

Jessica Straus: *Stemming the Tide*

Brattleboro Museum & Art Center, Brattleboro, VT • brattleboromuseum.org • Through October 19, 2024

Jessica Straus grew up within feet of the ocean in New Hampshire, taking for granted the extraordinary, magical expanse of water. She has become keenly aware of the fragility of so much that has become endangered, particularly the collapse of the cod-fishing industry in Newfoundland where she has traveled many times while researching for her current exhibit, *Stemming the Tide*.

Out of these profound experiences, Straus has created a large quilt-like map of squares linked together. She created a technique of linking the 13 x 13 inch squares with grommets and inventive clips. The ocean and land included span the coastal corridor from Greenland down to Cape Cod to emphasize the interconnectedness of these seemingly far-flung regions. The map which is 12 x 21 feet nearly fills the Mary Sommer Room gallery from floor to ceiling, and the viewer is met by a school of carved white cod.

It is impossible not to be drawn into this immersive installation, which also features hand knotted fishing nets hung along the walls. The nets



Installation view of *Stemming the Tide*. Photo: Will Howcroft.

partially occlude photographs of map pieces which Straus set afloat in the waters of Newfoundland and Maine. The high definition color photographs of the ocean and coast are veiled by the black nets and seem to be a warning that lest we heed the signs, collapse of fishing industries along the coast could be in the future.

Straus' work is both passionate and exquisitely rendered. She is a consummate wood carver, and the school of more than fifty cod carved out of boxwood have textured surfaces from the rhythical chisel marks, lending them a sense of life. Their delicate attached fins are also hand carved.

Straus knotted each of the fishing nets herself out of waxed polyester twine having learned the traditional technique from Pat Hickman, a fiber artist, and having seen the same techniques in Newfoundland. The installation is labor intensive, and Straus' dedication to her craft is remarkable.

There is a meditative quality to Straus' work and her concern for the environment. The effects of climate change are clearly presented in a unique and thought-provoking installation. — *B. Amore*