

Patrick Mahon in Conversation with Jen Budney

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BUDNEY In your essay, *Drawing on the River*, you talk about water as image, metaphor, resource (both commodity and tool, or conduit). Then, Michael Blackstock's poem seems to talk about water as a living entity. I'm wondering if it is one of your goals, with this exhibition, to help generate a much broader definition of water.

MAHON Yes; I would like to bring forward a broader understanding of the idea of water. It functions in so many ways and situates itself, substantially, in all our lives. As an artist, I'm also interested in thinking about different ways that an art practice can operate in relation to social concerns, and, in this case, to environmental concerns. So I have a tandem objective here: to expand our thinking about a particular subject, water, and also to expand our understanding of what's possible for art.

BUDNEY So is the goal of this exhibition then, in terms of its function within the Kamloops community, to be a form of consciousness-raising?

MAHON I would say yes. But, in as much as I think of myself as an engaged artist, I am disposed to reject the idea that artists are necessarily intent on raising consciousness in a directed kind of way, because I really like the idea that art has lots of open possibilities. Having said that, I think the subject of water is a great one from the standpoint of using art to raise awareness. In a sense, this project could bring people to numerous things: to another kind of consideration of art, or of water as a resource, or to a new consideration of water, even spiritually. If any of that happened, I would see it as a successful work. So I guess that I *am* open to the idea that art can be about consciousness-raising, especially if what's being encouraged is something that's broad enough to be really inclusive.

BUDNEY Michael might argue, as the blue ecology movement he's a part of makes central, that water is perhaps the most important focus for

people desiring social, political, spiritual, and ecological change. If we have to choose just one particular substance or issue or life form, water is really at the core of it all.

MAHON I really like that. I must admit that, personally, I'm always preoccupied with the environment, with the future of the planet—like many, many people are. But I think that often times in relation to such concerns, we end up focusing on the kinds of commodities we need, or lifestyle choices we have and which we want to maintain. As an alternative to those kinds of preoccupations, water is a subject that is vast and timeless. Our bodies are made almost completely of water, and so there's a way in which I think water brings us into a really basic kind of relationship to the world, and to our own sense of our materiality and the materiality of the planet. And thinking about water, and making art about it, is very practical. You know, water has tremendous value and significance, and as we discussed before, it is becoming something that needs to be thought about as a right.

BUDNEY Is it more difficult to draw water than to draw other things?

MAHON That's a good question. I chose the project and that title, *Drawing Water*, because it is somewhat anachronistic. By that I mean that I think the act of drawing water is about a kind of *capturing*, which seems impossible. Regarding drawing, lots of artists and people, both past and present, have talked about *it* and about how it functions. One of the ways that I think that it functions, obviously, is as a form of record-keeping, or as a form of storage, the storage of information. To keep a record of something elusive like water is a difficult thing to do. But I think that this "contradictoriness" acknowledges the seeming impossibility that we may think we face as human beings when we consider dealing with our present environmental situation. And yet, to do something like drawing is actually quite practical in the truest sense. You *make* something in response to the subject with your hand and pencil. It sounds contradictory to draw water, but it seems to me to also refer to something that is very practical that we can all do—and so it may offer us a bit of hope.

BUDNEY The act of attempting to draw water, and the difficulty of this act, might highlight the kind of problems and moral bankruptcy of

trying to commodify water in the first place. I think it must mean something that you can't really draw water as an object until you put it in a bottle or something. And once it's in the bottle, you're not drawing the water any more, you're drawing the bottle. Do you know what I'm getting at?

MAHON Yes, I certainly do. I would agree with it. This kind of thinking, about water as a commodity, seems based, among other things, on forgetting that water has all kinds of spiritual associations across cultures, as well. Ultimately, water is a vast entity, but it's one that's also a simple necessity in our daily lives. Something as expansive as that is, for me, a really important kind of subject for art right now, because I think that in a postmodern context, we may have come to think that artists really can't do very much, and that they can only deal, in a certain sense, with the "smaller stuff" in order to indirectly refer to the "bigger stuff."

BUDNEY Can you give me an example?

MAHON I'm a big fan of the artist Mona Hatoum, but I'm aware that some people might not think that the video work she produced by arranging for a microscopic camera to travel the length of her intestinal tract has much to do with anything beyond her interest in the physical interior of the body. I, myself, think it does. I guess what I'm pointing to is the fact that sometimes artists are only thought to be able to deal with the specific subjects an individual can attend to, and I don't think this is so. By focusing on the details of our lives and the world, and also by trying to relate those subjects to some bigger themes, we ensure that some of the big "life" questions don't get left off the agenda that artists expect, or are expected, to address. So I think that the activity of trying to draw water shares both a postmodern desire to take on a very particular subject and its material character, while it also relates historically to what artists have tried to embrace across the ages.

BUDNEY So what were some of the issues that came out of the workshops you did at the Sk'elep School and on Royal Avenue?

MAHON With the students at the Sk'elep School, one of the things that I had to acknowledge personally, before going into the workshops, was that despite the fact that I've worked quite a lot with First Nations people, and first nations students specifically, I

didn't know the particular students I was going to work with, and I don't know that much about the culture of the native people in the Kamloops area. So I wanted to make sure that I didn't go in with a lot of assumptions, even from the standpoint of how I would situate the topic. Beforehand, I decided that I would present artwork and also some stories that I had come across from a broad spectrum of cultures, including First Nations' cultures. This was at least one way, in addition to talking to the teachers at the school, to bring some sort of scope to the drawing workshops. I also went in with a kind of curiosity about what the kids would know, what the people in the school were encouraging them to think about in relation to water. And I had some nice revelations and surprises regarding how conscious of the environment and environmental problems the kids were, and about the fact that they seemed to have a lot of experience around water, both recreationally and as an important social context in their lives. So in going into that situation, there was a sense that I wanted to pose questions and introduce a topic, but I didn't want to enter with a lot of expectations about what I thought the children should or shouldn't produce.

I think that with the people, mainly adults, around the riverside area on Royal Avenue, there was a different kind of problem or challenge. One of the issues was that there's a certain expectation regarding "the artist"—and I probably in some ways fostered the idea—that to do art is a kind of expert activity that requires talent. People often think that there's something to learn and know that comes *before* engaging with a subject, like making a drawing in order to encounter water. I think that one of the things that I needed to do was both to introduce some concepts and skills concerning how one can draw successfully and develop some technique, but also to encourage the participants to see the workshops as an opportunity to have a new encounter with something that they probably see or pass by on a daily basis. And so there was a productive tension in those workshops whereby the participants desired to become more skilled artists, and also needed to develop a different relationship, through art-making, to something that they already know in their everyday lives.

BUDNEY What made you want to work with groups from the community in the first place?

MAHON You and I have talked before about the way that I approach my work as an artist, and a part of that includes being a teacher. My teaching always includes trying to understand what the social connection is between art and daily life for people. I guess I did have the sense that by introducing or bringing these workshops into the community, there would be the possibility of giving people a way in, we could say, to art, as well as into the subject of water. Art interests me and, through drawing practise, can hopefully become of interest to others. When I think of my own creative work, I think of it as somewhat intuitive and idiosyncratic and, as with lots of art, not always self-explanatory. I think that at the same time, if you can help people to engage in the kind of practises that one takes on as an artist, it can be a way for them to actually connect a little more closely with something that may seem quite foreign or possibly difficult to interpret, such as my work! So, in a sense, the workshops were a way of introducing myself as an artist, in addition to introducing myself as a social being. I think of those two as the same in a lot of ways.

BUDNEY You've also pulled a selection of artworks from the Kamloops Art Gallery collection and installed those in your exhibition. These works are all landscapes that depict water, but specifically rivers and lakes—fresh water, not oceans or seas.

MAHON Yes, there are only rivers and lakes. I would say that if we had to really nail it down, they are images where the water is contained by the land: so, water within the landscape.

BUDNEY What are you hoping to discover through this section of the exhibition?

MAHON The curatorial aspect of *Drawing Water* is meant to operate in a couple of ways. One way is to provide a context: to say that there's a history of artists working with a subject like this that's available and quite evident right in Kamloops. So you don't have to go to the Louvre; you don't have to go to the National Gallery in order to see a collection that tells you a story of what artists are thinking about. It's available to us in many of our

galleries, in our community contexts, and if it is, if you have the kind of wealth that exists at the Kamloops Art Gallery, it's very important to bring that out and give people access to that. So that's one thing. Hopefully, it's an engaging backdrop for the whole project. I also think that sometimes we may have certain assumptions about how something ought to be represented or depicted, and when you look at the variety of ways that artists have represented a subject, you ultimately realize that in a lot of cases the artists aren't necessarily only talking about water. They could be talking about movement, or they may be talking about the history of a place that's situated around a body of water, or they might be talking about something else. There's a work by Stan Douglas in the exhibition that shows a power plant, and in the essay I wrote I referred to the fact that the photograph acknowledges the relationship between water and the history of power and technology. So the subject of water, for example, can be a way into an understanding that artists often have tremendously complex ways of reading the world. I certainly feel the exhibition demonstrates that.

BUDNEY Now, as for your own work in this show, you've made works on glass about water, and there's something kind of poetic in this choice of materials, in the sense that glass mirrors water: they're both liquid. Tell me how this work came about.

MAHON One of the things that happened in making the work was that I began by looking at a series of engravings by Turner, an 18th century British artist who people will be somewhat familiar with, more likely from his paintings that depict weather situations, and rolling seas with ships and that sort of thing. But Turner also did some wonderful drawings that were made into engravings. Engraving is a way of making a drawing onto metal and then printing it. The engravings I was especially interested in are of rivers of France. They are really quite tiny. I found Turner's *Rivers of France* book in our library here in London. It doesn't have a date on it, but must be well over 80 years old. When I started looking at the images, I noted how rivers are very, very much contained and framed by the landscape. They are like moving pathways that flow through the landscape. But they're also very much contained by it. I decided that I was going to look closely at the water in these

pictures, and try and see what I could ultimately invent out of the same kind of line work that Turner had done. And as I developed my drawings with a fine black pen, I started to realize that I was developing structured networks of lines. And I was thinking of these drawings as invisible structures, or as underlayers that we might fantasize are, in a sense, holding water together. I don't mean that in a physical sense, but, you know, as an artist I also think about the things that we don't see, yet we imagine. For me, lots of times, making art is as much about thinking about what we don't see as what we do see. And so I developed these drawings that I think of in relation to something unseen in those very little engravings. Once I had done that, I recognized what I had made as a series of nets or networks. So I decided that it would be interesting to see if I could take these things that are structured in a way (unlike we think water is, water being so fluid) and to present them on glass so that you can look through them. It seemed to me to be a way of setting up a kind of contradiction, or perhaps to further the contradiction I had already developed. These glass works almost make the backdrop into the water, and the thing that's seen on it something more tangible and structured.

BUDNEY How are these going to be displayed? How are they hung?

MAHON Those works are shown against the wall, but they sit out from the wall by about a couple of inches because of a metal bracket that holds them up.

BUDNEY So they cast a shadow on the wall?

MAHON They do cast a shadow on the wall. And that's actually part of the work, and in a certain sense, what the work is about. The thing on the wall is an illusive, shadowy picture, and the two pictures together (the picture on the glass and the picture on the wall) create an animated relationship. So when you walk past the works, everything shifts a little bit because of the way the shadows are cast on the wall. For me, the ephemeral manner in which the picture is not fully fixed is important because I think that's the way I think about my own encounters with water, and even about water's historical presence, and about my own fears regarding its passage.