

Ashfield photographer's images of frozen ice fishing holes join Bates Museum of Art's collection

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Ashfield resident Erik Hoffner has been skating out onto the ice for 20 years to capture recently frozen ice fishing holes and the unique, eye-catching formations they make.

Now, a few of the images that make up Hoffner's "Ice Visions" series have joined the Bates Museum of Art's permanent collection in Lewiston, Maine.

"The series is really about connecting to the elements," said Hoffner, "and finding a sense of wonder even in mundane things."

The photographer and environmental journalist described the freshly frozen fishing holes as looking like "all kinds of stars or cells or galaxies."

Their addition to the Bates Museum's collection is made especially notable by the fact that the collection also houses a few original images captured by Wilson "Snowflake" Bentley, who was the first to photograph individual snow crystals and showcase their unique formations. Hoffner's work is inspired by Bentley's, as each ice fishing hole is also distinctly striking.



Dan Mills, director of the Bates Museum of Art, discovered Hoffner's work at an exhibit at the Bennington Museum. He said Hoffner's photos were "interesting in their own right and had a wonderful relationship with works already in the collection."

"We have a small collection of Snowflake Bentley's photographs, and Erik's photos were in an exhibition that revolved around Snowflake Bentley and his work," Mills noted, describing the "Ice Visions" series as "very much visually compelling."

"It's been a goal to have my work collected by an institution, and it's special because the Bates Museum has original Snowflake Bentley prints, who showed the world for the first time the magic and beauty of each snowflake," Hoffner said. "His work is an influence on mine, so to be living together in this collection feels like the perfect place for it."

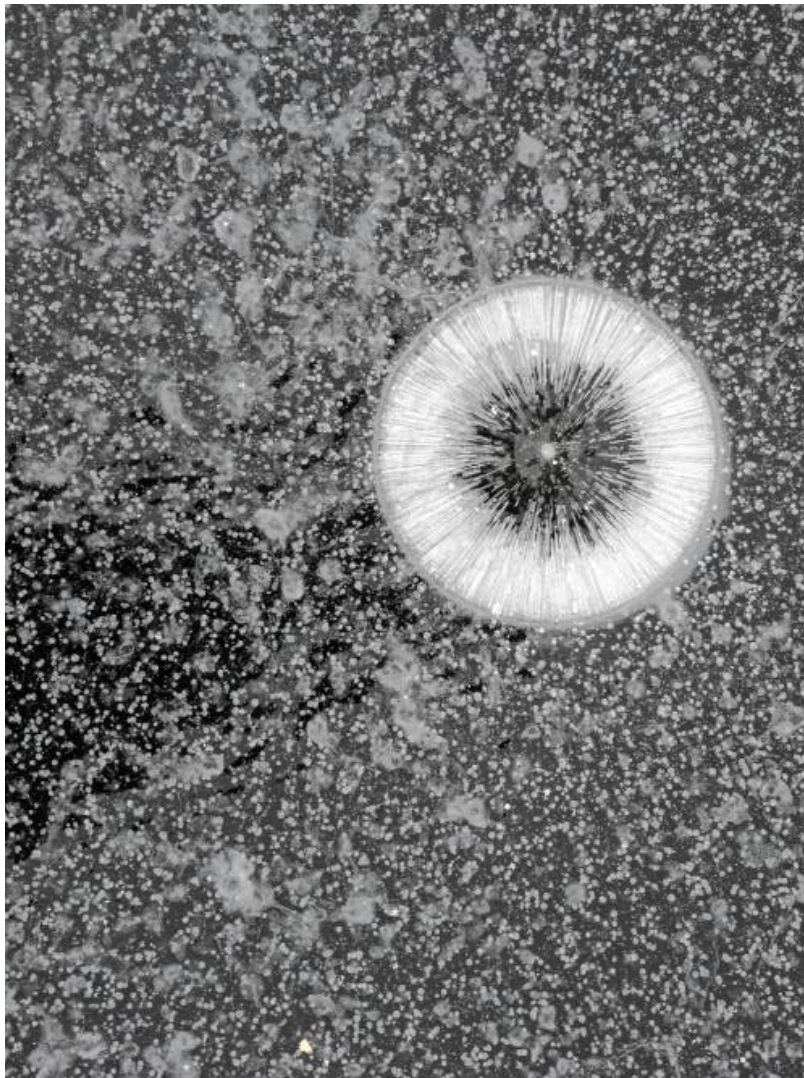
Hoffner observed that his images, after so many years, have come to document changes in the ice and the climate. Most of his photos are taken in Franklin County, on Lake Wyola in Shutesbury, Ashfield Lake and Upper Highland Lake in Goshen.

"For the first few years they looked like eye holes or wormholes or black holes. ... Then, just a few years ago, I noticed the way the bubbles were making these formations that were very different because the ice was so thin," Hoffner explained. "As the bubbles that come up from below hit the freezing water, they start to stretch, but if you don't get enough ice formation overnight, the bubbles instead pool right under the surface. The images have started to look kind of weird, like distorted faces and weird animals."

Hoffner is an ice skater and fisherman himself, and comes from a family of photographers. He noted that ice fishing and ice skating are important parts of the culture in this region, and he has been “increasingly seeing that this part of our community is changing” due to climate change. This environmental transformation has inspired him to capture as much as possible while there’s still ice to skate and fish on.

“Some winters I don’t get really anything because it snows early or the ice is not good,” he said. He referenced ice fishers in places like New Jersey, where the ice has not been viable for years. “Sometimes we also have super cold weather, and that’s also a sign of climate change because the jet stream is being altered.”

Hoffner plans to continue taking photos every winter, and is curious to watch how they progress and change over time as the climate does. He is now working on a project in Maine capturing the intertidal zone, to highlight the beauty and ecology of it.



The name of his photo series, “Ice Visions,” references the fact that each viewer will see something different in these holes in the ice. At exhibits, he has asked attendees what they see in the ice fishing holes, and everyone gives a unique response.

“Across the board, they’re pretty overwhelmed by the beauty that they see in these things,” he said.

Hoffner said that he’ll often interact with ice fisherman while taking his photographs, and they regularly comment that they, too, have noticed the beauty in them.

“There’s this stigma about ice fishing that it’s an unpleasant activity, but these people are connecting with the elements and creating beauty,” he said. “I really enjoy that juxtaposition and showing people that beauty is everywhere if you look for it.”



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