

## WATER AND TOWER ALLEGORY

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### INSTALLATION

*Water and Tower Allegory*, Patrick Mahon's installation at Wilfrid Laurier University's Robert Langen Art Gallery in Waterloo, Ontario, epitomizes, in its adaptation to a challenging location, the very essence of provisionality his assemblage of works explores.

The gallery space occupies a long, narrow rectangle poised between a hallway and a concert hall, comprises more window than wall surface, and is dimly lit, accentuating the sombre tones of floor carpet and wall panels. Mahon adapts to these constraints by using the floor as a display surface, laying seven balsawood and basswood constructions on two raised white platforms (one flat, the other sloped) that dominate the room but are low enough not to divide it. To one side, a sloping glass wall shelf displays *Water and Tower Allegory Studies*, four small two-dimensional maquettes. A single large-scale photograph is positioned at each end of the room: a large two-part photo panel depicting a choppy ocean surface (*Waterscape*) leans against the more remote wall as one enters the gallery, while an equally large photograph of a water tower construction, *Water and Tower Allegory #4*, is pinned to the near end wall.

The overall layout initially prompts one's eyes to sweep from near-point to far and back again in a fluid, orienting motion before one moves closer to examine each construction in turn. The platform sloping downward from *Waterscape* underscores this feeling of water propelled into the room and washing over the horizontal

towers and other low-lying forms. But at that moment when one focuses closer on the individual works and their printed surfaces, the installation transitions into an enigmatic syntax, suggestive of a narrative or proposition demanding interpretation. Each of the wooden constructions, whether taken as a whole object or as a series of surfaces to be read, acts like an ideogram wavering between pictorial image and meaningful text, the signified and signifier collapsed. At several levels then, the installation and its components evoke consideration of the historicity of printmaking, modernist abstraction, the materiality of objects, and the debatable ability of art to address real-world environmental problems.

All the wooden constructions are prints. Some of the raw wood elements are hand-printed with rubber stamps using phthalo blue, an insoluble pigment conventionally used in printing inks, while other elements are digitally printed in shades of blue, yellow, and gold. The gold derives from a sampled photograph of a Baroque carved-and-painted wood ceiling the artist came across in a Brazilian church. Mahon's art practice has frequently toyed self-consciously with decorative surfaces, but this one not only refers to the history of graphic arts but also invokes the sacred in an open-ended, aesthetic manner. Juxtaposed to other material elements such as the blank spaces and the mimetic printed patterns suggestive of waves and ripples, the gold is fractured and repurposed into a seemingly

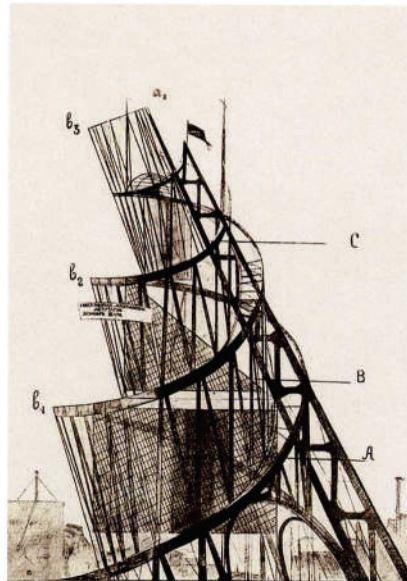
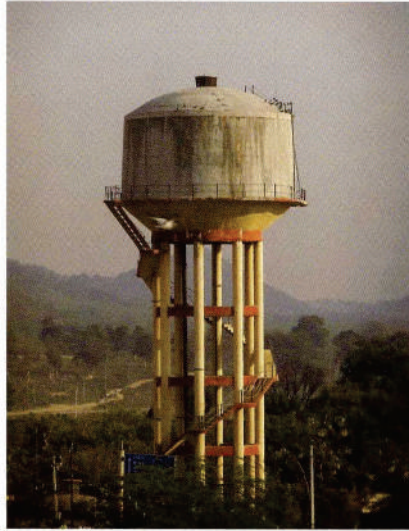
practical structure. These material choices evoke a mix of modernist idioms from the turn of the 20th century that edge toward abstraction: a Japanese sensibility, but also cubist and constructivist.

The installation plays with scale and the planarity of angled, horizontal, and vertical surfaces, echoing the grids and angles of the various wooden constructions and furthering the invocation of early modernist abstraction. It riffs on the collapsing into two dimensions of the tower forms, which Mahon had started out building in three dimensions. Each tower or structure operates at a different scale, or requires a different kind of looking, say from the bottom rather than a direct up/down orientation.

In some pieces the wood is rendered sinuous like water, as in the undulating shapes of *Water Tower (cascade, horizontal state)*, and the curves of *Water and Tower Allegory #1* and the *Water and Tower Allegory (flat arcs)*. Combined with the printed patterns mimicking ripples, waves, and eddies and suggestive of the water that flows through living trees, the installation coheres into a visual tension between flow and grid, fluidity and rigidity, between water and its technologies of containment and control.

## TOWER

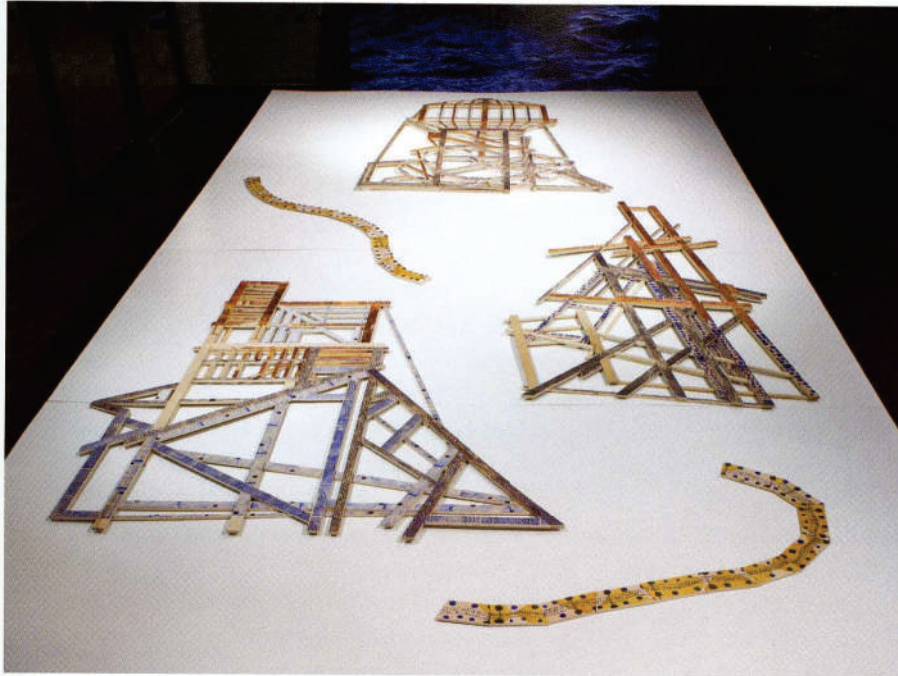
In February 2010, Mahon travelled to India as a board member of the Catholic NGO, Save A Family Plan, whose Canadian office is based in his home city of London, Ontario. Evidence of the devastating force of the tsunami six years previous was still visible, but it was the water towers dotting the landscape that caught his attention. His sense of how the towers could work on a metaphorical level while simultaneously being a practical, relatively low-tech resource inspired Mahon to examine Bernd and Hilla Becher's photo series of urban rooftop water towers. While those photos were inspiring, the artist was particularly taken with the Becher's documentation of 19th-century mining tipples poised above mine shafts. He was attracted to the ramshackle, ad hoc structures made of wood, a material lacking the hard masculine permanence of industrial steel and iron and resonating with his own aesthetic. For Mahon, the tipples embody a survivalist impulse, an adaptation to a task and a reality rather than a mammoth modernist environment exemplified, for example, by the Hoover Dam.



LEFT TOP:  
*Water Tower, India*  
Rajasthan, 2011

MIDDLE:  
*Mining Tippel, 1920's*  
Bernd and Hilla Becher  
Frailey Coal Co., Donaldson,  
Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania,  
USA, 1978  
gelatin silver print  
Courtesy Bernd and Hilla Becher  
Konrad Fischer Galerie

BOTTOM:  
Vladimir Tatlin, Russian  
*Drawing of the Monument to  
the Third International, 1920*  
from the Nikolai Punin book,  
*Pamiatnik III Internatsionala*, 1928  
Courtesy of E.P. Taylor Research Lib  
and Archives, Art Gallery of Ontario;  
Anonymous Donation 2010.



LEFT:  
*Water and Tower  
 Allegory*, 2012  
 [installation view, detail]

The towers provide a means for Mahon to encapsulate literal, representational, and allegorical spheres within provisional thought-experiments. Like the figures of maps and ships with which he is engaging in other bodies of work, towers are technologies for, in a sense, both navigating and controlling water. In early modernity, proposals for water's management appear, for example, in Leonardo da Vinci's sketchbooks. At that historic moment, at the outset of modernity's Faustian bargain to harness the forces and resources of nature, the artist's powers of careful observation and inventive technical skill brought together the literal and representational.

Mahon's constructivist aesthetic also calls to mind the energetic optimism of early 20th century artistic modernism and another ambitious structure, Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919-20), also known as Tatlin's Tower. Large enough to usurp the Eiffel Tower's role as triumphant symbol of modernity, its geometric forms were intended to be made from steel and glass and mechanical devices were to move people through its double helix spirals. Even if the money and materials had been available in post-revolutionary Russia, it is doubtful the structure could have practicably been built. With artistic optimism

given over to the Revolution, expressed in ideas too obscure and experimental for popular comprehension, Tatlin's Tower makes a better allegory than built form. Within a few years of its design, Stalin declared such artistic experimentation bourgeois. Artists, repurposed as purveyors of state propaganda, no longer designed and spoke for society since engineers were now the masters of technology.

## WATER

*Water and Tower Allegory* also brings to mind two works from the early 16th century, Titian's woodcut *Drowning of the Pharaoh's Host in the Red Sea* (1515-17) and Leonardo Da Vinci's series of observational water sketches, mentioned above, that were produced over several years. Titian's rendering of water is decorative and schematic, and Mahon quotes its fluid marks in his own printed surfaces. Da Vinci's concern with the properties of water flow were motivated by his desire to develop technologies for irrigation, flood management, and land drainage.

For an artist to invoke water in an era when water is both solution (to drought, to thirst, to feeding the world's people) and problem (think: ravaging storms and flooding) is to confront and in some manner address

the fraught environmental politics of globalized water crises. Over-exploitation by modern industrial, agricultural, and energy companies, inadequate infrastructure to manage pollution and distribution, grossly unequal access to potable water, and climate change bringing melting ice caps, rising sea levels and dramatic, destructive weather: the threats to life are many and mammoth. Together with such factors as population growth, unstable governments, monetization of water, and use of water-access as a weapon, humans face a day of reckoning as our control of nature reaches its limit. At the very least a failure to address water issues will lead to social and environmental deterioration. The potential for armed conflict over access to water resources cannot be discounted.

What is an artist to do? What can he or she do? This question hangs over *Water and Tower Allegory*, embodied in the visual tension between water's overwhelming force and Mahon's proposed contraptions to harness or be protected from it. The viewer is compelled to parse the installation's elements to find an answer: the art historic references, the images of water towers, the fragile materiality of balsawood constructions suggestive of popsicle stick crafts and model airplanes. Makeshift. Tentative. Unable to stand on their own.

#### ALLEGORY

To draw attention to the installation's layered connections amongst natural forces, human enterprise, and social commentary, Mahon repurposes the figuration of allegory, a literary device ubiquitous in the titles of Renaissance and Baroque art but long since fallen from favour. It's an intriguing and historically-weighted means of evoking the notion of legibility that Mahon has often explored in his work. Legibility is at its most fragile in that perceptual space between abstract visual design and conventional script, a space that Mahon evokes with printed patterns suggestive of latent yet elusive meanings ripe for decoding.

Mahon's evocation of allegory alerts the viewer to approach the works as symbols intended for persuasion as well as abstracted or fragmented depictions of towers and water. Yet the idea or narrative to which the allegory of tower and water might refer are not immediately obvious. The works are poised to persuade yet they linger, teetering, on the edge of significance. No socially conventional referent asserts itself, thus raising the possibility that the allegory is more personal or self-conscious. Pre-modern painterly allegorists relied on standardized themes from classical antiquity to comment upon such subjects as time, mortality, virtue, and vice; and allegory was an acceptable means also to express political views. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the subject of art and its supposed divine inspiration became a popular means for artists to elevate the status of painting from craft to a liberal art. Herein is the clue to the installation.

I think *Tower and Water Allegory* is an attempt to do something or say something that represents the precariousness of the attempt to do or say something through art. It is about the problem of making art in the face of all that exists. Alternatives in this historical moment for an artist seeking to take on the responsibility of our collective water woes are constrained not just by their sheer monumentality but as well as by the imperfection of any artistic gesture. The modern art work can easily become a token of value in the money economy, even if that token is a critique of the money economy itself. Critique has the potential to actually cause change to stall—as when protests that demand some project, such as a dam or pipeline, be stopped, when stopping the juggernaut is not within anybody's power. Mere critique is no longer going to produce radical change in a situation of complexity. Some might suggest artists can inspire hope, but as Mahon himself points out, artists can't be bearers of hope paradigmatically, because of the nature of the modern project as well as postmodern deconstruction.



*Water and Tower Allegory Studies, 2012*  
ink on balsa wood, dimensions variable

Moreover, hope isn't necessarily a useful ethos and can be regarded as an imposition onto the-world-as-it-is. Then could overcoming indifference be something artists could strive to do, making a kind of anti-consumer-propaganda? Ad Busters and the Occupy movement testify to that possibility yet they, too, have been unable to staunch our wounds.

Art isn't so powerful as to be able to engineer necessary social changes. That attitude was the hubris of early modernism. Nonetheless, there's something in the visual language of that time that is worth keeping alive even as it is repurposed. Perhaps Mahon is proposing we need to adapt an "off-hand" beauty, adjusting our aesthetic to embrace solutions that are makeshift and jury-rigged and not big modernist-development solutions requiring big corporate and government bureaucracies to build and operate. The water towers of India and the 19th-century mining tipples come to mind.

The water tower could be an allegory for all anachronistic technologies that many would willingly throw aside, without any sense of what would come next. It is characteristic of our profligate times that we dispose of forms of doing things, whether of art or of water management, even when many such forms are quite adequate to the task.

Patrick Mahon isn't proposing that artists must devise solutions to environmental problems. He is proposing, rather, to make some kind of artistic iteration in the face of the multiple problems and experiences of the moment in which we live. Proceeding provisionally, continuing to make art that is somehow legitimate and acknowledges its historical lineage is worth doing—even if the arts and humanities within our universities are treated as if they are no longer of value. Mahon's work potentially asserts that there is always value, not to mention transformation, to be found in the human enterprise that is engaged in making art in the face of history. -AB