

Artist Viewpoint 2001

"Water Works" Photography works on water, power and the land.
By Adrienne Read

I went into this very small gallery in Laguna Beach expecting to spend about 15 minutes and walked out 2 1/2 hours later with my head swimming full of questions about our natural resources and just how much we take for granted what keeps us alive. Water.

When I first glanced at the Ariel photographs of bodies of water- that's what they looked like. Like a documentary on finding out what life forms exist on other planets. Then I looked closer and what I was seeing was run-off from chemical dumping sights for hazardous waste. Sights that were magnified by huge, glossy, color prints with a symposium on anthracite coal companies -closed mines- that couldn't compete with other energy sources. They were dumping the waste in these areas for years and we have done nothing to help nature in a healing process or even recognize that recovery is important. The prints were large format, magnifying every detail we don't look at normally, with great attention to deep shades of red and hot colors that signify pain.

As I began to get absorbed, the curator, Mark Chamberlain began to explain how the artists came together and his reasons for including each piece, but only to open my mind to how important his cause was. He wants to educate the public on where the world is going and how to maintain life form with our water. He is concerned with how water is undervalued, misused, ignored, and just plain scarce in some areas. His contention is that the next wars will be fought over water, not oil. Next I looked at a set of prints by Douglas McColluh called "chance encounters". The artist made a grid of Los Angeles with an x and y axis that he could follow on a daily basis. He closed his eyes and let his pen find where he was going to shoot for that day. His prints were straight, high contrast, full frame black and white prints with a commentary attached with what his thoughts were on the environment and the feeling he got when he was shooting. Mark asked him to see what he had on water out of the 5, 400 areas he covered to contribute to the impact. He shot the Los Angeles riverbank and his work definitely conveys what he was feeling, by his use of angles and directness he engages the viewer in. He impacts you on an area we rarely venture to even guess what goes on at.

Then I listened, or should I say, I listened the entire time I was at to gallery to the documentary by Claude S. Wiley called "Romance of the hydrograph." He recorded sounds of the San Diego Creek in Orange County. The sounds came from the creek while going against the grid structure over three seasons. He investigates a canalized waterway in an effort to better understand the realities of water management while at the same time reconnecting himself with the physical environment. It seems when an artist is trying to engage his audience, he must first do so himself. It got to re-think the importance of an earth system. He visits the politics of Water and gives us an insight a country like Israel who uses drip irrigation, low-pressure spray irrigation and cloud seeding to maintain agricultural practices; however, California, rich in agriculture takes water conservation for granted. "We are entering an age where imaginations can help us to increase our

levels of perception. Our technologies may become distracting to the support system of our physical environment unless we come to terms with the plant-animal-water-relationships keeping us alive". His book on the research he did while he was recording the sounds is driven home by the intense emotions you experience while absorbing what you are listening.

There is an installation of a bed of grass called lawns in the dessert by Kathryn Miller and Michael Horner. And a book of digital prints with statements like "60% of urban water is used to water lawns", and "220 gallons of water a year"- keep a 2'x 5' piece of grass alive (the installation). What makes this piece easier to look at and take in is in this book you will find solutions to a problem.

The rest of the exhibit is more of the same and what is offered with the intense emotion I felt is an upside and the feeling that we can all do something. As I was leaving "Cancer Alley" by Richard Misrach drove home the point that what we call drinking water is what we are dieing over. His piece was a study of 75 toxins found in the carcinogens in Louisiana Drinking Water. It is a 150-mile stretch between Baton Rouge and New Orleans where oil refineries have dumped and now Louisiana suffers the highest mortality rate from cancer. Two hazy, romantic images done with large format 8 x 10 with Hughes of green that you wouldn't think could exist with the image before you.

In conclusion, I think art should convey not only a message and a problem, but also hopefully a solution. I may not always agree, but I am thinking about how I am affected and wanting to understand.