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Are we in too deep? Artists engage in dialog on water crises

By Kurt Shaw, PITTSBURGH TRIBUNE-REVIEW
Sunday, July 10, 2011

Photos

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'Body of Water'
American Jewish Museum

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'Abandoned'
American Jewish Museum

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'Love Poem for Water, an Operetta'

In the eyes of many environmentalists, humanity is on a sinking ship.

According to the second United Nations World Water Development Report released in 2006, more than a billion people don't have access to clean drinking water -- that's one out of every six people on the planet. Many believe our water resources are being increasingly compromised with each passing day, and something needs to be done about it, immediately.

An exhibit addressing this and many other water-related crises fills the American Jewish Museum's two galleries at the Jewish Community Center in Squirrel Hill. "Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century is Treading Water" was organized by artist Carolyn Speranza, who turned to 15 of her fellow artists and asked them to become activists for the cause.

"It's an inspiring group to be a part of, and, as the project developer, the host, as well," Speranza says. "With respect to their art practices, these artists consistently challenge themselves and their public. That is why I invited them to create new work for this exhibition."

As visitors will see, the artists' work addresses a variety of environmental issues surrounding water.

For example, painter Jim Denney documents the ongoing struggle of man vs. nature by depicting the construction atop the natural environment in his large-scale oil paintings "Obstacle" and "Abandoned."

Maritza Mosquera's digital prints and her video installation "Body in Water" document the artist herself treading water as she learns how to swim. She makes a human spectacle of herself, while engaging with water in literal terms. Likewise, Jamie Gruzka's photographs draw upon various instances of water in his life since the age of 11.

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American Jewish Museum

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'Powerful'

American Jewish Museum

'Too Shallow for Diving: The 21st Century is Treading Water'

When: Through July 28.
7:30 a.m.-10 p.m.
Mondays-Thursdays;
7:30 a.m.-6 p.m. Fridays;
1-7 p.m. Saturdays; 7:45
a.m.-6 p.m. Sundays

Admission: Free

Where: American Jewish Museum at the Jewish Community Center, 5738 Forbes Ave., Squirrel Hill

Details: 412-521-8011, ext. 105, or www.jccpgh.org

About the writer

Kurt Shaw is the Pittsburgh Tribune-Review art critic and can be reached via e-mail.

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Then, there is the work of David Stairs, a Fulbright scholar who founded Designers Without Borders (www.designerswithoutborders.org) in Kampala, Uganda, in 2001. A designer by trade, he uses maps, photographs and statistical information to explore Africa's water crisis, proposing the crisis there is the result of human behaviors on a global level.

His digital prints "PowerFUL/PowerLESS" feature statistical data related to a Hydro Site at Bujagali Falls in Uganda and Lake Victoria at Jinja, the source of the Nile River, supporting those issues. For example, Lake Victoria supports Africa's largest inland fishery, yet, it has dried up completely three times since its formation and with its large surface, small inflow and shallowness, is vulnerable to climate change.

Like Stairs' pieces, sustainability is the issue addressed in several of the remaining works. Richard Harned's piece "This is the Tasteless Water of Souls ... This is the True Sustenance," for example, is a blown-glass marble that represents all the bodies of water on Earth.

And outside, on the grounds of the center, is Roger Laib's "Glut Hut." An actual hut the artist built, it demonstrates "sustainable" technologies that easily could be put into practice on a personal level, such as water collection, solar collection, composting of food scraps, etc. It even has a composting toilet. Using an FDA-approved collection tank for rain run-off, the artist is growing vegetables in planters attached to the hut.

Laib is not the only artist to go outside the usual gallery spaces devoted to the American Jewish Museum. Prudence Gill created two artworks, collectively titled "Waterwishes," specifically for the building's Darlington entrance hallway, something new in the museum's history. These holographic installations draw upon tactile, textural, intimate, sensual and metaphorical attachments to the reflective, elemental qualities of water. They are subtle, yet potent, installations that visually and conceptually connect viewers to the waters of the Ohio River Basin, and connect the exhibit to the center at large in a literal context.

Many of the remaining works -- such as Tim Collins' and Reiko Goto's "Nine Mile Run" and "3 Rivers: 2nd Nature" -- are more examples of activism than artworks. Involving scientists, attorneys, engineers, city planners and landscape designers, both of the projects made substantial contributions to the intersection between community, art and the environment. They blur the line between art and activism, but, at the same time, draw attention to what all of us can do on a very real level -- engage with our environment, and more importantly, community, to effect change.

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