

WATER WAIT, WATER WAYS

an interview with Patrick Mahon

ROBERT ENRIGHT

PATRICK MAHON: As material and as metaphor, water has always been there, including in the Catholic world in which I grew up. When I started this work I was invited to do a residency in Durham, Ontario in what used to be a mill by the river. They wanted me to do something that had a community connection and, given the context, I came to this not too brilliant idea of drawing water. But when I eventually got working in Durham and in other places, including Kamloops, it seemed as if my work was as much about the people, the structures and the kinds of community around the water as it was about the water itself. That was the beginning but I think it was something that was lodged in me well before I came up with an art idea.

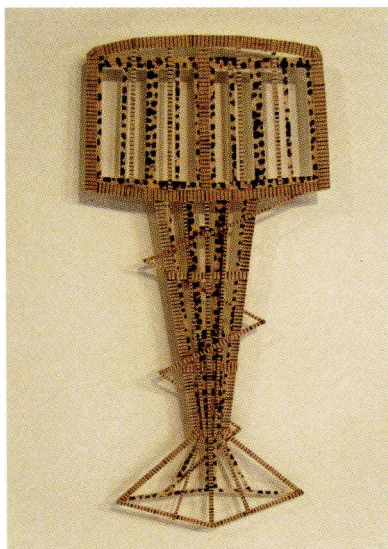
ROBERT ENRIGHT: Water is a container for a whole range of possibilities, everything from the *Ship of Fools* to the ways we contain it in towers and reservoirs. Water becomes a central and generative metaphor that is simultaneously contained and mobile?

A: I think so. For me water is an ideal subject and substance to embody those contradictory problems. I have been struggling with the problem of trying to represent a liquid with a line for some time. It's that same kind of conundrum. Water is both the thing we surround and that surrounds us; it's the material we try to contain that is also uncontained. It has the potential for being one of those large art themes that aren't fashionable in postmodern art, yet it has been important to me because it is so big and so very specific and very timely.

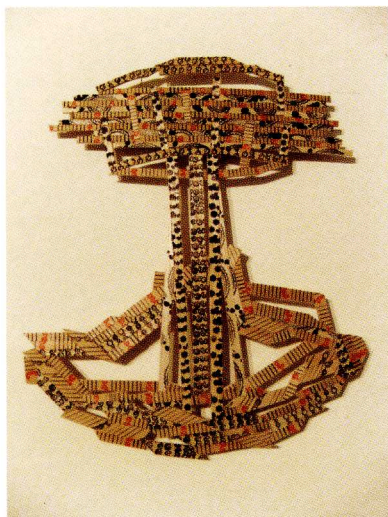
Q: There is something preposterous, and perhaps perfectly postmodern, in the idea of a water fence that is permeable.

A: Yes. My friend Gu Xiong in Vancouver made a lot of work with chain-link fences and that had a lot to do with Tiananmen Square and post-cultural revolutionary China, a world of containment and repression. In light of that sort of work it has always seemed to me that a fence was a strange and wonderful metaphor, a kind of screen that you are able to see through, that is permeable and yet it holds back. So if you bring that forward to water, it becomes even more unseemly. We now find ourselves historically in an impossible situation with water and the environment. At the same time that water is us and has always been with us it is also something that we are usefully challenged to try to contain, even if it is uncontainable.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Water Memory Table, 2013
ink on wood with metal supports
87.5 x 150 x 267.5 cm, 2013



ABOVE & BELOW:
Water and Tower Allegory Studies, 2010
ink on balsawood
various dimensions



Q: One of the intriguing things that emerges from your bodies of work is a rich sense of ambiguity. The shipwrecks appear to be both about being wrecked and about re-forming. Do you want them to exist at that nexus of the already-destroyed and the about-to-become?

A: Absolutely. When I decided to work with this shipwreck idea it did seem unidirectional that the ship had overturned itself and become wrecked. It was too limiting an idea, not only in relation to the times we live in (because I'm not that pessimistic), but in relation to my doing an artist's project as well. Illustrating a shipwreck ultimately struck me as a potential one-liner. That's when the title for the project changed to *Voyager*. I wanted the additional sense that in some perverse way these things are in a state of transformation or becoming.

Q: Are they based on photographs or prints of other shipwrecks?

A: The structures themselves are based on a bunch of fairly recent photographs I found on the internet, and the patterns on the wood make reference to some of the Hogarth prints I was looking at (for the McMaster Museum of Art project) while I was thinking about shipwrecks.

Q: You have mentioned artists like Sigmar Polke and Dieter Roth as influences but I can't help but think of Vladimir Tatlin and his tower when I look at *Water and Tower Allegory #2*. Are there ways in which you have raided previous images in your work?

A: I think so. There is a specific work by Sigmar Polke of a watchtower that in his hands was about the war and Nazi Germany. It's an icon he used a number of times and while my structure is not like his, his was an interest. Essentially, I was thinking about modern structures that were aspirational and also bizarre in terms of utility. So those things that are both propositional and probably useless, like Tatlin's structure, were definitely the kind of thing I was interested in.

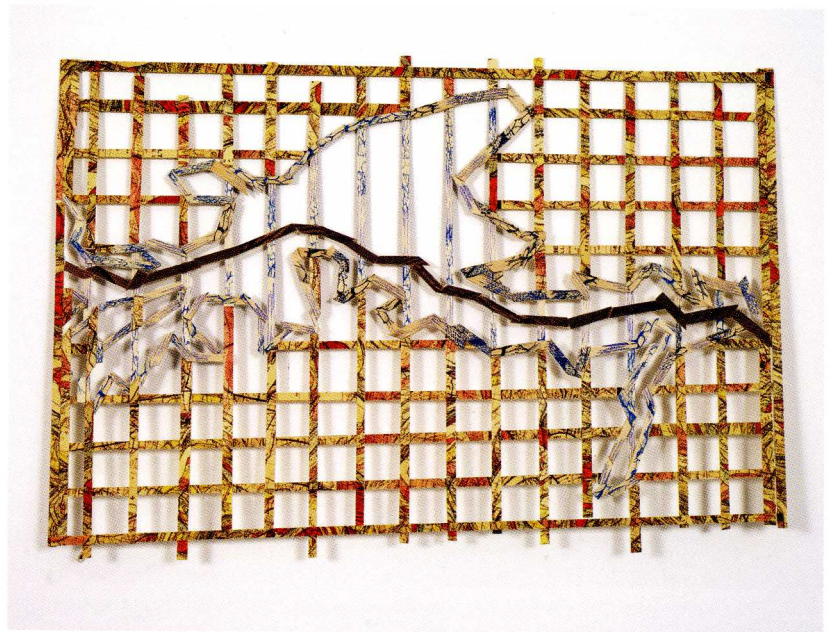
Q: You have expressed an interest in a relationship between aesthetics and critique. You want to make a thing that is attractive at the same time that you want the artist to be engaged as a social critic.

A: I have an interest in a history of aesthetics that suggests making a beautiful thing also makes it possible to make a right-thinking thing, or at least a thing that needed to be made. So I think that building a tower, even a rickety one, holds to that line of thought. At the same time the towers that I am making are bricolage. Some of the prints on them are beautiful but they're also a bit of a mess, with different kinds of signifiers. So even in terms of aesthetic beauty there are lots of contradictions. The work doesn't absolutely adhere to the tenets regarding what would make a beautiful object.

Q: Where did the idea first come from for the "Printed Stick" drawings? I thought of Roni Horn and her inscription of lines from Emily Dickinson poems on the surface of her sculptures. She wasn't into decoration but your printed sticks have some connection with the Dickinson works.

A: Roni Horn is someone I have been really interested in. I had done some work a number of years ago where I was printing patterns on two-by-fours and building structures. At one point I actually made a piece called *Studflowers*.

RIGHT:
Water Memory Table Study, 2013
ink on basswood
42.5 x 62.5 cm



I was literally printing flowers on wood studs and inferentially playing around with ideas of gender. That was an earlier way of thinking how material could embody or hold language or even the text within it. Actually, before making these new works, I had been to India and done a lot of research, photographing some of the amazing water towers and architecture there. When I came back I started making these little three-dimensional models, knowing that I wasn't going to treat them as art works per se but thinking they might lead to some larger sculptural works. Once I had worked with them I became dissatisfied with their three-dimensionality, in part because they seemed purely decorative and also because they lacked any kind of lyricism. They also didn't work with the patterned sticks I was using, in ways that would both acknowledge the rigidity of the material but also set up the possibility to work against that, in order to make something that alluded to some sort of fluidity. And the 3D objects just couldn't capitalize on the potential of the wall and the flat plane. I think my work pushes away from the wall, in one way or another, and yet it always acknowledges that kind of abstract plane. So I started making small maquettes by literally gluing these printed sticks onto rice paper and then cutting away the rice paper. It seemed a great way to solve problems. As far as Roni Horn is concerned, I was interested in her for the things she has had to say, not only about water, but about the way she thinks as an artist. It was only laterally that I saw some of the pieces you are alluding to and I recognized some of the thinking behind them was what I had been interested in, too.

Q: When you installed the columnar piece, called *Château d'eau*, at La Maison Patrimoniale de Barthète, did you think of it as one piece or as seven separate pieces? This is less a question about installation than a way of asking about the way in which your work shifts from one art form to another. So your relief structures come off the wall and become sculptural presences.



ABOVE:
Water Tower (Cascade, vertical state), 2012
 silkscreen on wood
 62 x 198 x 88 cm

A: I definitely thought of *Château d'eau* as one work of art. One of the ways I work is through a series of stages to fashion a material that might appear like a readymade but that I actually refer to as a “handmade readymade.” So I work through a number of steps to get to the production of a thing, and then the thing is put together with other like things, in order to make another thing or a full thing. In *Château d'eau* each of those pillars remains separate from the others in that they don’t touch one another, they just touch the ceiling and the floor. That piece came before the little three-dimensional structures I mentioned where they were all stuck together. It seemed as if they were too finished and they actually didn’t work that well. I don’t think of myself as a sculptor. It’s not so much that I can’t make sculpture but my work is still related to the wall and to graphic art. So ultimately I think of that *Château d'eau* piece as a *drawing* made with the printed sticks.

Q: When I look at the work I think of two very different traditions of art-making; pattern painting and Philip Taaffe, and Donald Judd and a certain kind of minimalism. So *Cascade* is minimalist at the same time that it urges towards the baroque. You have a way of combining styles of art-making that you wouldn’t normally think would come together.

A: I really admire the work of Taaffe and was very interested in the Pattern and Decoration Movement. But because I am interested in the possibility that my work will point to social preoccupations, I try to weave some of those strands in. I hope some kind of distilled thing comes out of this complex interest in artifice and beauty and repetition. The objects I make become fairly refined (like minimalist art), so that the work will have the possibility of engaging in an arena that we might think of as involving critical conjecture. Not that I don’t think Philip Taaffe is interested in those things, but in my case I am trying to make something that is more of an index or that self-consciously points to the social subjects in which I am interested.

Q: In naming your pieces you often use a language that de-stabilizes meaning or that at least makes it ambiguous.

A: I want to solve art problems and I also want to deal with everyday social human problems. Inherently with the *Water Memory Table*, or the idea of trying to represent a liquid with a line, I’m saying that artists have a job to do and sometimes the job appears embedded in the very formal principles of art. But if we do our work it can also become attached to the other kinds of tensions and problematics that exist in the lived world. In part the *Water Memory Table* is a grid structure that could never hold water and, at the same time, the idea of a water table alludes to something tangible and even potentially ‘testable’. I am interested in that flip back and forth between what is art and what is lived reality because I think that ultimately they can be the same thing.

Q: In lots of ways your structures argue that same kind of doubleness. The ship is a thing that wants to keep water out; the tower wants to keep water in. They have an opposite function and you engage both possibilities.

A: I think that is true. There are many challenges around water in a time when it is threatened and at the same time is a threat. I have asked myself whether it is enough to make a work of art (in light of that). That is always a question for me. I think my work sometimes admits to its own fallibility, to its own failure to be more than simply what it is.

Q: The range of the shipwrecks interests me: *Shipwreck Study # 3* is quite complicated and *Shipwreck Study #4* is comparatively minimal, even skeletal. Have you gone after a series of different renditions in the work?

A: As an artist you often make work that follows from the work you made before. Regarding stylistic choices, there is an awareness of the way in which this thing becomes something so 'other' that it actually starts to seem like a sign for something unnamable and yet has some level of familiarity or presence.

Q: *Tsunami Study in Water Memory Table* reminds me of the tragic photographs taken after the event. Your piece caught a terrific sense of the destructive power of a tsunami.

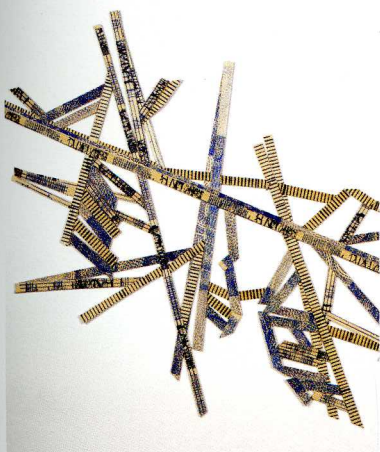
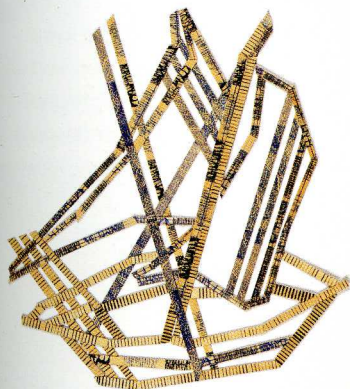
A: Somebody had given me some photographs from India of the rebuilding after the tsunami but alongside there were also photographs of what these places had looked like before. When I was at Banff last year I wanted to make some new studies. I was looking at this one photograph and I projected it on an angle so that it seemed to appear at an inclined plane that was moving into the distance perceptually. Then I started making a stick drawing. On the material I was cutting up, I think I had the image of a snake going through water and an image of a map of the Mississippi and all kinds of tropes and artifactual traces that referred to different situations and ideas about water. But I had the idea of wanting to weave the strands back in, of trying to pull them all together, not with the intention of illustrating anything in particular, but with the sense that the work would embody what I was both thinking and feeling about the subject of water and the tsunami.

BELOW:
Tsunami Study, 2013
ink on basswood
37.5 x 72.5 cm



BELOW:
Shipwreck Study #5, 2013
ink on balsawood
38 x 40 cm

BOTTOM:
Shipwreck Study #3, [detail], 2013
ink on balsawood
28 x 51 cm



Q: If I were characterizing the nature of your representation, I would say you move towards beauty and elegance rather than towards chaos and destruction. Whether you're doing a shipwreck or a tsunami, your instinct for the elegant seems to rise to the surface.

A: It is something I have been conscious of for a long time. I think my work proclaims itself as a work of art, as a thing that is meant to operate within an aesthetic sphere. Then I hope people will spend enough time that it actually becomes more complicated for them. I don't want it to fall apart but I like it when something beautiful starts to unmake itself and shows itself to be full of as many questions as answers or sites of repose or pleasure. So yes, I do think that's the way my work functions and it functions best when it holds a tension between the appearance of something beautiful and the knowledge of something more complicated or maybe troubling.

Q: Your work plays into so many kinds of art making; I also think of architectural drawing when I look at the "Printed Stick" series.

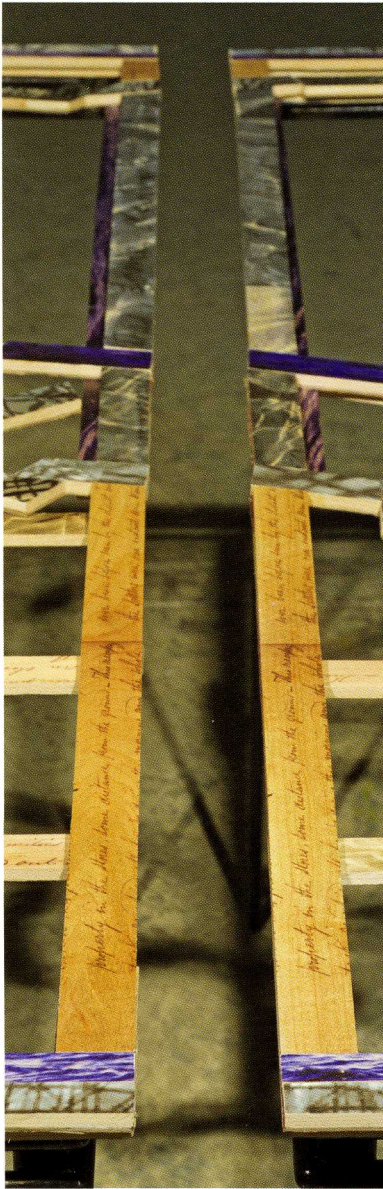
A: As I think I've already implied, when I think seriously about being an artist there is a desire to do something that seems to need doing. That's where the idea of making these structures came from. It's not so much that I'm making anything that anybody can use or that I'm solving real world problems. I think I'm sort of 'performing' a trope of a man who is trying to build something and the architectural reference is very much about that.

Q: I also like the drift of these things. The water towers are developed from real structures but they also seem like maquettes, but then you have maquettes for the water towers so you've got meta-maquettes. You don't really know where you are in scale in your work.

A: When I started making these little maquettes, I was just trying to figure out what I was doing and they seemed somehow resolved, or at least they seemed to be at home in their own skin. Then I had the idea of wanting to see them larger and, of course, the scale of the patterns had to change. The patterns for the little pieces were done quickly by hand with rubber stamps and the details were fairly small but most of the patterns for the larger pieces were digitally printed. So the idea of having to recalibrate and rethink how the language of the material is working when it shifts scale was one of my preoccupations.

Q: If I compare *Voyager I* and *Voyager II*, *Voyager II* looks like it could have been designed by Mario Merz with this igloo shape. *Voyager I*, on the other hand, breaks up in really fascinating ways. *Shipwreck Study #3* is like pick up sticks that were choreographed to fall in a certain way. I'm intrigued by how you arrive at the organizational sense of these pieces. Is it primarily an intuitive process that you come to in the making of the work?

A: Yes, although with *Voyager I* and something like *Water and Tower Allegory #5*, there is more play between the two-dimensional plane and three-dimensional illusion. Part of the logic of what I'm doing is to make a work that sits on the wall at the same time that it appears to be receding into space. I try to work with the tension between the piece operating as a kind of representational object, as a boat, and also to have it hang on the wall in a way that functions as a compelling, abstract thing. I would love them to operate in the space between representation and abstraction.



Q: So in *Water Tower Allegory # 1* you have a number of straight lines which seem to establish a structure and then this snaky line meanders in, as if you were diagrammatically indicating the possibilities of both structure and the chaos of line.

A: That is something I was doing more with some of the early models where I would cut up a bunch of little strips of the printed wood and then assemble them, so there would be some kind of fluidity. When I first made that piece I was literally thinking, “How can I make this thing so that it resembles something familiar, like a water tower, and that has other elements that might be water itself?”

Q: Sometimes when I look at the water towers I think of tree houses and side stairwells attached to old apartment buildings. They play into memory and how we make spaces that adapt to our needs.

A: Absolutely. Some of the initial drawings on paper were made with reference to photographs by Bernd and Hilla Becher, not the water towers series but mining tipples, of these very provisional 19th century structures that were built above mine shafts to haul up whatever was being mined. As far as I understand, they were made mostly in the U.S. and then they were abandoned. I was interested in mimicking them as structures, although none of mine looked much like the things the Bechers had photographed. I also loved the enterprise of those things, the way in which they looked as if they were made to serve a particular purpose. They were incredibly elegant and at the same time you wondered how they would have appeared to anybody who worked on them, though I suppose those miners probably wouldn’t have been preoccupied with how they looked. I think water towers are a bit like that. For those of us who are looking they look pretty remarkable but, other than being a local sign or edifice, I suspect that many people haven’t thought that much about their aesthetics.

Q: I was intrigued by the diary sections from the Hudson Bay Company Archives included in the *Water Memory Table* work. There is something about the script that is like drawing. Were the diaries generative for you as well?

A: Yes. I had already worked on the structure of the table, in part looking at a map that I had found of the flood plain of the Red River from 1950. It was at Winnipeg and a bit south of Winnipeg, so I based part of the form for the organic interior of the work on that. Then I was thinking more about maps because the original study had some references to maps of rivers, although it happened to be the Mississippi that I had as something to work with early on. When I got to the Archives and found that text, it seemed like a wonderful counterpoint to the idea that we want to graphically picture where the water will go, or where it has been. So even though that report – from 1878, I think – is only a couple of pages long, there is some detail about the occurrence of flooding and its effect on people of the region. That seemed to be another wonderful kind of map, another kind of graphic representation.

Q: It’s cartography meets Donald Judd. You get both the meandering and the structural quality in the piece.

A: And Smithsonian, too, with those piles of words.

Q: Have you decided whether it is a wall piece or a sculptural piece that actually sits on the table?

A: As much as I said my work needs the wall, I actually think this work is going to be oriented more like an actual table. At this point I am interested in what the shadow from the grid will do when it falls on the floor, the implied idea of water permeating and falling through due to gravity seems important to how I'm thinking about the structure. So I think if I hang it on the wall there will be a way that illusion will be lost. I've said I'm not so comfortable with my actual sculptural capabilities or affinities, but the *Water Memory Table* seems a kind of slightly-above-the-floor floor work. So while it still acknowledges the existing plane that is somewhat abstract, it does seem to need the floor rather than the wall. Coming back to Winnipeg is a great opportunity. When I started talking with the Gallery about doing something related to the river in Manitoba I got really excited. As it happened, there wasn't the degree of flooding this past year that has been recently experienced, and that seemed to be just about right from the standpoint of the environment. For me it suggests the possibility that maybe these things are a little more controllable, though perhaps I'm naive. I hope that the work embodies something about the ever-present but the not always there, the idea that there is a flood and there is not a flood. And after all, it's not my job to be an environmental scientist or to be making predictions. My job is to be writing poetry through materials.

OPPOSITE:

Water Memory Table, 2013
ink on wood with metal supports [detail]
87.5 x 150 x 267.5 cm

BELOW:

Water Memory Table, 2013
ink on wood with metal supports [detail]
87.5 x 150 x 267.5 cm

