

Fluid Dynamics: The Shape of Global Waters

Barbara Morris

“Without lights, you could light a candle. But how do you replace water? With what?”

Roberto Cables, a retired cab driver from Cuba

Basia Irland's *Book of Drought: A Water Memory*

Water, Water Everywhere: A Paean to a Vanishing Resource reflects on various manifestations of water on our beautiful, compromised planet. From caked and flaking mud, to pristine glaciers, from the destructive power of a tsunami to the precious drips of clean water through a high-tech filter in Kenya water takes many shapes and forms and inflects every moment of every day, as we chart its course through our bodies and through our lives.

Curator Jennifer Heath's new-media art exhibition and film festival mingles more than forty works from disparate sources -- activists, animators, documentarians, and performance artists. Presenting differing perspectives, alarming portraits of water quality politics are interspersed with more poetic passages.

Without clean water to drink, without water to irrigate crops, our planet could no longer sustain life. For centuries, bodies of water (wide rivers, deep lakes, vast expanses of ocean) seemed deceptively limitless. Their power was harnessed for energy and their depths became dumping grounds for sewage, trash, and toxic waste. Now, as our population strains at the boundaries of what Earth can tolerate water resources have become proportionately scarce.

Carbon for Water, by Evan Abramson and Carmen Elsa Lopez, contrasts the old way of life in Kenya with the prospect of a revolutionary future. In the past women, girls really, have been responsible “for the kitchen”-- translating into backbreaking days spent hiking to retrieve water from streams along with piles of firewood carried on their heads. Residents in Western Province, Kenya have been boiling the unsafe water on wood fires -- directly contributing to both deforestation and respiratory ailments in the population. A forward-thinking corporation, Vestergaard Frandsen, implemented a plan to use carbon shares to provide state-of-the-art water filters for 900,000 Kenyan homes. No longer needing to spend their days devoted to collecting firewood, the girls will now have time for education, and a new way of life. Clean water will help reduce the spread of disease such as cholera and cleaner air will benefit the entire planet. When this idea ignites, who knows how much good may be accomplished by other corporations who simply, on one level, are taking care of business?

Friends of the Earth Middle East presents *Good Water Neighbors*, portraying adolescents from Israel, Jordan, and Palestine jointly participating in an environmental education project and learning they all must work together for a sustainable future with their shared water resources. Conservation, recycling, and a shift in outmoded habits and ways of thought will all need to come into play. These neighbors from differing backgrounds learn to see each other simply as kids who may enjoy sports or social media. By developing an awareness of environmental responsibility in the minds of the young, the message will reach older generations as well. A participant, Lilach, reflects “if you influence children and convince them of something the parents will ultimately agree.”

Water rights are also at the core of Swarathma's *Pyasi (The Thirsty)*. With a lively musical soundtrack, this video contrasts a small girl laboriously retrieving water in a leaky vessel with images of wealthy

men lounging around, and in a swimming pool. To drive home the fact that one in seven Indians do not have access to clean water. When those in the public eye -- such as this activist folk rock band from Bangalore -- are willing to take a stand using their visibility along with their music to carry an environmental message, new audiences will begin to think about these issues and work to enact change.

Across the country and around the globe competition for resources pits one group against another and all too often it's a question of quality of life for local residents versus a greater profit margin for commercial interests. *A Colossal Fracking Mess*, a film by Jacques del Conte, chronicles the misfortunes of residents of Northeast Pennsylvania whose wells became contaminated with gasoline as a result of hydraulic fracturing "fracking" for underground gas in their vicinity. The film stands as a testament to the power of greed, and a cautionary tale -- debunking the fiction that fracking has little negative impact on the environment and making it clear that action must be taken to ensure that unsafe mining practices are not allowed to continue.

The often devastating effects of dams, which may destroy not only the livelihood and homes of those unfortunate enough to live in the dam's floodplain but permanently damage the fragile ecosystem supported by the river, sparked a conference in Temaca, Mexico. *A River Runs Through Us*, by Carla Pataky and International Rivers, Inc., focuses on the documentation of a gathering of 350 river activists from around the world who assembled to discuss the problem and to explore greener power options of solar, wind, and micro-hydro "mini-dams." Again, the spirit of cooperation and the human connections made translate into the realization that our similarities are stronger than our differences, that the message of environmental responsibility is one whose profound effect is heard loudest when magnified by the power of many voices and in many languages.

Balancing the works that tackle complex political issues head-on are ones that portray our involvement with water in more symbolic and abstracted language. Basia Irland's *A Gathering of Waters* charts the course of the Rio Grande from its source in the alpine terrain of Southern Colorado's San Juan Mountains to its mouth in the Gulf of Mexico, 1,875 miles. A canteen of water, "the river vessel," carried by hand symbolizes the intimate connection between neighbors along the path of the river. Like the river itself it is continually refilled by participants on each leg of its journey. Native Americans from the twelve pueblos of New Mexico celebrate this drama as a relay of runners carries water 180 miles in two days. The image of runners at dawn with a soundtrack of drumming and chanting creates a memorable moment. Irland also documents important community involvement in restoring riparian habitat as children are taught to make and distribute seed balls to increase the growth of plants along the river that support its health-- as well as that of the fish and wildlife to whom it is home. To fully appreciate water issues the film emphasizes that one must be "present with the river," developing an intimate awareness of its plants and animals and having physical contact and direct involvement with its sights, sounds, and smells. This is to foster appreciation and cultivate an attitude of guardianship toward this endangered river and by extension, toward whatever rivers, lakes, or streams might be found in the viewer's own locale.

Gazelle Samizay's *This Will Be the Last* is one of a number of works in which performance artists make metaphorical statements about the fragility of our ecosystem ... or just revel in a watery vibe. Samizay depicts frenzied scrubbing and wringing, accompanied by sounds of panting from the effort; as a sheet is pulled gradually from a wash pan, the residual liquid turns an evil reddish brown. Claudia Borgna's *Sweep & Weep, Weep & Sweep* also enacts obsessive cleaning rituals, manic circular motions over a riverbed, culminating in a forest of makeshift brooms fashioned from sticks and plastic bags. *I Came...I*

Saw...Prayed for Someone Whom I Love positions artist Manoj Baviskar, painted a vivid blue symbolizing Nature and Hindu gods Shiva and Krishna on a rocky hillside as his head is symbolically shaved bald in a comment on the acts of deforestation in the area. Without citing facts or figures these artists draw attention to disturbing and complex issues -- no easy solutions are offered or indeed, may exist to remedy the situation and yet an important step is taken by planting a seed of awareness in the mind of the viewer; it is a picture or a feeling often more powerful than stacks of literature, charts, or graphs. Jaap Blonk's *Flabbable 1* offers a welcome bit of absurdity: a human face swishes to and fro, with flapping jowls and a fishy, gasping motion, pulsing sound like underwater sonic waves.

Fiammetta De Michele's *Louisiana* addresses the Gulf Oil spill using a dancer, her attempts at graceful movement to Tchaikovsky derailed by a slippery surface of dark ooze in which she soon becomes mired within. Back in the documentary vein Michel Varisco's *Shifting* discusses the changing face of the Mississippi River and Louisiana wetlands, as impacted by the increasing interventions of canals and channels in the fragile marsh. The use of jetties which results in the loss of the rich soil carried by the river -- as well as the devastating impact of the spill in the Gulf of Mexico. It asks "can we shift our consciousness as a species to the triple bottom line where social, economic, and environmental concerns are all of equal value?"

With a strong playful streak, *One Plastic Beach*, by Eric Slatkin and Tess Thackara, highlights artists Richard and Judith Selby Lang who have staked out a 1000 yard-long territory on Kehoe Beach in the Point Reyes Seashore. Since their first date they have poured for ten years over the same stretch of sand, collecting the small and large plastic objects and bits that have washed up, the tons they have amassed only a small fraction of the total. Toys, cigarette lighters, and cheese spreaders are some of the colorful objects which fill their abundant palette. Much as in the work of late artist/activist Jo Hanson, who made cleaning up trash on her windy block of Buchanan Street in San Francisco her art form, this small local action has a broader significance. Considering the ways in which our daily activities and the choices we make have a direct impact on our environment, we may reflect on the fragility of the ecosystem and the callous disregard with which humankind has treated our natural resources. Selby Lang describes the specter of the garbage patch in the North Pacific Gyre -- a floating mass of plastic detritus the size of the state of Texas which does not go away, only becoming composed of bits of increasingly minute size: the level of plastic pollution in our oceans is simply unthinkable. When viewers confront the work in a gallery setting or in the film, the magnitude of the situation is driven home and action -- such as boycotting single-use plastics -- may be taken. Addressing a parallel issue in a very different way a young boy and his mother in Indonesia discuss the intrinsic evil of polluting the water in Monika Hapsari's *Big Trash*, a concept which seems easy for this four year old to grasp. Who is responsible for cleaning up the pollution? "The people who throw it there..."

Combining animation and live footage, Åsa Maria Bengtsson and Ewa Cedarstam's engaging *FLOW* uses the narrative device of a swimmer, an elegant line-drawing. Releasing the stream of water that flows within us all he then dives through his personally drilled hole in the ice to journey from one side of the world to the other, offering us dramatic vistas of glaciers in Greenland and a steaming spot in New Zealand where the Earth's crust is at its thinnest. Extra graves, we learn, are dug in Greenland in summer. In New Zealand, where the steamy depths can cook a chicken, human remains are interred above ground. More ominous, *Climate Change: An Intimate Portrait* by Jessica Plumb takes us to Alaska where the persistent soundtrack of dripping and splashing water underscores the frightening speed with which glaciers are melting.

While many films pose problems or offer solutions, others offer a reminder of what is at stake, presenting beautiful and haunting images of seemingly untroubled waters. Christine Baeumler's hypnotic *Amazon Twilight* travels down the river at dusk, as a dazzling sunset gives way to a night filled with fireflies, stars, and the chirping of insects and frogs. The Rio Grande reappears in Diane Armitage's *The Great River* where the flickering highlights on its surface abstract into a mesmerizing texture of triangular patterns in shades of gray-green. The short clip *Indonesian Borneo: Water Meditation* (2009), by Jason Houston offers ripples of water passing over a bed of sand, brief and peaceful scenes which replenish the spirit.

Other films present Mother Nature displaying her formidable power: from the crashing lighting of Georgie Friedman's *The Light of the Storm* to the silent film, *lyons, co, 10-10-13* by J. Gluckstern. We enter the picture sideways through a grainy image, as though perhaps the camera itself has been salvaged from the flood which devastated this small town. Our gaze is directed slowly, lovingly, to small details: from an overturned jeep, piles of mud and debris, to architectural details, siding, a rain gutter, and a box of 35mm slides lying abandoned in the mud. Mirrors reflect the sky filtered through tree branches, the scene dissolves to white then cuts to black.

Drawing our attention to the overlooked, to the beauty in our everyday surroundings, or tracing links between the unexpected, artists enable us to look at the world in a different way. Each of these films in its own way conveys a vivid, often moving experience -- while sketching out the many ways in which water is so crucial to life on our planet. Providing the models of water activists from around the globe, the films offer lessons in cooperation, creative thinking, and resistance, and reveal the profound impact that even one small action may have as its importance ripples out into broader circles of influence. *Water, Water Everywhere* will clearly give one pause before turning on the tap, and just may motivate viewers to take action: to fight pollution, to conserve, and to consider how closely intertwined all life on our planet is with the network of rivers, lakes, and oceans which sustain it.



Barbara Morris is an artist and writer based in Marin County. With an MFA degree from UC Berkeley, her often narrative, figurative paintings are laced with feminist content and an undercurrent of dark humor. Morris writes for *Artillery* and *art ltd.* magazines. She provided regular reviews and essays for *Artweek* magazine for ten years, seven of them as a contributing editor.