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# Under the microscope

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 By Steven Powell, [spowell2@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:spowell2@mailbox.sc.edu), 803-777-1923

**Alicia Leeke's** abstract renderings of phytoplankton, which make up a traveling exhibit of 18 paintings bridging the gap between science and art, are recent creations by the **Columbia-based artist**, but she can trace their origins back to a childhood yen that took some time to be fulfilled.

"This all really started when I was about 5. I had **always wanted a microscope**, every Christmas, but I never got one," she says. "My scientific path ended up taking a break in college here at USC, where I started out as a biology major and then ended up being a journalism major, and now I'm a fine art painter."

The road she traveled might have been roundabout, but Leeke has enjoyed the journey — and the opportunity to connect past interests with current pursuits along the way. The traveling exhibit, which will be displayed at the **Green Quad** and will include a short talk by the artist, is the result of a chance interaction at an earlier presentation of her work.

"I was doing a show at **Frame of Mind** with (alumnus) **Mark Plessinger**, and I was talking to his wife, **Wendy**, saying, 'I've always wanted a microscope, I've always wanted to do something with biology or things under microscopes,' and she was actually working in the lab with **Tammi Richardson**, and she said she would make the introduction."

That got Leeke connected with Richardson, a professor in the department of biological sciences and faculty member of the **marine science program**, who set her up with not just a microscope, but some digital photographic equipment and scientific guidance as well.


Leeke learned how to collect, mount and photograph her own specimens, which she obtained from freshwater source **Quinine Hill Lake** in Columbia and from saltier **Darrell Creek**, a tidal waterway in Mount Pleasant, S.C.

Richardson studies **phytoplankton**, the sunlight-harvesting microorganisms found in natural waters the world over, so Leeke decided to make these tiny creatures, which serve as the base of the food pyramid for life on Earth, the focus of her artwork as well.


Beginning with digital micrographs imported into her Wacom tablet, Leeke created abstract digital paintings inspired by the micrography that were printed and mounted for the exhibit. The presentation debuted in Charleston at the Mitchell Hill Gallery and will make stops at the Richland County Public Library and the Columbia Metropolitan Airport before traveling out of the state.

"I wanted to **make science fun**, in a very colorful way. Something that will make people ask questions," Leeke says. "And I feel like I've already had success when I took my work to the framer, who was somebody I probably would never have had a conversation with about plankton. But we had a great conversation. It was exciting, helping someone **see these creatures in a different light.**"

## Learn more

Alicia Leeke will discuss her artwork Nov. 4 at a showing at the Green Quad, starting at 6 p.m. To see more images and learn more, visit [Alicia Leeke's website](#) .



 [View Image\(s\)](#)

## Looking deeper

Alumna Alicia Leeke discusses her artistic process at the UofSC debut of her traveling exhibition, "View from under the Microscope," which takes place from 6 to 8 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 4 at the Green Quad (438 S. Main St).