

September 2015

L.A. River Project

Erin Payne

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Recommended Citation

Payne, Erin (2015) "L.A. River Project," *The STEAM Journal*: Vol. 2: Iss. 1, Article 31. DOI: 10.5642/steam.20150201.31
Available at: <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/steam/vol2/iss1/31>

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STEAM is a bi-annual journal published by the Claremont Colleges Library | ISSN 2327-2074 | <http://scholarship.claremont.edu/steam>

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Abstract

A field note that reflected the artists' experience of the city and the making of art through an activity at the L.A. River.

Author/Artist Bio

Erin Payne is a L.A.-based artist who received her MFA from Claremont Graduate University in 2011. Her work has recently been shown at West Los Angeles College through a collaboration with First Street Gallery Art Center in Claremont, California. She also recently completed a residency at Side Street Projects in Pasadena with Summercamp's 'ProjectProject'.

Keywords

Los Angeles River, Conservation, Art, Engagement

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L.A. River Project

Erin Payne

As artist participating in the “Witty and Urbane” exhibition at the Fellows of Contemporary Art (FOCA), an exhibition featuring 5 Los Angeles based artists, we were asked by the curator, Kristi Lippire to each chose a location and create an activity that would involve the way we experience the city and make art. I immediately thought of the L.A. River.



There is currently a lot of excitement about the city’s River Revitalization Plan and great efforts are being made by nonprofits like Friends of the Los Angeles River to restore the L.A. River habitat. For my FOCA event, I thought it would be interesting to create an event that added to the restoration efforts currently underway, but originating from an artistic perspective. I wanted to organize something that brought people together to interact with the river in a positive and fun way. I decided to lead a group in launching seed bombs into the river from Frogtown’s Marsh Park. This area is considered the Glendale Narrows stretch of the river, which as a ten year resident of the area, is the part I know best. It also happens to be the only soft bottom section of

the L.A. River in the city. This means that because of the high water table, they Army Corp of Engineers were never able to seal this part of the river bottom with concrete. Thus there is much possibility for vegetative growth here.

Through trial and error I created a river seed bomb prototype. It consists of what the river bottom is basically made up of, a mixture of dried clay, sand and silt. The bomb is relatively hollow so that it floats in the water. It has a small opening on one side where the participants could add native cattail, rush, willow, and grass seeds. The native riparian plants that grow from these seeds encourage bird, insect, and amphibian diversity.

I wanted the event to be collaborative. My plan was for participants to fill the bombs with seeds of their choosing and a small slip of non-toxic paper on which they could write a secret message.

The day of the event was uncomfortably hot, but 15 brave participants found their way to Marsh Park. While picking out the seeds they wanted to include in their bombs, people swapped stories about the river and shared a bit about their secret messages and hopes for the river's future.

When it came time for launching, some people gently placed their bombs in the river, while others lobbed them in. With each bombing, there were cheers of victory and a lot of laughter.

The shared experience brought us all closer together and brought us closer to our long suffering river. We hope that the seeds we tossed will end up taking hold and sprouting—just like the connections we made with one another and the river. I believe this is what art does best.