitors to look at life underwater. Silver Springs and other Florida attractions lost their popularity with the opening of Walt Disney World in 1971, but Silver Springs has seen a re-emergence with the popularity of eco-tourism.

SUGGESTED CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Gel Printmaking

Using gel plates, layer different colors of acrylic paint to create water in the style of Tolbert. Add to the texture by using a cotton swab and stamps. Rub a piece of paper on the gel plate and peel it back to reveal your design.

Crayon Resist Painting

Using lines, draw the flow of water with a white crayon on a white piece of paper. Add aquatic plants and wildlife. Paint over the paper with green and blue watercolor. The wax of the crayon will resist the paint, and the design will be revealed when painted.

Collaborative Paper Mosaic

Cut paper into six-inch squares for the mosaic. Have each student in a class decorate their square as body of water however they want. Be sure they add aquatic plants and wildlife to create more variety in their section of water. Combine the squares into an amorphous shape on a wall to represent the flow of water and highlight the individuality of each square.



Postcard with aerial photograph of Silver Springs with location map of underwater scenes, ticket office and glass-bottom boat landing. Photograph by Henry R. Bezzant (1887–1984), 1929.

River Map

Choose a Florida river and draw it by hand using pen on paper. Go back and add color to the map with watercolors. Draw the whole river or just a section. Notate important features or places of interest along the river. Use color to mark different terrains.

Aquifer in a Bottle

Using a two-liter plastic bottle, create a model of an aquifer using sand, soil and gravel to demonstrate how surface water is filtered through the earth to become groundwater.

Freeform Poetry

Write a freeform poem describing your sensory experiences while swimming, canoeing or even walking by a body of water. Read Margaret Ross Tolbert’s poem below for inspiration.

“BLEW LIGHT INTO my FACE” by Margaret Ross Tolbert, 2010

What are the Springs?

They are a FORCE.

I enter the springs

I am ENGULFED in a force

Its waters POUR OUT

of deep caverns of the aquifer

I see it, I feel it

It ENVELOPS me

in a STORM of white limerock

like a torrent of stars

In my FACE, my hair, my eyes

It TRANSPORTS me upward

In a beam of particles of light



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