

# ART NEW ENGLAND

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Cape Ann Historical Museum/Gloucester, MA

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## **ERMA WHEELER: LANDSCAPES REAL AND IMAGINED**

Wheeler uses the Cape Ann landscape as a starting point for works that are at once personal and universally accessible. Her sumptuous watercolors—ranging from landscapes painted on-site from the 1970s through the 1990s to abstract studio works such as the late 1970s series of OE paintings—transcend place, time, and medium with self-contained strength and wholeness.

Wheeler uses watercolor with an independence that belies the traditional constraints of the medium. Her saturated, muscular paintings exploit the full range of her chosen material as they counterbalance lightness, luminosity, and clarity against areas of deliciously brooding muddiness; crisp edges bump up against softly flowing washes, and saturated, intense colors play alongside watery, muted passages.

Underlying Wheeler's work is a keen ability to pull apart her subject, to dig down, uncover, and articulate physical structure. Her black-and-white drawings attest to this; regardless of whether she is exploring an onion or a rocky Cape Ann beach, she lays bare the patterns and rhythms of her subject. Her paintings expose not only the physical structure of the landscape but also an emotional tenor; in the *Basalt* series, she counters the newness of dawn with the timelessness of rock. In paintings such as *Blue Hill Landscape*, Wheeler is able to present the vastness of



Erma Wheeler, *Quarried Waters #1*, watercolor, 10 x 14", 1999.

a vista while conveying with a rich palette and dynamic juxtapositions of color both the feel and look of the landscape.

Wheeler's work redefines the familiar, often-painted Cape Ann landscape. Each image feels like a whole world unto itself: Rather than a fragment of a whole, it is the whole—more importantly, it is Wheeler's whole. In redefining the landscape, she has made it her own. *Mary Bucci McCoy*