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RETHINKING WATER, PLACE & COMMUNITY

RIVERS AND MEANING



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from multiple perspectives within and beyond the academy.

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The cover image is of low clouds in Glen Forsa on the Isle of Mull, Scotland, UK. Image by Jill Diamond on Unsplash.

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CONTENTS

Introductions

Introduction to Issue Twenty
By Laurie Moberg, Editor 4

Guest Editor’s Introduction to Issue Twenty: Rivers and Meaning
By Mary Modeen 6

Features

RIVER FUGUES
By Margaret Cogswell 15

(Re)connecting Community to the Awataha Stream
By Laura Donkers and Charmaine Bailie 47

TWEED
By Tania Kovats and Mary Modeen 60

Professor Jiao Xingtao and *The Yangdeng Art Cooperative Project*
By Jiao Xingtao and Mary Modeen 100

In Review

Light and Language at Lismore Castle Arts
By Ciara Healy Musson 113

Geographies

In the Crook of My Elbow
By Katie Hart Potapoff 120

Perspectives

River / Museum
By Miriam Mallalieu 128

Primary Sources

Photo Essay of Ilhabela Rivers
By Francisco Pereira Da Silva, Laelcio Pereira Da Silva, and Helena Beutel 136

Reflecting On Brackish Waters
By Louise Ritchie 164

Between Two Rivers: Two Ballads from a Scots Traveller Family
By Arthur Watson 173

Teaching and Practice

The River and The Bridge
By Robert Snikkar 179

FEATURE

RIVER FUGUES

By Margaret Cogswell

I've known rivers:

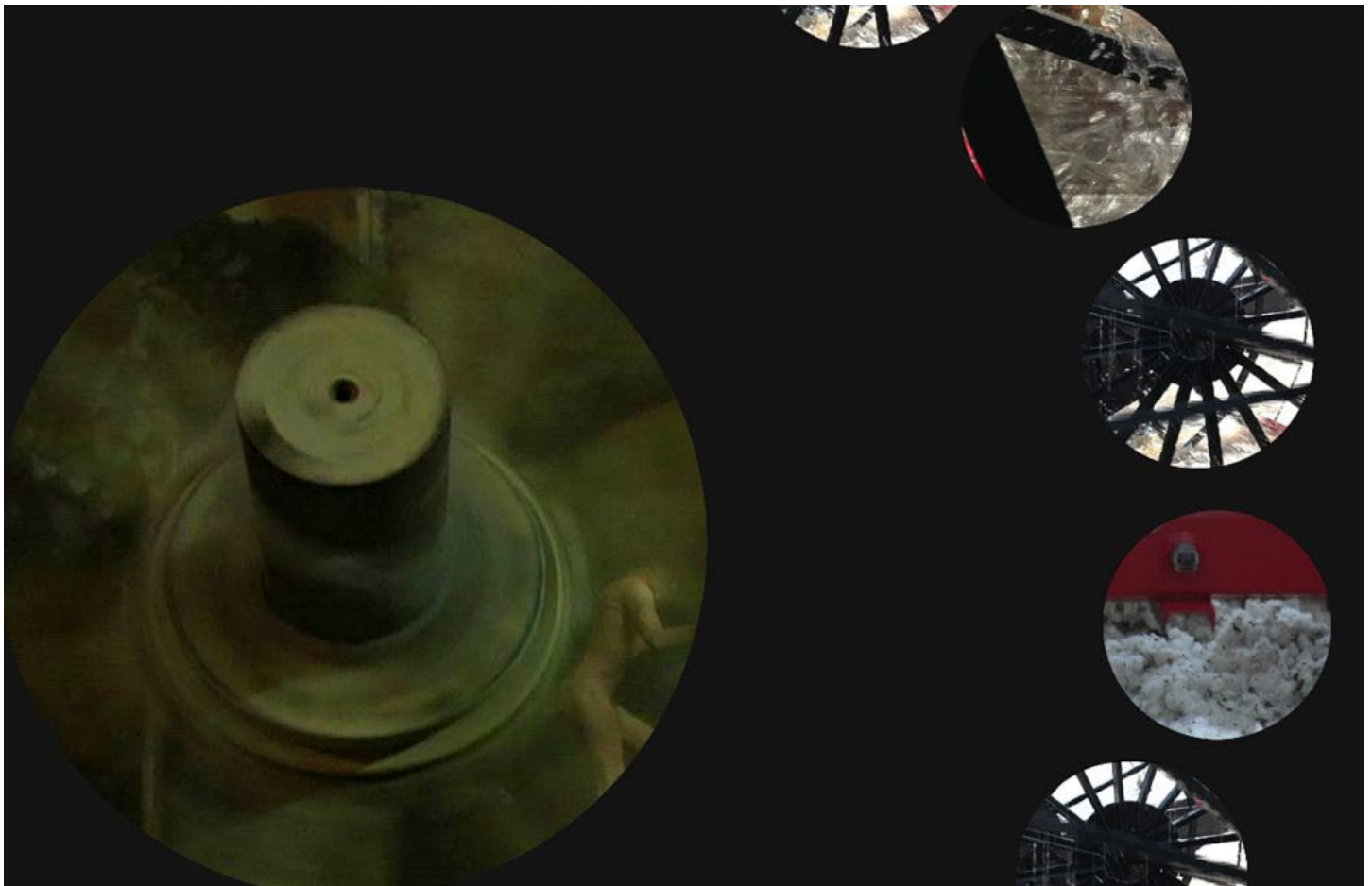
*I've known rivers ancient as the world
and older than the flow of human blood in
human veins.*

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

Langston Hughes

"The Negro Speaks of Rivers"[1]

What is it to "know" rivers? As an artist I have been asking myself this question for over twenty years. Ever since an artist residency in Cleveland, Ohio led to my encountering the burning river history of the Cuyahoga River, I realized that all rivers have stories, and to learn of their histories was to explore and listen. Simon Schama, in the introduction to his book, *Landscape and Memory*, describes this kind of exploration beautifully:



*'Mississippi River Fugues,' collage of video stills, Margaret Cogswell, 2008.
Image courtesy of Ed West.*

Landscape and Memory has been built around such moments of recognition as this, when a place suddenly exposes its connections to an ancient and peculiar vision of the forest, the mountain, or the river. A curious excavator of traditions stumbles over something protruding above the surface of the commonplaces of contemporary life. He scratches away, discovering bits and pieces of a cultural design that seems to elude coherent reconstitution but which leads him deeper into the past. [2]

In this essay, I will focus on my research on different rivers, sharing the meandering paths

which have led me to explore these rivers and my creative responses to them in the form of mixed-media art installations that seek to reflect the complex relationships between land, water, and peoples. To contextualize the impetus for what developed into an ongoing series of *River Fugues* projects, I will offer some personal history. Although I was born in the United States (in Memphis, Tennessee along the Mississippi River), I went to Japan with my parents when I was 18 months old and lived there until I was 13 years old. Coming back to the United States at age 13 was like moving to a foreign country. Although I was bilingual and spoke English as well as Japanese, I did not know this country's



Fig. 1, 'A Bend in the River,' installation view 1. 1984, Margaret Cogswell. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Mixed-media installation includes: steel, glass, fluorescent light bulbs, concrete, bamboo, and straw. Installation dimensions includes in and outside gallery space: 12' h x 60' l x 60' w. Image courtesy of Ed West.

history, or understand its culture. My early efforts to better understand this country were through the study of literature. This led to my efforts to explore the intervals between words and what cannot be translated, and eventually to my work as a visual artist.

My feeling of being "displaced" eventually led me to study and teach art at the University of Hawaii—thinking that in this landscape, between the mainland USA and Japan, I would find a familiar and comfortable fusion of cultures. I, of course, found something else—another world entirely. But it was through my parallel explorations in literature that I eventually began to realize how

much history was in a landscape and how much I could learn by exploring a landscape.

In 1984, in response to my experience of living in Hawaii for three and a half years where colonialism's impact was still strongly felt, I made a brief foray into the investigation of rivers, more as a place where different peoples and cultures met—often colliding—than a focus on its waters. The resulting work was a mixed-media installation at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa Art Gallery, titled *A Bend in the River*, after V.S. Naipaul's book.

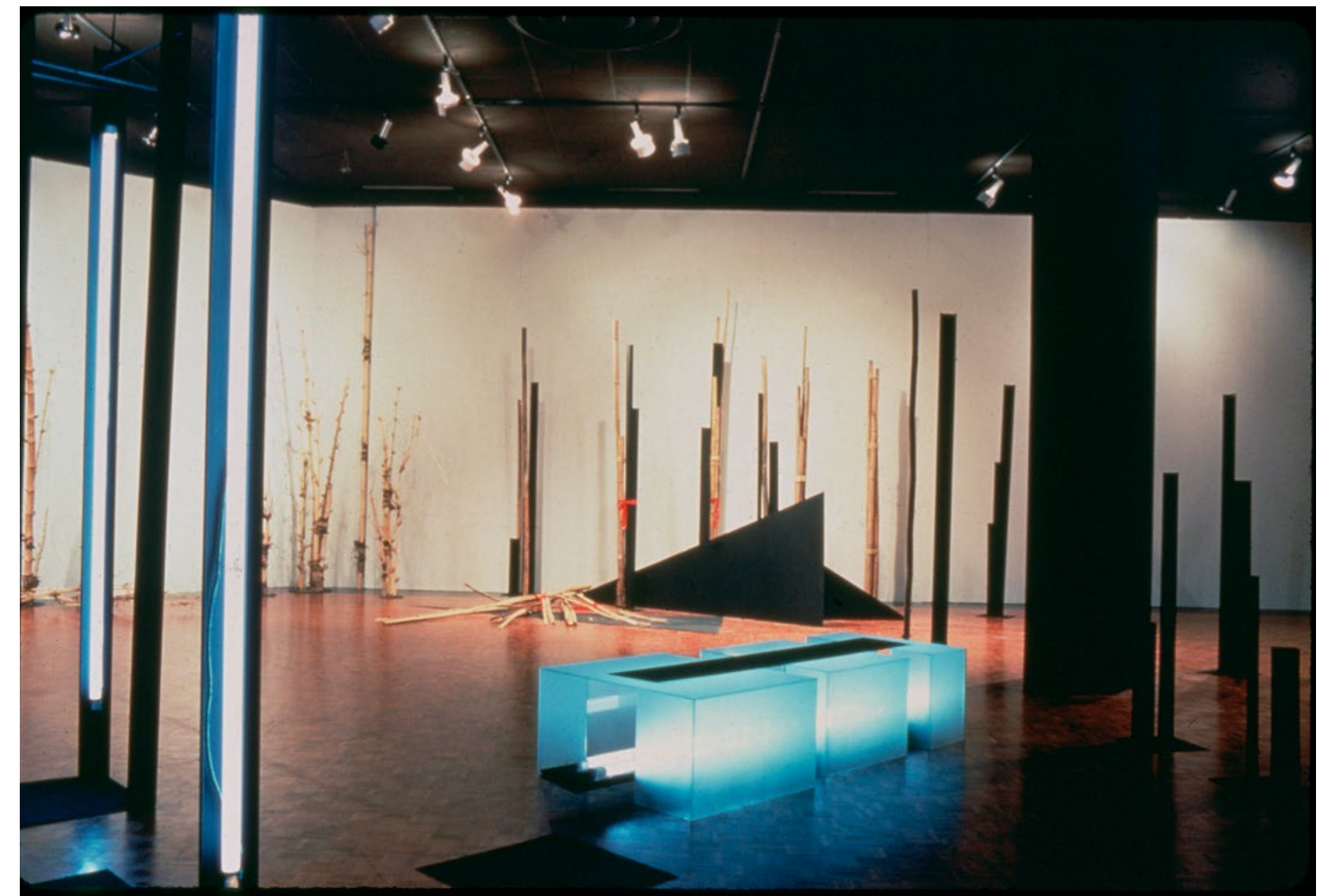


Fig. 2, 'A Bend in the River,' installation view 2. University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Mixed-media installation includes: steel, glass, fluorescent light bulbs, concrete, bamboo, and straw, Margaret Cogswell. Installation dimensions includes in and outside gallery space: 12' h x 60' l x 60' w. Image courtesy of Ed West.

Although I would continue my search to understand people and places through landscapes and memory[3] it would not be until my discovery of W.B. Yeats' play, *At the Hawk's Well* (one of Yeats' *Four Plays for Dancers* written in the style of the Noh drama of Japan, 1921) that I would begin to explore creating work focusing on water. Since I grew up in Japan, I was excited

by the discovery of these plays, which draw on the cultural traditions of both Ireland and Japan. I was also intrigued with Yeats' exploration of the peculiar human longing for immortality—a universal longing which becomes the focus of Yeats' play and revolves around the search for water from the fountain of youth.



Fig. 3, 'A Bend in the River,' installation view detail: bamboo, steel, wire mesh, concrete and straw, Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Ed West.

THIRST (1999 & 2001)

Installed in an abandoned syrup factory, Kansas City, MO—1999

THIRST (Elegy for Esther), 2001

Carriage House Installations
Islip Art Museum
East Islip, NY

It is this peculiar human longing and search for immortality that I latched on to and began to work with in a series of pieces called *Thirst* (1999 and 2001). These works explore the idea of immortality being found in the waters of a particular place and/or through particular rituals involving water, including the Japanese tea ceremony, as well as the art of dowsing for water using divining



Fig. 4, 'Thirst,' installation view. Mixed-media installation. Media & dimensions: 3 steel discs at 3' H x 3' D, 5' H x 7' D, and 7' H x 10' D; 7 heating element structures; 15 cast ice buckets; 3 wood and steel "fishing poles" with video monitors; video loop; one light bulb and one 5" x 4" steel ladle with 6' handle, Margaret Cogswell. Installation site dimensions: 10' h x 15' x 20' x 4'. Image courtesy of Kansas City Art Institute.



Fig. 5, 'Thirst,' installation detail. 15 cast ice buckets suspended from ceiling over steel discs with heating elements, Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Kansas City Art Institute.

rods. In my *Thirst* projects, water was present, but turned to steam as it hit heated steel discs; thus, like the fountain of youth, the waters are never accessible for drinking and immortality remains elusive.

CUYAHOGA FUGUES (2003)

SPACES World Artists' Program
SPACES
Cleveland, Ohio
Curated by director Susan Channing
<https://www.spacescle.org/>

During my artist's residency in 2003 at SPACES in Cleveland, Ohio, this exploration of the meaning of water in our lives expanded to an exploration of rivers and culminated in my first *River Fugues* project which was *Cuyahoga Fugues*. There, at the mouth of Lake Erie, I was confronted with the presence of large bodies of water that had been polluted to such a degree that the Cuyahoga River had burned three times. Finally in 1969 the last burning river precipitated the creation of the Clean Water Act and served to save other rivers as well.

At the beginning of my residency in Cleveland, I had no idea what to do with this information. Nonetheless, lured by fire, water, and the imposing presence of volcanic steel mills at the mouth of the Cuyahoga River, I set out to explore and listen to generations of stories reflecting the life and dreams embodied by the Cuyahoga. I interviewed steel workers, environmentalists, fishermen, and river enthusiasts. I visited and filmed inside the steel mills. I traced the Cuyahoga River with a regional historian, filming its path from source to mouth in Lake Erie. I collected stories about water from four-year-olds at a Cleveland pre-school, stories told to me while they made drawings about water which then became posters advertising the exhibition in the community.

These oral histories became beams of light in a large and complex historical landscape. They were invaluable contributions to the kaleidoscope of interpretations of the realities surrounding the history of a place, of people to their river and to their source of water necessary for sustaining life. The realization of the complexity of all these different voices, both literally and metaphorically, combined with video footage from my journeys along riverbanks and in the steel mills, created both a conceptual and practical challenge to me as an artist. How was I to honor these different voices in an installation with multiple video and audio components, without creating complete chaos? I needed a structure. Linking sound to music, I began to explore the musical structure of the *fugue* as a way to think about how to organize these different components.

In music, by definition, *a fugue is a contrapuntal composition in two or more voices, built on a subject (theme) that is introduced at the beginning and recurs frequently in the course of the composition.*

In its most general aspect, counterpoint or contrapuntal music involves the writing of musical lines that sound very different and move independently from each other, but sound harmonious when played simultaneously.[4]

My reason for using the fugue is because of its flexibility as a conceptual framework, which can be applied to any set of components one is trying to integrate, whether it is musical, ambient sounds, voices, narratives, or images. Editing each of my video and audio pieces as "fugues" enabled me to "play" multiple components together in the same space. Ultimately, it has become very much like writing a musical score for a chamber music ensemble.

Although my initial process for gathering materials parallels that of a documentary filmmaker, the work upon completion does not follow a linear descriptive narrative. Instead, my primary mentors are found in composers and poets. Of particular significance have been Glenn Gould and Anne Carson.[5]

I have long been an avid listener to Glenn Gould's interpretation of Bach; it was not, however, until after I decided to edit my videos and narratives using the musical structure of the fugue that a composer friend of mine introduced me to Gould's narrative fugue, *The Idea of the North*. [6] In this radio play, Gould uses the musical



Fig. 6, 'Cuyahoga Fugues,' installation view, 2003. Mixed-media installation. Media: 24" diameter spiral steel pipe, sheet metal window plenums, electrical conduit and fixtures, poly pipe, portable TV, ice cooler, transistor radio, ice-fishing pole, video projectors, rear-projected video in both "river" and steel pipes, CD players and venting pipes installed in walls, electric light bulbs, multiple audio and video components, Margaret Cogswell. Site dimensions: 14' x 40' x 40'. Video stills by Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Jerry Mann.

structure of the fugue to weave together stories told by passengers on a train while riding through the Canadian North. The stories reveal what each passenger sought in the idealized landscape of the north country—a landscape to which they were retreating for various individual reasons. The ambient railroad track sounds became the contrapuntal element for the fugue, while the timbre of each voice and different pacing in each passenger's telling of their story transformed the voice into a musical instrument. Harnessing each of these elements, Gould created a narrative fugue; when I discovered this, it encouraged me that I was on the right track in using the fugue as a structure for my own work!

While Gould's *The Idea of the North* would bolster the trajectory of my use of the fugue as a conceptual structure for my videos and narratives, it was Anne Carson and other poets (including Seamus Heaney) who were to inspire how I edited my images. Thinking of visual images as a language, my interest has been to explore the unexpected juxtaposition of images in the way a poet might use words in an effort to lead the reader/viewer to see something in a different way.

Anne Carson's prose poem, "The Anthropology of Water,"[7] uses the form of a journal to take the reader along on a pilgrimage to Compostela. Each entry is introduced by another poet's haiku which, juxtaposed with Carson's prose poem, expands the search for meaning in her journal of the pilgrimage itself. With her brilliant use of language, Carson packs each short entry with unexpected and often jarring juxtapositions of philosophical reflections with those addressing social, political, and cultural histories embedded in the landscape along the pilgrims' path. Together with Simon Schama's investigations in *Landscape and Memory*,[8] Carson's pilgrimage in *The Anthropology of Water* inspired and challenged my thinking and, subsequently, the editing of my *River Fugues* videos and installations.

HUDSON WEATHER FUGUES (2005)

for

Meteorologic Phenomena

Curated by Jennifer McGregor
Glyndor Gallery, Wave Hill, Bronx, New York
<https://www.wavehill.org/discover/arts>

&



Fig. 7, 'Hudson Weather Fuges,' installation view. Dimensions: 3 windows with video projections on two panes of two windows with each pane @ 17" x 12"; video image size = 17" x 24"; 3 benches = 28" H x 20" W x 30" L; 6 window shutters = 81" H x 24" W x 6" D. Media: custom-made wood window sills & shutters with audio speakers inside; benches; video projectors; DVD players; plexiglass video screen inserted over window panes, Margaret Cogswell. Video link: <https://margaretcogswell.net/udson-river-fuges>. Image courtesy of Wave Hill.

HUDSON RIVER FUGUES (2009-10)

for

Lives of the Hudson

Curated by Ian Berry and Tom Lewis
The Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery
Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, New York
<https://tang.skidmore.edu/>

In 2005, I was invited to create a project for *Meteorologic Phenomena*, an exhibition at Wave Hill, a public garden and cultural center that sits on cliffs along the Hudson River in the Bronx, New York. In developing this work



Fig. 8, 'Hudson Weather Fuges,' video still by Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.

and gathering stories for what became *Hudson Weather Fugues*, I took a schooner down the Hudson River from Albany to the Chelsea piers in New York City; I interviewed climate and regional historians, ice-boat sailors, shad fishermen, lighthouse keepers and river guides.

I also came upon the *Hudson River Almanac*,^[9] which is compiled by Tom Lake, a naturalist at the Hudson River Estuary Program and published through the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. This weekly e-newsletter is comprised of observations along the river by local people from all walks of life. In *Hudson Weather Fugues*, readings from the *Hudson River Almanac* by a Hudson valley librarian were woven together to become the musical equivalent of the contrapuntal element of the fugue in contrast to the more melodic rhythm and voices of the storytellers. Memorable storytellers included Frank Parslow, an 87-year local shad fisherman whose observations helped the *Hudson Riverkeeper*, an environmental advocacy organization, win a case against Exxon.

Noting that “to check the weather” one usually goes to the window, I installed *Hudson Weather Fugues* in the gallery’s windows overlooking the Hudson River and layered the view from the window with video shot from the Saugerties lighthouse and my schooner trip down the Hudson. These videos were projected onto the glass panes in two of the three sets of windows. Shutters, custom-made for each set of the windows, housed speakers from which the narratives accompanying each video emerged. Benches placed in front of each window lured the viewer to linger, look out at the layered landscape, and “eavesdrop” on the river’s weather stories emerging from the shutters. The third window, though treated visually the same (with bench and shutters), had no video or audio intervention. The viewer, in anticipation of someone else’s

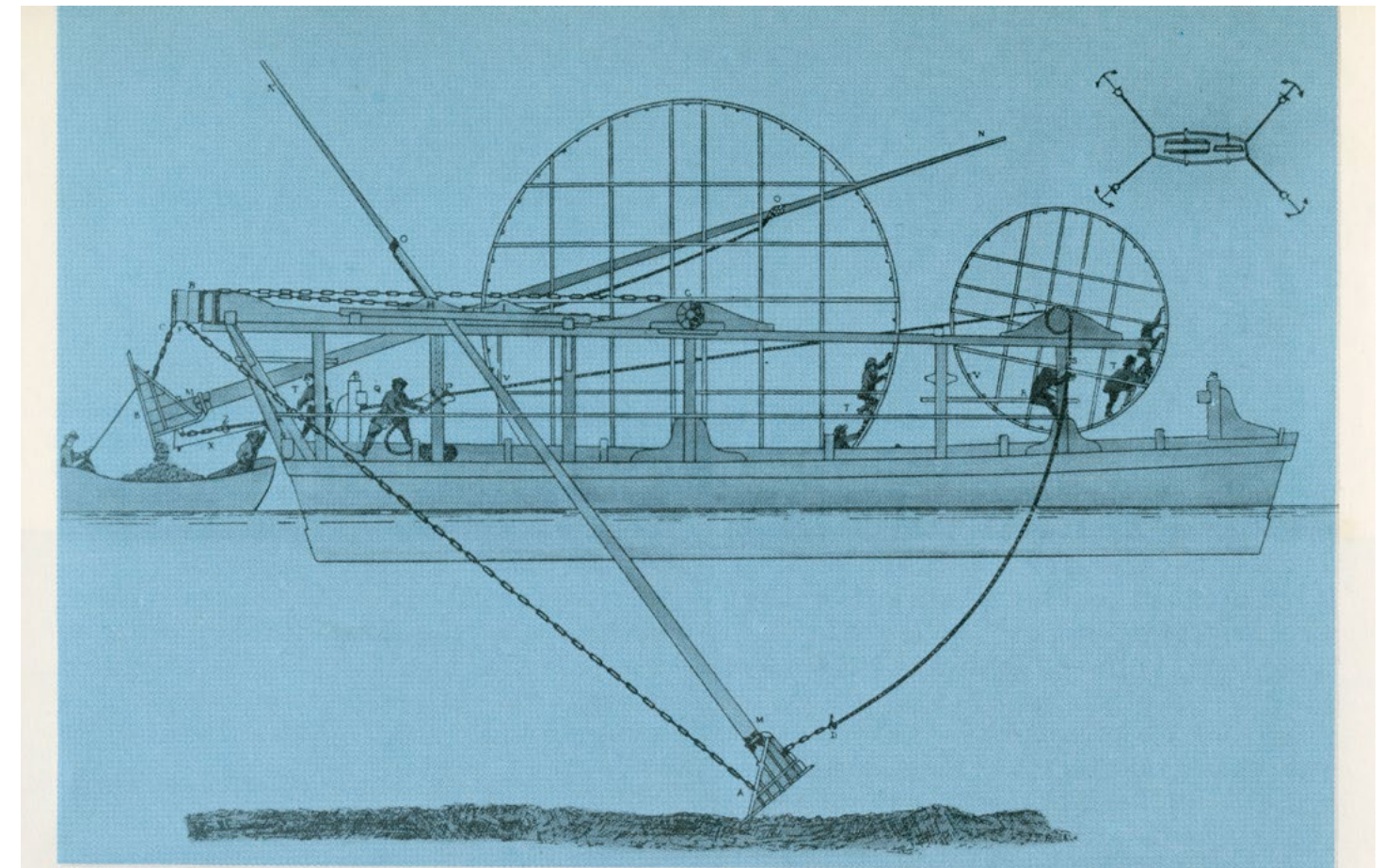
narratives, instead filled the silence with his/her own stories while visually exploring the landscape and river beyond.

This installation, which began at Wave Hill, was later developed into *Hudson River Fugues* for the exhibition, *Lives of the Hudson*, at the Tang Museum in Saratoga Springs, New York (2009–10). *Hudson River Fugues* juxtaposed contemporary stories from people along the Hudson River with the story of Henry Hudson’s disillusionment in not finding a short passage to China. It also contrasted Henry Hudson’s journey with the tragedy of the Algonquians whose ancient prophecy promised that their nomadic journeys would end in peace and prosperity when they found a great stream whose waters flow two ways.^[10] As *The Hudson Estuary* describes it, “Of course native tribes had named the river long before Hudson’s arrival. One of their names—*Mahicantuck*—means “great waters in constant motion” or, more loosely, “river that flows two ways.” It highlights the fact that this waterway is more than a river—it is a tidal estuary, an arm of the sea where salty sea water meets fresh water running off the land.”^[11] Collectively, these stories explore parallel narratives, contrasting expectations with disillusionment and loss in relation to the Hudson River.

MISSISSIPPI RIVER FUGUES – 2008

Solo Exhibition curated by museum director, Leslie Luebbbers
Art Museum of the University of Memphis
Memphis, Tennessee
<https://www.memphis.edu/amum/>

Since I was born in Memphis, Tennessee, when I was invited to create a new piece for a solo exhibition at the Art Museum of the University of Memphis, it seemed significant that I create a project focusing on the Mississippi River. The resulting *Mississippi River Fugues* emerged as an exploration of the complex history of the



A drawing of an early concept in “machine” dredging. Pre-dating the era of the Steam Engine, this machine was designed to dredge the harbor at the Port of Toulon, France, in the 18th century. Note that the scoops were powered by men in squirrel cages.

Fig. 9, eighteenth-century French drawing of a river dredger on pg. 4 of ‘A Century on the Mississippi: A History of the Memphis District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1876–1976,’ by Floyd M. Clay, Ph.D. Published by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Memphis District, June 1986.

Mississippi River as it runs through the Deep South, including the history of the rise of the cotton industry on the backs of slaves out of the fertile flood plains of the Mississippi River. Of course, now the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers attempts to control the river's flooding, along with the actual course that the Mississippi River

takes, as well as its depth for navigational purposes. This is particularly important when river levels are low because of severe droughts in the southwest.

View video here: 'MISSISSIPPI RIVER FUGUES' (2008) – Art Museum, University of Memphis.

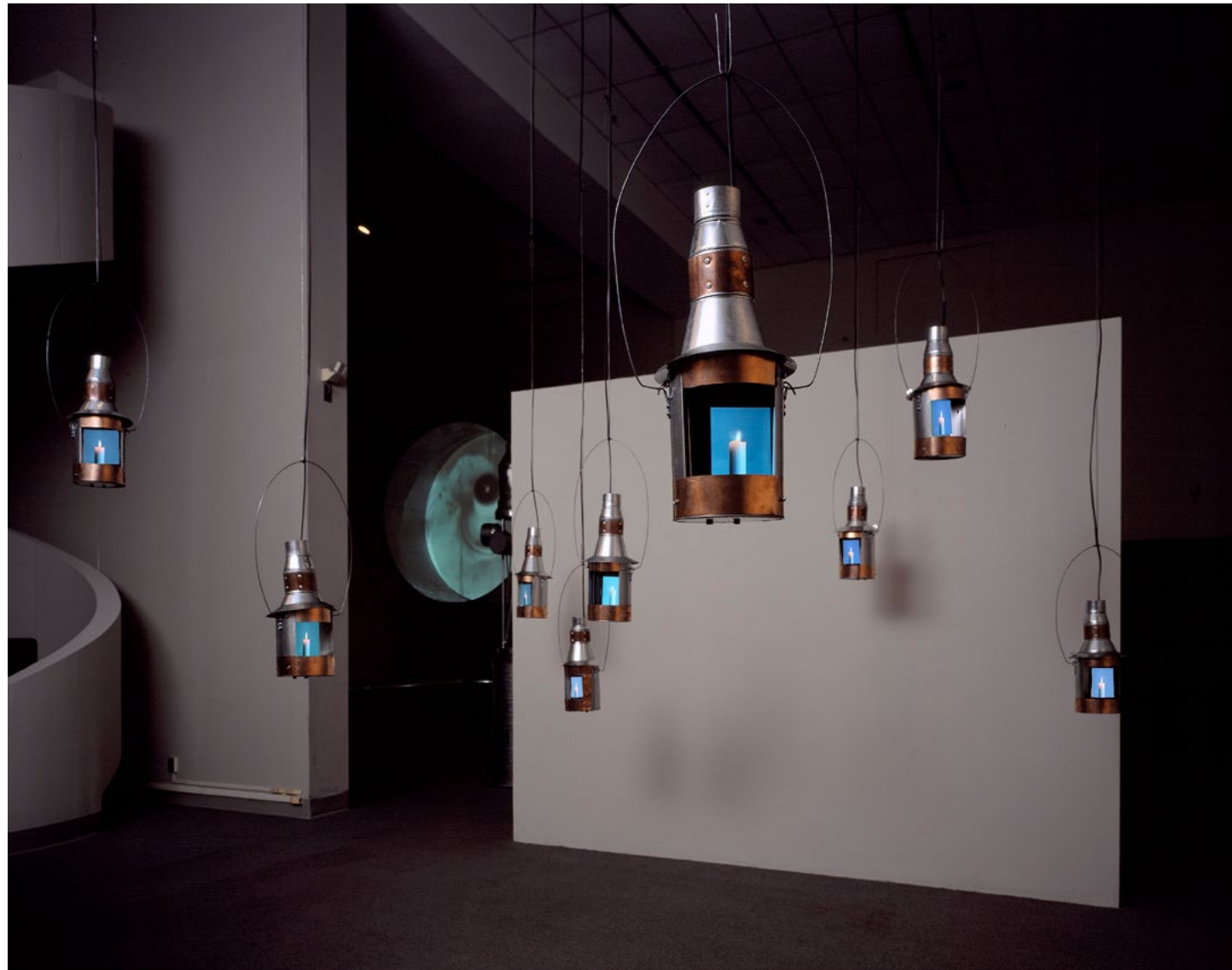


Fig. 10, 'Mississippi River Fugues,' Installation view. Museum entrance: 9 lanterns with portable DVD players; galvanized pipe sections, and copper; Video & audio: playing narrative fugues composed from stories from people who live and work along the Mississippi River, Margaret Cogswell. Dimensions: 18" H x 12" diameter. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.

In the midst of my research in a book titled, *A Century on the Mississippi*,^[12] published by the Army Corps of Engineers, I came across a reproduction of an eighteenth-century French drawing, which is what I call a "proposal drawing" for a dredger powered by men in squirrel wheel cages. This image seemed to depict the absurdity of

humanity's efforts to control nature. Because it was so bizarre, it became my point of departure for my *Mississippi River Fugues* installation.^[13]

Entering the museum lobby, the viewer walked through a series of hurricane lanterns from which the narrative fugues created from people's stories emerged. Telephone recordings made

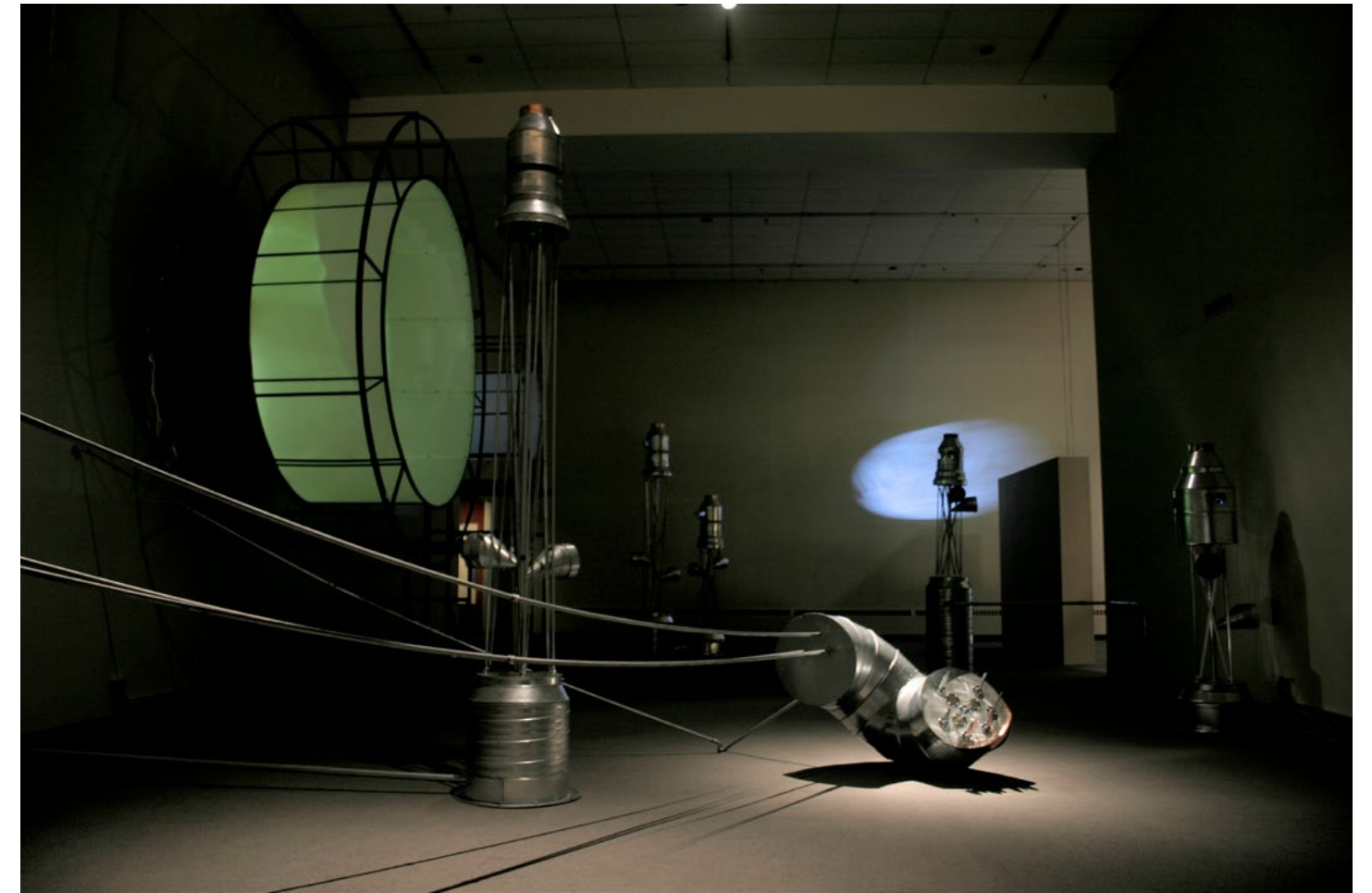


Fig. 11, 'Mississippi River Fugues,' installation view, main gallery. Mixed-media installation of sculpture, audio and video projections. Installation Dimension = 20' H x 66' L x 33' W. Two Wheels with Dredger: steel, translucent plastic video screen, video projections with audio, Margaret Cogswell. Large Wheel: 20' H x 14' diameter x 4' deep.

Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.

from the daily readings of the Mississippi River's water level emerged from the center lantern and were heard between stories emerging from the surrounding lanterns. These stories were from people along the river, including cotton farmers, the Yazoo Mississippi levee board, Army Corps of Engineers, cotton field workers, and people at a cotton gin. This recitation of numbers reflecting

the river's water level formed the contrapuntal element in these narrative fugues.

In the main part of this installation, the viewer enters a darkened space lit only by the light from the video projections sweeping the walls and videos seen in the middle of two giant 20-foot-high wheels. As though standing in the middle



Fig. 12, 'Mississippi River Fugues.' Video still by Margaret Cogswell. Video projection on screen inside large dredger wheel 10' diameter, Margaret Cogswell. Large Wheel Dredger: 20' H x 14' diameter x 4' deep. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.

of the river, the viewer gazes upon a man in the middle of each of the two squirrel wheel cage-like structures—a man who appears to be propelling the wheels linked to an absurd dredger. Alongside there are five buoy structures. Instead of blinking lights, these buoys house video projectors, and their projections appear to light an otherwise darkened landscape.

I chose to project the video in circular images because, for me, this shape alludes to so many aspects of seeing. It is about discovering an image as though through the lens of a telescope, a portal, or a beam of light which, when raking a landscape in the night, illuminates only that which it is focused on. In each of these cases, the revelation is intentional and only partial. One is

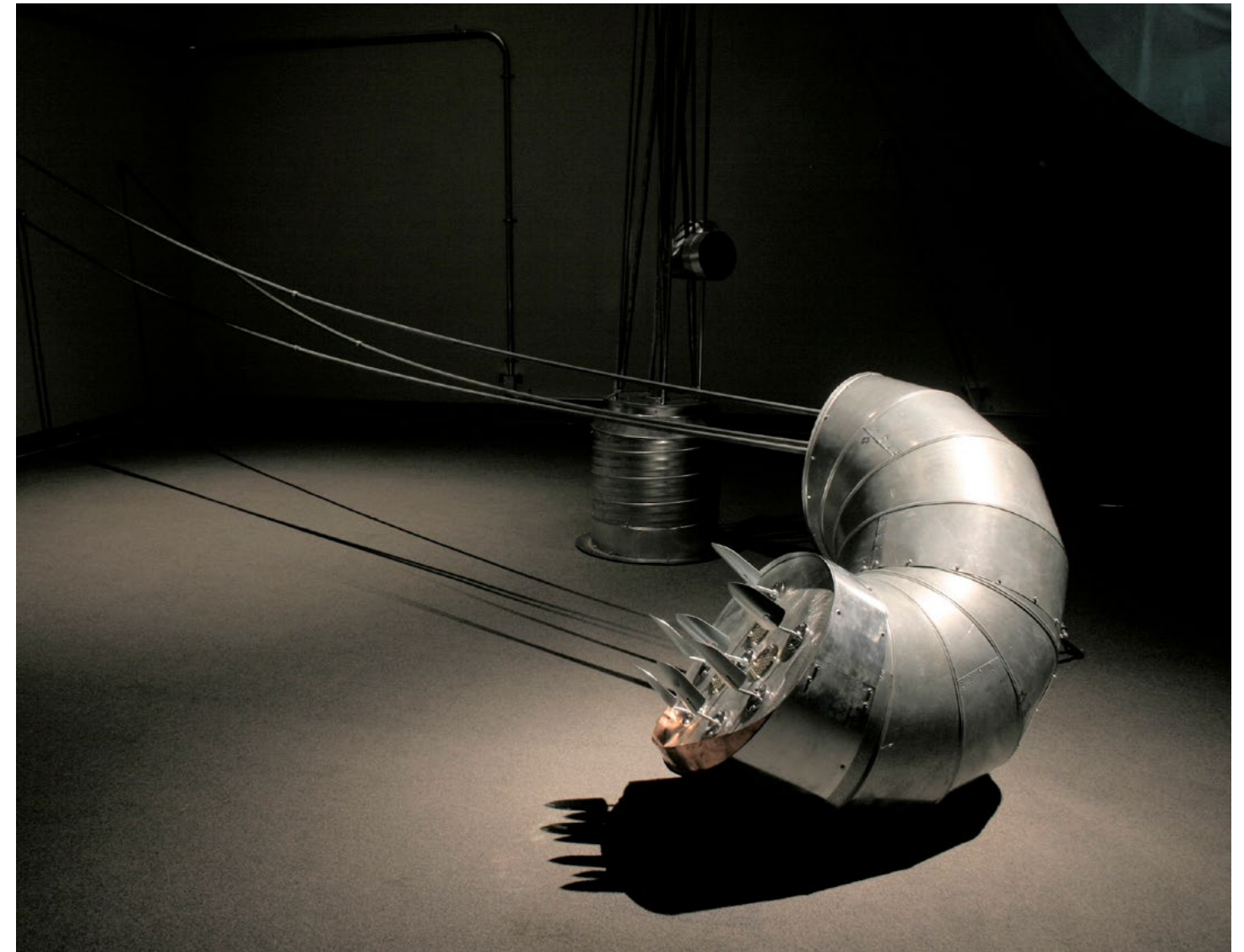


Fig. 13, 'Mississippi River Fugues.' Dredger Detail: 24" diameter X 6' L; 24" diameter spiral steel pipes, copper, steel spades. Installation, Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.

aware that there is more outside the frame of the lens or the parameters of the beam of light than what is within, so one must work to imagine or attempt to recall from memory the surrounding context of what is only partially revealed.

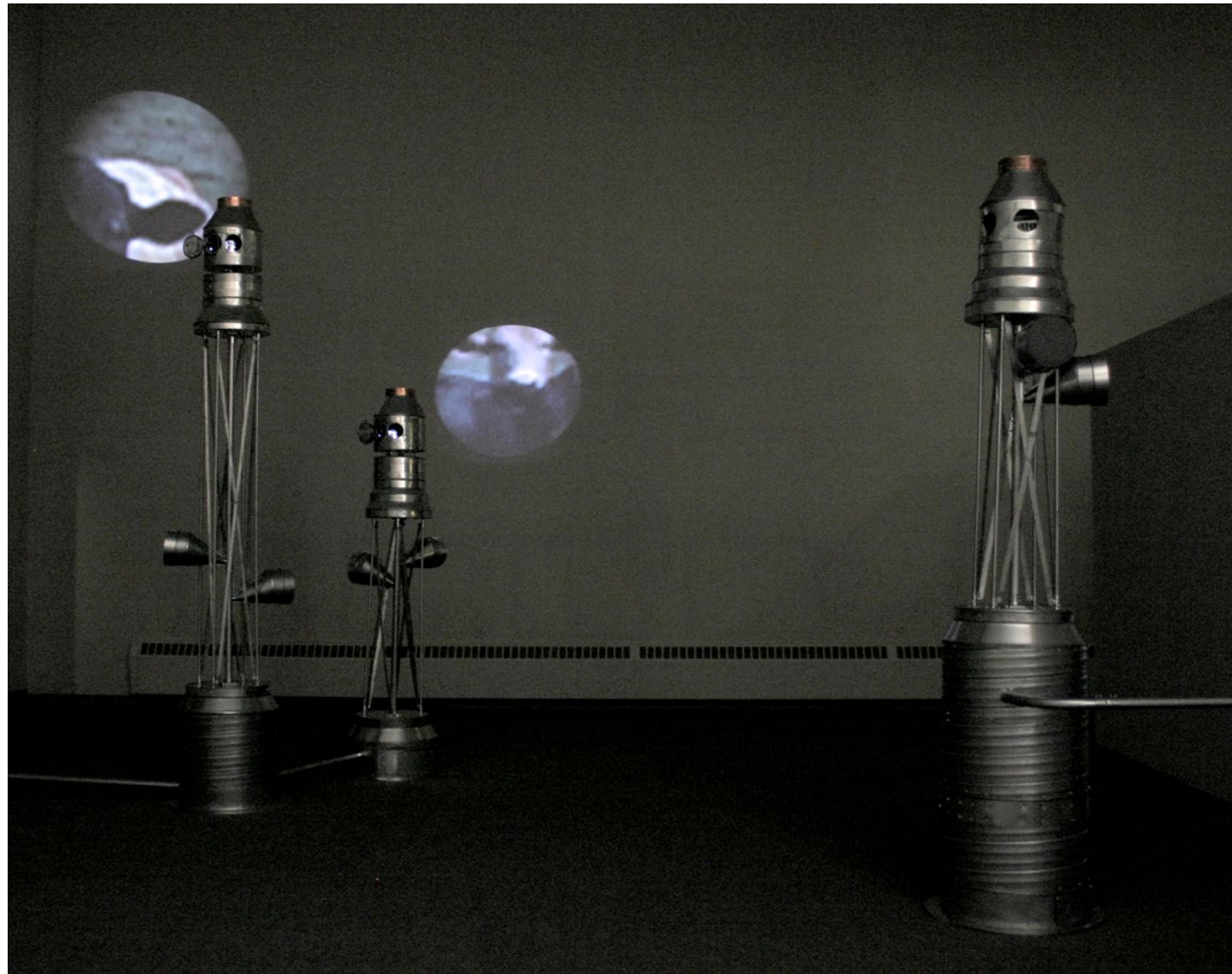


Fig. 14, 'Mississippi River Fugues,' Installation view: 5 Buoy structures. Mixed-media: spiral steel HVAC pipes, electrical conduits, copper, mirrors, electrical motor which oscillates top of buoy 90 degrees; video projector housed in top of each of five buoys, audio speakers, DVD players, Margaret Cogswell. Buoy Dimensions range from 6' H x 24" diameter to 14' H x 24" diameter. Image courtesy of Dennis Cowley.

WYOMING RIVER FUGUES (2012)

Solo Exhibition

Curated by museum director, *Susan Moldenhauer*

Art Museum of the University of Wyoming
Laramie, Wyoming

<http://www.uwyo.edu/artmuseum/>

Research for *Wyoming River Fugues* revealed to me a startlingly new landscape, filling me with awe at the majesty of the wide-open spaces and a raw, exposed landscape whose ancient geological history entices even this novice explorer. Again, my research led me to talk with people from all walks of life and academic disciplines.

Visits with Mark Soldier Wolf and other Arapaho and Shoshone elders introduced me to the life, history, and struggles of Native Americans on the Wind River Reservation, in particular, in relation to water rights. Conversations with an archaeologist led me to ask more questions in wonder as I looked more closely at the earth and rock formations.. Perhaps it was these conversations that led to the subsequent series of drawings of dirt and the erosion of embankments, which I also showed in the exhibition.

In summer 2011, while participating in a residency for artists at *Ucross*, I was introduced to Jill Morrison, an organizer for the Powder River Basin Resource Council, who led me on an eight-hour tour of the Powder River Basin. Jill introduced me to the conflicted histories and struggles in relation to the river and water quality issues particularly as a result of coalbed methane development (i.e., fracking) within that area. Also while in the area, I visited some of the land reclamation sites of Cloud Peak open pit coal mining industries in and around the area of Gillette, Wyoming.

There was also a fortuitous meeting with Mike Latham who lives and works in *Ucross*. In the midst of a casual chat, Mike suddenly apologized

and said that he had to go and “move the water,” a turn of phrase I had never heard before. This led to an introduction to flood irrigation, ditch riders, and the use of the ubiquitous orange tarp, which became a focal point of my video. My readings in *Cadillac Desert*[14] and *Rivers of Empire*[15] had laid the groundwork for an overall history of the diversion of water, particularly in the southwest. However, it was through Mike’s introduction to flood irrigation and all that it entails in terms of water rights and access to water that I found a way to pull all these disparate, but related, ideas, histories, uses of water, and the role of rivers in Wyoming together.

The orange tarp was quite magical, basic but effective. It “moved the water”—concealed and revealed—much like the cape of a magician. Thus, with the entrance of a magician into the video, his role serves to reference other “magical” diversions of waters, whether through dams, irrigation, mining, or other efforts. All of these constitute another kind of sleight-of-hand efforts, that is, “now you see it,” or have access to the river’s waters, and “now you don’t,” because it has been diverted elsewhere.

Realizing that in the end, access to water was determined by how the land was surveyed, I created three surveyor’s transits which housed video projectors and threw images across the walls as they seemingly raked the landscape. Again, I used the circular image for each video projection because it could convey the act of discovering an image as though through the lens of a telescope, or in this case, a surveyor’s transit.

As for the moving bucket of light, while exploring the open pit coal mines in the huge Wyoming landscape, I remembered the image of a bucket of coal I caught on video one night in Cleveland’s steel yards. As it moved in and out of a fog of smoke and steam, the wet sides of the steel bucket glowed under the steel mills’ bright



Fig. 15, 'Wyoming River Fugues, August: Dry Embankment,' watercolor and color pencil on paper, Margaret Cogswell. 30" X 22". Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.



Fig. 16, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' Moving the Water: Orange Tarp, Set Number3, watercolor and color pencil on paper. 30" X 22". Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

yellow lights, appearing like a ball of fire in the black night sky. The starkness of this mysterious glowing object moving back and forth along a cable through the fog had a haunting impact on me because, at the time, I didn't know its real function and meaning.

I realized then the evocative power of an object that had movement, but whose purpose/meaning was indecipherable. So I reintroduced this bucket of light in *Wyoming River Fugues*, to slowly and mysteriously traverse 50 feet across the museum's gallery space. While it served as

a physical link between the two main walls of video projections, by not defining exactly what the bucket was carrying, I hoped to provoke the viewer into questioning, imagining, and possibly even beginning to explore the relationship between light, energy, and the waters of Wyoming rivers—ideas subtly nuanced and woven together in the fugal visual poems/video projections.

View video here: 'WYOMING RIVER FUGUES – 2012.' Art Museum, University of Wyoming, Laramie.



Fig. 17, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' video still by Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 18, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' installation view. Mixed-media installation. Dimensions: 16' H X 64' L X 37' W. 3 surveyor's transits: wood, steel, plumb bob, video projector, mirror, copper, duct pipes, electrical conduits, chain, 90-degree oscillating motor, audio speakers, computers. Dimensions: 6, 9 & 11' H, 2 steel stock tanks= 5' and 8' diameters. 1 bucket of light: translucent polyurethane sheets, steel bars, cable, LED lights. Motor for bucket movement and light controlled by computer program, Margaret Cogswell. Dimensions: 40" x 30" x 50". Image courtesy of Susan Moldenhauer.

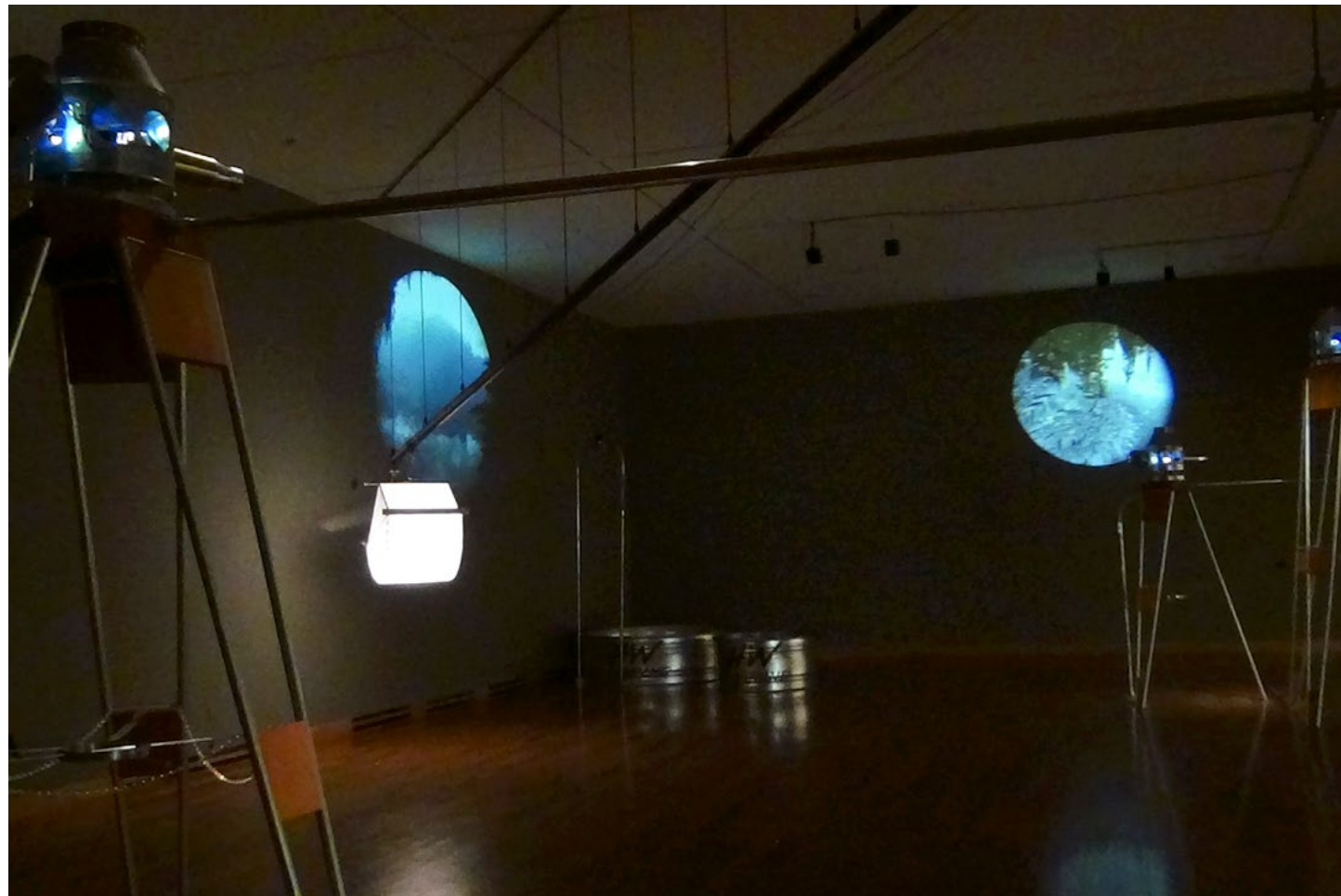


Fig. 19, 'Wyoming River Fugues,' installation view 2, details as above, Margaret Cogswell.
Image courtesy of Susan Moldenhauer.

ZHUJIAJIAO RIVER POEMS – 2014

Solo Exhibition curated by Wang Nanming
Zendai Zhujiajiao Art Museum
Zhujiajiao, China

In 2014, I was invited by curator Wang Nanming to create new work for a solo exhibition while in residence at the Zendai Zhujiajiao Art Museum in Zhujiajiao, a 1,700-year-old water town in China. Living and working in the museum's Ming Dynasty building located along the Cao Gong River with all the overlays of both ancient history and contemporary life, offered a unique experience for a newcomer to China and a rare opportunity to observe its relationship to its water and its rivers.

In Zhujiajiao, the rivers and canals are public waterways. Not only beautiful to look at, they also serve as arteries in the life of the surrounding communities and towns. These rivers are used for everything including fishing, boating, hauling construction materials, washing clothes, mops, and food, and more. Teahouses, restaurants, and parks, as well as private homes, line these waterways, and are always filled with people whose lives are dependent on different uses of the water for survival as well as for pleasure.

View video here: [*Zhujiajiao River Poems – 2014*](#).

Watching the river while working in my studio or taking long walks through the town, I looked for links to China's history and culture through the details of objects, food, music, and movements in daily life or rituals. I began to notice the reoccurring movements in different activities—like the rowing of the boats, the movement of a Taiji master's hands, the motions of harvesting snails with long bamboo poles, the movement of the water after a passing boat. I would catch fragments of traditional songs, whiffs of smoke from the cooking of food, and smells of fish frying on open flames. These observations formed a point of departure for both the drawings and videos I

created as I strove to capture the essence of my experience along the Cao Gong River. Aware that I was seeing the world through the personal lens of an outsider framed by the Ming Dynasty windows of my studio, I chose to emphasize this perspective by masking the videos that would form *Zhujiajiao River Poems* in oval and rectangular formats.

Zhujiajiao River Poems was installed as a video installation and part of my solo exhibition at the Zendai Zhujiajiao Art Museum. It consisted of four video projections—two projections each of two different videos.^[16] The main video, exploring life on the Cao Gong River, was in color and projected in an oval format. In contrast, the second video, which was recorded during a rainstorm, was a very tightly cropped detail shot of raindrops collecting in puddles on the museum's roof. The rain video was in black and white and projected in a vertical rectangular format.

Juxtaposing the projections of these two videos to each other visually linked the waters of the rain to that of the river. Together these two videos (four projections) formed a fugue, with the sound of each raindrop splashing in the puddles forming the contrapuntal element for this fugue.

Throughout this essay, I have focused on my mixed-media installation responses to research on the different rivers I have explored. All the while, I have also been developing a parallel body of [*drawings on paper*](#). These works are the result of many months of walking, exploring, photographing, and filming the landscape of an area I was researching for the development of each of my *River Fugues* projects. Much like an archaeologist or geologist, I have searched for clues to the history of a river, a people, or a place in the enigmatic remnants of their past.

In 2015, I was invited to create new work for *SOUNDINGS*, a two-person exhibition with



Fig. 20, 'Zhujiajiao River Poems,' exhibition poster, 2014.
Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 21 (above) and Fig. 22 (below), 'Zhujiajiao River Poems,' 2014. Video stills: Margaret Cogswell. Images courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 23, 'Zhujiajiao River Poems,' 2014. Video still: Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Margaret Cogswell.



Fig. 24, 'Zhujiajiao Soundings #1,' 2014. Collaged watercolor, colored pencil, Chinese red ink and stamps on handmade paper, 13" x 48", Margaret Cogswell. Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

Ellen Driscoll, at Kentler International Drawing Space in Red Hook, Brooklyn.[17] Red Hook is a peninsula section of Brooklyn that juts into the East River at its confluence with the Hudson River, thereby historically serving as a major harbor for New York City. While researching for what became a series of drawings titled *Red Hook Harbor Soundings*, I became intrigued with the fragmented remains of infrastructure and industry emerging from the Red Hook harbor where the tidal waters of both the Hudson and East Rivers alternately reveal and then conceal the histories of these ruins.

Similarly, walks along the Ashokan Reservoir evoked wonderings of the submerged towns, their memories now held silently in the surrounding mountains. Hikes through desert landscapes in New Mexico and Wyoming, wanderings along the Cao Gong River in the ancient water town of Zhujiajiao, China, and hushed ventures through abandoned steel mills in Cleveland all led to drawings that often acknowledge loss, paying homage to the defiant traces of a people, their lives embedded in a place—in a landscape—literally, metaphorically, or metaphysically.



Fig. 25, 'Red Hook Harbor Soundings #26,' 2015. Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15" x 22." Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

Following meandering rivers, I am learning that, although my research always begins with a river, its life is not just about its waters. Instead, it is about our relationships to each other, to the land and to all of our natural resources. Nor are these relationships strictly physical. They are also very spiritual and ultimately reflect our relationship with all aspects of life.

Reflecting on Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*,^[18] I was particularly struck by his defining a memorable photograph as one having the quality of "punctum," that is, the ability to pierce. Taking Barthes' challenge, I strive to create work that pierces, is memorable, and is intellectually and visually provocative. Often poignant elegies, these works reflect the complex and changing



Fig. 26, 'Red Hook Harbor Soundings #20,' 2015. Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15" x 44." Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.



Fig. 27: 'Red Hook Harbor Soundings #19,' 2015. Margaret Cogswell. Watercolor, colored pencil on paper, 15" x 30." Image courtesy of Paul Takeuchi.

relationship of a society to the land, its industries, and rivers. I strive to be a contributing artistic voice in a larger conversation exploring how we live along our rivers and use their waters in complex and ever-shifting inter-relationships.

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Permissions: Unless otherwise specifically listed, all photographs, videos, video stills, and artworks

Footnotes

[1] Langston Hughes, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," *Crisis*, vol. 71 (New York: NAACP, Crisis Publishing, 1921): 26.

[2] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Vintage Books, 1996), 16.

[3] See *Inside Yoknapatawpha*—1992, <https://margaretcogswell.net/inside-yoknapatawpha>; *Memento Mori*—1993 & 1995, <https://margaretcogswell.net/memento-mori>.

[4] Anonymous source.

[5] Glen Gould, *The Idea of the North*, radio play (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), and Anne Carson, *Plainwater Essays and Poetry* (London: Vintage Books, 1996).

[6] *The Idea of the North*, a radio piece by pianist Glenn Gould, debuted on the CBC, December 28, 1967. Subsequently, this was made into a documentary film (Judith Pearlman, Dir., 58 min. 1970).

[7] Carson, *Plainwater Essays and Poetry*.

[8] Schama, *Landscape and Memory*.

[9] Tom Lake, ed., *Hudson River Almanac*, A Project of the Hudson River Estuary Program (The New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, n.d.), <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/25608.html>.

[10] John Mylod, *Biography of a River, The People and Legends of the Hudson Valley* (Pineville, Oregon: Bonanza Books, 1969), 2.

[11] Department of Environmental Conservation, *The Hudson Estuary: A River That Flows Two Ways* (New York State), <https://www.dec.ny.gov/lands/4923.html>.

[12] Floyd M. Clay, *A Century on the Mississippi: A History of the Memphis District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers 1876–1976* (Memphis: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, 1976).

[13] Two additional books pivotal in my research for this installation were: John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), and Mark Twain, *Life on the Mississippi* (Boston: John Osgood & Co, 1883).

[14] Marc Reisner, *Cadillac Desert: The American West and Its Disappearing Water* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1986).

[15] Donald Worster, *Rivers Of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[16] Margaret Cogswell, *Water Soundings: Solo Exhibition at Zendai Zhujiqiao Art Museum—China 2014*, <https://vimeo.com/113727858>.

[17] Kentler International Drawing Space, <https://www.kentlergallery.org/>.

[18] Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Richard Howard, trans. (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1981).

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About the Author

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