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## AJM’s new exhibition examines our relationship with water

by Justin Jacobs, Associate Editor

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Wendy Osher’s “Something in the Water” is made of crocheted plastic bags.

It’s all around us — and inside us — but in many ways, we take it for granted.

It’s water, and it’s the theme of “Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century is Treading Water,” a new exhibition at the Jewish Community Center’s American Jewish Museum.

Guest curated by artist and educator Carolyn Speranza, “Too Shallow for Diving” is a collection of new, largely exclusive art — ranging from more traditional painting to installation art — from 15 artists and re- searchers, all ruminating on water and what it means to us today, both personally and as the human race.

The idea had been sitting with both Speranza and AJM Director Melissa Hiller separately since 2009.

“I thought [water] would be a very potent topic to bring to the JCC audience, as well as Pittsburgh’s art-going audience,” said Hiller. “Serendipity rained on me one morning in 2009 when I heard a knock on my door — it was Carolyn, who I’d never met before.”

Before presenting her proposal to Hiller, Speranza spent time brainstorming the perfect community into which her exhibition could be received.

“People who walk into this building care about their kids, about their grandkids,” said Speranza. “I’ve seen JCC people organize themselves around issues they care about. It’s not like a gallery where people would walk in and out, and I wouldn’t have any say.”

Together, Hiller and Speranza spent the last year and a half assembling the exhibition. The pieces vary greatly, unified by their liquid inspirations among them:

- Roger Laib’s “Glut-Hut” is a large-scale mobile-hut, built on the lawn of the JCC’s Robinson Building, completely out of found and recycled material.
- Wendy Osher’s “Something in the Water” is an arresting, brightly colored, breast-like sculpture made of crocheted plastic bags — pointing out how plastic bags are linked to toxins affecting women’s breast milk.
- Lisa Link’s “Water Ways” is a series of square tiles, each showing a photograph and some information gleaned from discussions with Boston scientists: she quotes Dr. Susan Oktay with “If you take a half liter bottle of water, the oil... energy and carbon that went into making that bottle is equal to filling it a third of the way with gasoline.”

The artworks, and their artists, don’t have all the answers to the world’s water problems; on the contrary, “What artists do really well is open up questions for people,” said Speranza. The exhibition’s collection of artists are “thinking, engaged professors and fellows, and they noticed:



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the globe is heating up; water is drying out,” said Speranza. “So they’re bringing that out in their work. In Wendy Osher’s case, she’s a mom. So she’s concerned with the plastic getting in the water and then into mother’s milk.” In addition to varying mediums, the artists’ relationships to water are vastly different. Osher, for example, may be cautious. Jim Denney’s paintings give viewers a sense of curiosity and wonder. Jamie Gruzka’s photographs present a more emotional, memory-based relationship. And David Stairs’ assembled maps and globe show an analytical, more scientific relationship.

But all the relationships have one thing in common: the acknowledgment that water is crucial to our lives.

“I think we tend to forget that we are a species of animals, and as one, we forget that water isn’t something we can live without,” said Speranza. “There was a time we didn’t use oil or coal; just look at the arc of human history. But as animals, we can’t do without water. And we take that for granted.”

Want to go?

“Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century is Treading Water,” American Jewish Museum of the Jewish Community Center, Squirrel Hill, now through July 28. Presentation with Conrad Volz, June 6, 7 p.m.

Above: Vanessa German's "Water! A Love Poem Operetta," performed one night only at the exhibition's May 14th opening reception.

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