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Stories for Good: Minnesota Marine Art Museum provides hands-on experiences

Caitlin Crouchet Minnesota Marine Art Museum

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Amara Hanson and her mother, Samantha Hanson, explore the discovery dock in the exhibition Kristian Brevik: Art for Fish/Art for Humans at the Minnesota Marine Museum.

Caitlin Crouchet, MMAM

Caitlin Crouchet Minnesota Marine Art Museum

It is not uncommon for visitors wandering through the galleries at the Minnesota Marine Art Museum in Winona to be greeted with something new every time they visit. From the art on the wall, to the books in the lounge, to the items in the store, the museum offers many ways for all kinds of visitors to think about our relationship to water. Purpose built in 2006, MMAM has evolved into a dynamic and welcoming place committed to sparking wonder and creating a more connected and compassionate world for all.

Beyond visitors walking through the galleries and looking at artwork, MMAM has a number of inviting "discovery docks" dotted throughout the museum. These hands-on interactive gallery stations offer visitors of all ages and abilities another way to connect with the exhibitions. The MMAM engagement staff, Julie Heukeshoven (programs manager), Dave Casey (associate curator) and Heather Casper (curator of engagement, impact and learning), are the creative minds behind these varied and enticing interactive experiences.

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“Months before an exhibit comes together we brainstorm what ‘discovery docks’ we can develop for the upcoming year. It’s absolutely one of my favorite meetings each year. We know we have great art to look at and we ask ourselves, ‘How can we give visitors a chance to participate?’ The ideas are always exciting,” says Casper.

In 2023, MMAM’s engagement staff developed a number of these "discovery docks" so visitors could experience the exhibitions in a new way.

Artist Marlena Myles (Spirit Lake Dakota) created an augmented reality experience that allowed visitors to "unlock" virtual artworks that floated throughout the gallery, providing another layer of interaction to Ian Hanesworth’s exhibition, Fragments of this Living Earth. Not only entertaining and full of surprise, visitors also had the opportunity to learn about the plants’ significance within Dakhóta culture and lifeways. In a recent exhibition, Kristian Brevik: Art for Fish/Art for Humans, visitors could assemble their own fish sculpture, using a light table to play with light, color and texture. And in Liz Sexton: Out of Water, visitors could pose with images of Liz Sexton’s paper mache masks, snap a selfie and share with friends.

“The interactive areas are fun for all ages and such a great way to get children interested and involved in art. We specifically enjoyed the lantern exhibit and painting with fish. I’m thrilled to see MMAM giving visitors of all ages the opportunity to explore the world of art,” says Samantha Hanson, who visited MMAM with her children at a recent Seasonal Saturday, one of the museum's quarterly community arts access programs

With each new "discovery dock," the engagement staff are always thinking of new ways to deepen visitors' experiences and connections to the artworks in the museum.

“In 17 years of creating these things, I might be most excited for the discovery dock opening in just a few weeks as part of our Across a Wide Ocean exhibition, staged in the Stephen and Barbara Slaggie Family Gallery. Visitors will have a chance to draw a picture about what is beautiful about their chosen or given family and then add it, digitally, to a digital quilt projected in the gallery walls,” says Casper.

MMAM is grateful to the hundreds of donors and dozens of foundations, including the Elizabeth Callender King Foundation, that make these experiences possible. Their unwavering support has not only allowed MMAM to see unprecedented growth in its engagement numbers, they allow the museum to “go beyond counting heads and really make heads count,” notes Scott Pollock, executive director. To learn more about the 2024 exhibitions at MMAM, and plan your next encounter with a "discovery dock," please visit **MMAM.org**.

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