

Drawing on the River

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Water as a subject of handmade description, whether in drawing or printing, is potentially anachronistic: the enterprise of trying to picture a liquid with a line is a fraught one indeed. Yet for centuries makers of graphical images have sought to capture water by utilizing marks and textures. A famous woodcut by Titian, *The Submersion of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea* (1549) is an astounding example of a waterscape carefully wrought with line such that the threat of being enveloped by turbulence becomes palpable for a viewer. Hokusai's *The Great Wave off Kanagawa* (c.1829-32) is another example of an artist's formidable use of graphic language to capture water with all its force and beauty.

The subject of water has historically fascinated and preoccupied many artists. The British artist J.M.W. Turner represented water in paint as an evocative site that is transitory and sometimes terrible. His engravings display a preoccupation with natural patterns that turn toward abstraction, and also suggest fields of information reminiscent of language. In Japanese historical art, Ukiyoe printers were interested in water and its potential to be portrayed as powerful formations or delicate flows. The astounding video installation *Fountain* (2005), by contemporary Canadian First Nations artist Rebecca Belmore, memorably turns water into blood as a metaphoric indictment of colonial history and environmental degradation.

The three-part *Drawing Water* project stems from my interest in linking encounters with natural phenomena with a commitment to utilizing representation as a means of proposing both social and contemplative engagement. *Drawing Water* is intended to present art that joins the aesthetic and the social and to link an historical subject of expressive inquiry with contemporary environmental concerns.

In the present moment water is increasingly a subject of discussion and contestation in public discourse. Canadians know

1. Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995) 6-7

water as a resource that is ubiquitous within our history and as a desirable international commodity. On a local level, the threat produced by recent forest fires in the region surrounding Kamloops, B.C. made obvious the fact that water resources must be protected and managed for the sake of the community and for the good of the environment. The situation also showed that the power and value of water is strongly recognized within public consciousness. Residents of the Kamloops region understood the forest fire situation as an opportunity for a renewed consideration of water as a precious, life-giving resource that needs to be valued and protected.

Water is a subject of historical, artistic, and current theoretical inquiry. In light of such considerations, this essay includes a brief discussion of some of the works in the *Drawing Water* exhibition. One part of the exhibition, *River*, comprises approximately 30 pieces selected from the Kamloops Art Gallery Permanent Collection. The second part is the community-based drawing project, *Drawing Water*, and the third is my own work, *A Book of the River*, both of which are documented elsewhere in this publication.

SOME THEORIES OF THE RIVER

It is necessary to engage some of the discourse that surrounds our understanding of water and its presence within the landscape in order to build a framework within which to consider the works on exhibition. Germane to this undertaking is the notion that, above all, the idea of landscape is a human construction. Historian Simon Schama, in *Landscape and Memory*, reminds us: "Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock."¹

Our preoccupation in this context is with a watery aspect of landscape: the river. To formulate an understanding of the river as an *idea*, we need note that waterways have historically borne human culture along while also enabling societies to build themselves up beside those fluid arteries. The dynamic tension between water as passageway and the water's edge as a fixed site of human community has regularly been the subject of pictorial representation, often-times adhering to the dictates of the picturesque tradition.

Among the works in the exhibition, an important drawing, *Okanagan Lake* (1959) by E.J. Hughes, reminds us of a significant essay on the artist's work by Leslie Allan Dawn, entitled "Revisiting the Picturesque." Dawn reviews the history of the development of the picturesque tradition in eighteenth century Britain that determined how natural views were to be identified (through "wandering and searching") and how they were ultimately to be re-presented, and credits Reverend William Gilpin with popularizing the appreciation of such an approach. Dawn cites Gilpin's inventory of what ought to constitute a picturesque picture: "...trees—rocks—broken grounds—woods—river—lakes—plains—vallis [sic]—mountains—and distances."²

Such a prescription for both observing and representing the land, which additionally demanded a stratification of foreground, middle ground and background,³ appears to cohere with Schama's argument that (from an etymological standpoint) "landscape" always signifies a human presence. That is, landscape is an inherited cultural tradition that turns "mere geology and vegetation" into a thing that is *pictureable* for human consumption.⁴ Accordingly, rivers have often been ready subjects of picturesque imagery, and have thus also been used to promote human projects, including cultural mythologies and nationalist programs. In this regard, British poet John Taylor (1580–1653), like others before him, found it useful to compare the character of peoples and nations to the temperaments of their rivers.⁵

The works of J.M.W. Turner, referred to earlier, are particularly significant in relation to a discussion of the manner in which rivers have historically been represented, and are also important as we speculate on how "picturing" may lead to a revised engagement with its ostensible subject. Schama views Turner's depictions of the Thames as steeped in Romanticism, "reversing the flow of the Thames in one [image]," and borrowing from Dutch landscape in another.⁶ But the writings of French philosopher Michael Serres, in "The Case of Turner," seem more compelling in directing a reconsideration of Turner's pictures of rivers, urgently speaking to us both *in time* and *of time*.

Serres offers an understanding of Turner's rivers not limited by social frameworks, or even by the conventional acknowledgement

2. Leslie Allan Dawn, "Revisiting the Picturesque: A Familiar Site" in *E.J. Hughes: The Vast and Beautiful Interior* (Kamloops: Kamloops Art Gallery, 1994) 17

3. Dawn, 17

4. Schama, 12

5. Schama, 328

6. Schama, 359

of the passage of water unidirectionally, but instead presents “time and the river” together, within a social science/hard science context not delimited by either traditional metaphors or the “mechanics” of water:

7. Michel Serres. “Science and the Humanities: The Case of Turner” in *SubStance*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Issue 83: *An Ecology of Knowledge: Michael Serres: A Special Issue* (1997) 15

8. *The Rivers of France, from Drawings by J.M.W. Turner* (London: Longman, Rees, etc., 1837).

9. Michel Serres. *Heremes: Literature, Science and Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982) 102

10. Gregory Dale Adamson, “Serres Translates Howe” in *SubStance*, Vol. 26, No. 2, Issue 83: *An Ecology of Knowledge: Michael Serres: A Special Issue* (1997) 110

Far from flowing in ... continuous lines, like a well-behaved river under a bridge, upstream to downstream, time descends, turns back on itself, stops, starts, bifurcates ten times, divides, and blends, caught up in whirlpools and counter-currents, hesitant, aleatory, uncertain and fluctuating, multiplied into a thousand beds like the Yukon River.⁷

As an artist dedicated to representation at a particular moment in history, Turner was working through drawing and painting in a period when water was shifting from its subjection to mechanical power to being put to industrialized service via thermodynamics. His paintings and, indeed, the turbulent webs of his graphic representations of rivers manifest this very shift; images in the volume *Rivers of France*, upon which my project *A Book of the River* is based, come to mind.⁸ So, rivers in Turner’s works came to demonstrate that “Turbulence deviates from equilibrium.”⁹ Water was no longer only flowing coolly through the landscape, but was hotly and turbulently moving in all directions, newly subject to an industrial, cultural and scientific revolution.

WORKS FROM THE COLLECTION: THE FLOW OF TIME

The trajectory that links the landscape/the river as a picturesque subject with the river as a contemporary descriptor of time and turbulence is at our disposal in considering the works in the exhibition, *River*. It would be an oversimplification to attempt to chart a shift in the kinds of representations manifested by works from various decades in the Gallery’s collection. Instead, describing the works as a network that acts, as Serres proposes, “like a hidden hand organizing their own composition and producing the environment from which social artifacts emerge”¹⁰ is less troubling. Serres’ construction of a *flow of time* is important here. For, just as the history of the Gallery’s collection—subject as it has

been to the vagaries of the moment and of chance—infers an ostensible organizing principle, it may be argued that the entire shifting set of artworks adheres to a Serresian notion of time/the river.

Hughes' picturesque drawing, *Okanagan Lake* (1959), subscribing to Gilpin's prescriptions as it seemingly does, also bears a taught character of cool detachment dedicated to producing a useful social document. Not merely touristically oriented, but tangibly committed to aesthetic record keeping, Hughes' drawing shares something with the photography of Stan Douglas. *Panoramic View of the Ruskin Power Plant and the Stave River* (1992) depicts a river setting with its industrial appendages. Here, the description is objective and without affect, and yet the presence of sources of "power" links the image to the earlier period discussed above, when water was in transition—from cold to hot—moving between its mechanical use and the thermodynamic. Not less attached to "history" than the work of Hughes, Douglas' photograph reveals a canny awareness of the layered narratives of the river.

A simple intaglio work by graphic artist Arnold Shives, *Mosquito Creek* (1983) is an important work in our "collection as flow of time." Contrived of linear flourishes and notational marks both descriptive and decorative, the piece owes something to the activity of *plein-air* observation that influenced some of the very early works in the exhibition (A. Lee Rogers' *Kamloops, B.C.*, 1888, Caroline Armington's *Lake Windermere from Invermere*, 1911) and something to the spirit of speculative invention that bespeaks some of the later works. Here, the artist demonstrates an engagement with the *river as picture* and the *river as time*, which compels our glance both upstream and downstream. Doing so, we encounter water in memory and also within an imagined future.