

The Contested Histories of Water

Two group shows make the case that, even at its most innocuous, water still poses hidden dangers.



Louis Bury June 24, 2017



Deborah Jack, "Far Water" (2016), archival digital photo, 20 x 30 inches (courtesy the artist)

Artistic representations of water tend toward one of two extremes. At one extreme, water is depicted as tranquil and soothing, as in Monet's lily ponds or the quiescent middlebrow beach scenes hung in waiting rooms. At the other extreme, it is depicted as turbulent and aggressive, as in Hokusai's infamous "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" or the stormy oceanscapes of J.M.W. Turner. In both, water may consume a significant portion of the pictorial space and constitute one of its principal subjects. But in the former, water appears unobtrusive in its stillness and placidity, while in the latter it appears as a tumultuous threat.

Two group shows, *DNA of Water* at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art and *Commonwealth: Water for All* at the Queens Museum, make the case that, even at its most innocuous, water still poses hidden dangers and encloses contested histories. In keeping with much recent ecological art, both shows are less concerned with the artistic representation of water, than with how such representations can alert audiences to water's invisible sociopolitical implications. When we sip from a water fountain or stroll along an unspoiled beach, it's easy to overlook the complex history of how that water reached our lips or feet.



Deborah Jack, "Untitled" (2014), digital C-Print 13 1/4 x 19 7/8 inches, edition 2/5, from: *What is the value of water, if it doesn't quench our thirst...* Series (courtesy the artist)

Deborah Jack's photographic and filmic depictions of shorelines, on display in *DNA of Water*, encapsulate the tension between water's tranquility and its tumult. On the surface, her 2016 short film and eponymous photograph series, *The Water Between Us Remembers*, seem to be hypnotic, minimalist meditations on water's formal properties. But her sharp, studied compositions — shot in St. Martin, where she was born — contain hints of menace amid their beauty. Backlit, subtly darkened, and never containing more than a solitary person, the black and white photographs churn with a sense of dramatic discord. And the film, whose exasperated full title is *The Water Between Us Remembers, so we carry this history on our skin... long for a sea-bath and hope the salt will heal what ails us*, emits, as its soundtrack, a low pulsing drone that looms over the screen's idyllic environs like a portentous shadow.

With intelligence and precision, Jack cultivates these tensions to evoke the specter of the transatlantic slave trade in what would otherwise be postcard-perfect tropical scenes. Curator Sasha Dees presumably took a cue from Jack in selecting works by Petri Saarikko, Simone Bennett, and Sasha Huber, whose aesthetic simplicity belies political complexity. While the room containing Bennett’s work was, ironically, closed on account of a water leak during my visit, Huber’s work showcases the Finnish artist’s thoughtful use of uncommon materials such as staples and chalkboard paint. For example, three graphite rubbings of Huber’s 2017 sculpture “Sea of the Lost” — a surfboard made out of 200,000 staples arranged in the shape of waves to commemorate the millions lost at sea during the transatlantic slave trade — capture the show’s ghostly, elegiac mood.



Installation view of “Commonwealth: Water for All” (2017), Queens Museum, New York (photo by Hai Zhang)

A gathering of recent agitprop about water, the Queens Museum’s *Commonwealth: Water for All* spotlights water’s political dimensions more directly than *DNA of Water*. For the exhibit, “the third in a series of contemporary exhibitions mounted in dialog with the [museum’s 1939 World’s Fair] Relief Map of New York City’s Water System,” several series of artists’ prints, as well as sundry political t-shirts and skateboards, hang on the walls around the WPA-commissioned map. This exhibition and the larger series are smartly curated by the museum — tucked away in a back room, the bleached brown topographic map of New York’s aqueducts has always felt uninspired in comparison to its show-stopping 1964 World’s Fair cousin, “Panorama of the City of New

York.” Like wall hangings in a teenager’s bedroom, the exhibition’s colorful posters make the relief map room feel more lived-in and personable.



Installation view of “Commonwealth: Water for All” (2017), Queens Museum, New York (photo by Hai Zhang)

The posters themselves, one wall of which focuses on protest responses to the proposed 2016 Dakota Access Pipeline, strike a defiant tone that is well suited to the medium. Simple slogans such as “Stand with Standing Rock,” “#NoDAPL,” “Agua Es Vida,” and “What we do to water, we do to ourselves” allow the posters’ imagery to be the visual focus. Those images, especially in two series of prints from the Justseeds Artists’ Cooperative, evidence smart and stylish design sensibilities. In particular, prints such as Josh MacPhee’s 2016 “Aqua Para Todos,” Erik Ruin’s 2016 “Ocean Death Spiral,” and Pete Railand’s 2016 “Commonwealth,” balance dense clusters and swirls of water into compelling gestalts. In a medium associated with consumer advertisement, such design maximalism seems a way of avoiding the logo-istic slickness of much corporate branding.

Justseeds’ prints can be purchased through the collective’s website, with the proceeds from the \$15-\$25 pieces going to support the politically engaged cooperative. The accessibility of the prints in *Commonwealth*, on both a commercial and a semiotic level, contrasts with the more cerebral and contemplative work in *DNA of Water*. While the former show represents a call to action, the latter is a call to mourn. With the United States experiencing as much political turbulence as it has in a generation or two, demotic goads to direct action, rather than high-art



reflection, may seem more urgent and timely. But both approaches are needed as much as ever. Reflection hones action's dumb blade and action firms up reflection's gossamer insights. Together, they help clarify and address the sociopolitical issues that are as ubiquitous and complex as water.

DNA of Water *continues at the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art (1000 Richmond Terrace, Staten Island) through September 4.*

Commonwealth: Water for All *continues at the Queens Museum (New York City Building, Flushing Meadows Corona Park, Queens) through July 30.*

Erik Ruin, "Ocean Death Spiral" (2017), risograph print, from the "Wellspring Portfolio" (courtesy Justseeds Artists' Cooperative)