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WATERWAYS – SOON DRY

by

AIYANNA CAMERON-LEWIS

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR KAPSER KOVITZ
PROFESSOR JOHANNA BREIDING**

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Abstract

This paper explores the historical and contemporary situation of waterways in Los Angeles. It examines the birth and growth of metropolitan LA and contrasts this narrative with the current and pressing issues of drought and gentrification. This contrast raises the question of the sustainability of human growth in resource-scarce regions. From this analysis it forwards a nuanced perspective of the hypothesis that the dynamics of environmental degradation in the LA region threaten human growth. It suggests that this degradation comes as a result of egocentric human development projects by the elite. This paper examines all of this through the lens of a creative body of work. The body of work consists of a series of four large paintings. It discusses the artist's inspiration and process of creation, as well as the influence of neo-expressionism and various contemporary artists on the work. It concludes with a consideration of where to go next with the series of paintings in order to address the issue of environmental degradation further.

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Waterways – Soon Dry

PART I: Introduction

Los Angeles, as a major powerhouse of a contemporary city and the most populated county in the United States¹, is an interesting and bold example of the dynamics between civic sprawl and natural environment. Nested within the vast scope of the Pacific Ocean, rugged mountain ranges, and the immense expanse of desert, Los Angeles is an isolated instance of thriving human civilization among mostly uninhabitable environments. What is striking about the city is the juxtaposition of its impressionable size and its Mediterranean climate.² Los Angeles is vast and naturally water scarce.

Infrastructure is the system by which all else is built and held up; it is the skeleton, the foundation, the architectural plan for what will come. Considering the Los Angeles area and its location in a semi-desert coastal valley, water is the metaphorical infrastructure of the civilization that is LA. Los Angeles cannot exist without its complex system of waterways that import water from Northern California and from across state lines to hydrate the semi-arid LA region. This complex technology of waterways, aqueducts, and concrete riverbeds enables the existence of a prodigious civilization and feeds the largest agricultural industry in the United States.³

¹ Dennis Romero, "L.A. Is Actually Bigger Than New York," L.A. Weekly, December 28, 2016.

² D. J. Waldie, "When Southern California Reinvented Itself as "Semi-Tropical"," KCET, December 04, 2017.

³ California Department of Food and Agriculture, "California Department of Food and Agriculture," CDFA.

Los Angeles is a hub of human evolution, and economic, commercial, artistic, and cultural production. California is the economic powerhouse of the United States and Los Angeles the ultimate juncture of both agricultural and cultural markets.⁴ Within the arid geographical region of Los Angeles, we have planted an epicenter of art, culture, and entertainment, an epicenter whose influence extends globally. Yet habitation of this region depends on the importation of water, which consequently has become a dangerously nonrenewable resource.⁵ This dynamic brings into question the sustainability of human evolution. We are betting our cultural, economic, and commercial wealth on a resource that we have extracted, manipulated, and controlled to its impending extinction. Are we limiting ourselves by pitting our growth upon a waterway that is running dry?

Los Angeles as a living breathing entity depends on the importation of water from three main locations: Northern California, the Colorado River, and local groundwater.⁶ Funneled through pipes and aqueducts, one-third of Los Angeles' water comes from the Sierra Nevada mountains' snowmelt. A little over half of Los Angeles' water is siphoned off from the Colorado River and redirected through man-made rivers, pipes, and tunnels across the desert to the city. The remaining water is collected from groundwater sources and used for the city and surrounding agriculture.⁷ Los Angeles does not possess all that it requires to subsist, and yet enabled by the exchange of natural resources across county and state lines; the city continues to expand as a powerhouse of American urban influence.

⁴ Matthew Speiser, "This chart shows how much each state contributes to the US economy," *Business Insider*, September 03, 2015, , accessed March 10, 2018.

⁵ J. Overpeck and B. Udall, "Dry Times Ahead," *Science* 328, no. 5986 (2010).

⁶ Bart Van Der Bruggen, Karolien Borghgraef, and Chris Vinckier, "Causes of Water Supply Problems in Urbanised Regions in Developing Countries," *Water Resources Management* 24, no. 9 (2009).

⁷ "LOS ANGELES WATER ISSUE," *LA's Water Issue*, , accessed March 10, 2018.

Los Angeles was built on an agricultural system that was directed and dictated by a select group of wealthy individuals whose influence shaped the foundation of the region through their monopoly on water and land. One of whom was William Mulholland, who spearheaded LA's early infrastructure and water projects.⁸ One of Mulholland's initial projects was the construction of the LA Aqueduct, which brought water from Owens River Valley to the LA area.⁹ The aqueduct facilitated LA's metropolitan expansion. Yet this explosion of growth came at the cost of sucking Owens River Valley's limited water source dry, which impaired the native environment and undermined the local population.¹⁰ This was the first piping of water from distant sources to metropolitan Los Angeles and thus set the precedent that remains today for the exploitation of natural resources and underprivileged communities for urban development.¹¹

PART II: Project

For my senior art thesis *Waterways - Soon Dry*, I am addressing the question of human evolution and its relationship to water sustainability in current day Los Angeles through the translation of photographs to neo-expressionist landscape paintings. The choice of painting was deliberate for its ability to break the familiarity of a photograph and re-portray an image in new evocative and emotional ways that elevate metaphorical

⁸ "William Mulholland: The Man Who Built the Los Angeles-Owens River Aqueduct," William Mulholland History, , accessed March 10, 2018.

⁹ "Owens Valley Water History (Chronology)," Inyo County Water Department, , accessed March 10, 2018.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "William Mulholland: The Man Who Built the Los Angeles-Owens River Aqueduct," William Mulholland History, , accessed March 10, 2018.

representations over literal ones. Photography is representational, while also using perspective and focus to play with abstraction. Painting has the potential to be representational, while also capturing the maker in the final work through brush stroke and style. Painting is not about literal representation, but rather the process of creation. Capturing progression through painting has the potential to delineate conceptions of time and creation to produce a more immersive and experiential work for the viewer.

Through a multilayered process of paintings, I am elevating four specific locations in the LA water system: Owens River Valley, the LA Aqueduct, industrial downtown LA, and the Los Angeles River at the former Sixth Street Bridge. Each of these locations has specific relevance to my question of sustainability due to their historical contexts and relevant importance in the previous and current growth of LA. Each of these locations carry unique time stamps that relate to the region and its water narrative. This project examines water as the metaphorical infrastructure of Los Angeles through its size, style, use of abstraction and choice of acrylic paint. The central question of this senior art thesis is the ethics of building and growing as a human race in locations unsuitable for urban life, such as waterless and drought-prone desert regions.¹²

Through their layered and expressive style, this body of work will represent the buildup of material and substance, not only the physical buildup in the paintings but also the metaphorical buildup of LA's infrastructure and transformation that is so deeply tied to and dictated by water. The technique used in these paintings speaks to neo-expressionism and its emphasis on the maker and their gesture by capturing movement, drips, and imperfection. These paintings emphasize production in order to capture the

¹² Marc Reisner. Cadillac desert: the American West and its disappearing water. London: Pimlico, 2001.

artist's involvement and challenge the idea of the product as independent from the process. This concept translates to a discussion of contemporary urban LA as the culmination of a long series of events, decisions, and contributing factors; it brings into question the evolution of urban development in the historical context of modern LA.

My final project will be a series of large-scale, neo-expressionist, acrylic landscape paintings. The paintings are large scale to encourage the exploration and immersion into the specific landscapes and subjects of these works. Their large dimensions are intentional in order to invite viewers to insert themselves and engage more directly with the subject matter and the pressing question of water sustainability. The style of these paintings is influenced by neo-expressionism, while also maintaining a sense of realism to honor the existing locations. This mixture of style is used to both invite emotion, movement, and intellectual expansion, while also grounding the work in a geographical framework to invoke a physical and direct connection to the locations and subject matter. The perspective varies from aerial to close up speak to the multifaceted nature of the subject. The aerial view draws the focus outward to a broader visual analysis of the contrasting landscapes and the inverted relationship between urban growth and the environment. These aerial views contrast with the close-up angle of the pipe and Sixth Street Bridge in order to point directly to the immediate impacts of this inverted relationship. The various perspectives of these paintings cultivate a more nuanced and encompassing experience of the subject matter and a more dynamic and creative meditation on the issue of water sustainability and metropolitan growth.

The use of acrylic paint is intended to both point towards human manipulated materials and, through its quality of quickly drying, better capture the movement of

water. Acrylics are plastic and synthetic by origin. The use of plastic in this series of paintings highlights the man-made and manipulated nature of Los Angeles' waterway system. This series uses acrylics to draw attention to the constructed nature of the geography and metropolitan expanse that is LA and to suggest that the building of LA's waterways is what cultivated and sustained the city's profound evolution. The acrylic paint also complements a neo-expressionist and layered style by drying at a faster rate and capturing the natural drips and washes of the water. By saturating the brush with water and allowing the substance to move freely and then dry on the canvas, these paintings render the dynamic nature of water and hint at the transportation and movement of it across land and space.

The subject of painting # 1 is an aerial view of the depleted Owens Lake. In it, I examine the complete extraction of water from Owens River Valley that enabled the initial growth of metropolitan Hollywood and modern day art mecca, LA. This paper will expand upon this history later since it is crucial to the discussion of water in this region. The pipes that jut up through Jawbone Canyon to make up part of the LA Aqueduct are the subject of painting # 2. These pipes are part of the water transport system that brings water from Mono Lake and Northern California to Los Angeles. The second painting raises questions about the amount of water that is lost through evaporation and leakage during its transportation hundreds of miles across desert and valley by representing and highlighting the rusted, leaking, and corroded nature of the pipes. It also raises skepticism about the amount of energy expended on the process of transporting water. The contrast of pipe to hillside, visually illustrates human's physical mark on nature, while also drawing attention to the deteriorating state of the water system. Painting # 3 represents an

aerial view of downtown LA and its physical infrastructure as framed by the towering San Gabriel Mountains. The aerial-view points again to the materially constructed nature of the LA waterways, while also representing the continual growth of urban sprawl. In contrast with the natural subject matter of painting # 1, this painting's geometrical perspective of the city examines the extent and cost of human growth so far as it undulates, expands, and sprawls out across the valley. The site of the former Sixth Street Bridge is the subject of painting # 4; its history and significance as located at the entrance to the arts district, points to the shifting demographics of LA through green gentrification, while also demonstrating the indefinite nature of the LA River. While gentrification signifies the forced removal of individuals due to shifting financial demographics, green gentrification points to this forced removal due to environmental improvements that attract more affluent residents. Thus these paintings together engage in a discussion of the process and impact of green gentrification in the Los Angeles area.

PART III: Historical and Social Context

Examining the history of Owens River Valley brings attention to the practice of extraction and environmental transformation. Mulholland fathered the LA Aqueduct and with it the practice of extraction and transportation of water from Owens River Valley to LA.¹³ Within 10 years of existence, the Owens River Valley aqueduct had drained the lake dry leaving dusty and empty lake beds that now produce health hazards for the

¹³ William L. Kahrl. *Water and power: The conflict over Los Angeles water supply in the Owens Valley*. Univ of California Press, 1983. pg. x.

region.¹⁴ Because the lakebed is dry and exposed, the dust and sediment that had collected at the bottom of the lake are now free to be whipped up in the valley's frequent dust storms. This poses threats to visibility while also causing the air to be thick and filled with caustic and dangerous lake bed dust that damages the lungs of residents.¹⁵ These paintings draw from this history to bring the question of future sustainability and the process of metropolitan growth into question.

The history of exploitation in Owens River Valley continues to manifest itself in current politics surrounding water in Los Angeles. The subject of the first painting, Owens River Valley, and the subject of the final painting, the no longer existing 6th Street Bridge, are in conversation about the conflicts of policing water in LA and the damages it brings to local communities. The 6th Street Bridge has long been considered a historical landmark of LA, but over time it has deteriorated due to natural causes and chemical reactions against its foundations. As of recent, the city of LA has begun the process of demolishing and replacing the bridge, which is indicative of shifting demographics in the area.¹⁶

The bridge marked the intersection of the Latinx Boyle Heights and the Arts District of Downtown LA. This intersection is significant as a pinpoint of gentrification in the area. The prospective plan for the 6th Street Bridge is to transform it into a large viaduct and public green park equipped with gathering spaces and a public art plaza.¹⁷

¹⁴ David Maisel, "Photos of the once-mighty, now-drained Owens Lake," *Grist*, January 19, 2005.

¹⁵ Tom Knudson, "Outrage in Owens Valley a century after L.A. began taking its water." *The Sacramento Bee*. January 4, 2014.

¹⁶ Bianca Barragan, "The Sixth Street Viaduct's arches are slowly coming down." *Curbed LA*. August 04, 2016.

¹⁷ Jeff Wattenhofer, "Public Art Plaza Planned Below LAs New Sixth Street Bridge." *Curbed LA*. March 02, 2016.

While this push to bring life back into the LA River is an important step for environmental conservation, it also points to the project of green gentrification in the area. The beautifying and revamping of the land surrounding the LA River and the Arts District have brought in a slew of well-off individuals that in turn transform the communities around them and push out the lower-income residents.¹⁸ The original culture, life, and labor that built the city is being replaced by elite and often non-native residents. The LA water narrative began with the stealing of water from Owens River Valley and the permanent alteration of local communities, and it continues in such a manner as the revamping of the LA River perpetuates green gentrification.

Physical change and evolution of the natural landscape are inevitable in the context of time, yet there is room for critique of the dynamics of accessibility and the economic incentives that drive and shape this change. This art thesis examines the dynamic nature of LA's infrastructure as it shifts and transforms scattering entire populations of deeply embedded communities and moving them further away from the water source. While the concrete walls of the LA River, in contrast to sandy or rocky banks, limit access to the water and isolate it, they also control the human and natural ecosystems that are able to exist within and around the river. The bridge as necessary infrastructure requires maintenance and replacement because it is extremely valuable for the continued mobilization of individuals. The bridge enables movement across the river for work and connection to the economic and cultural resources within downtown LA. Yet the reach of these benefits remains in contention as the proposal, an environmentally

¹⁸ Carolina A. Miranda. "'Out!' Boyle Heights activists say white art elites are ruining the neighborhood...but it's complicated." Los Angeles Times. October 14, 2016.

and art-conscious viaduct and park could arguably become a future playground for the rich.

The question of home, community, and migration is intimately tied to the LA water narrative. This history touches a wide array of individuals and communities from years back up to modern day. It involves those who lost their home environments in the early days of LA's construction, the plants, animals, and ecosystems as well as the Native Americans and local residents that were forcibly removed from their land for its use. It includes those wealthy individuals who are inhabiting beautiful new houses in gentrified areas of LA, as well as those that are being removed from their homes to make room. It is by no coincidence that LA's homeless community has begun to grow alongside the concrete shore of the LA River and outside downtown LA. In many instances, this growth is a political indictment of the water politics and resulting gentrification of the area. It is only through the manipulation of water and land and the creation of infrastructure that LA's metropolitan expanse can evolve and grow, yet as it grows and becomes more populated, it also becomes more disjointed and distant from the communities that built it. There must be mention of the homes created and destroyed throughout the narrative of LA's history and there must be attention and respect given to those most intimately and profoundly affected. By contrasting these specific locations throughout LA's historical and geographical water narrative, this body of work raises questions about what is gained and lost, forgotten and ignored in the grand scheme of human evolution in the LA Basin.

PART IV: Influential Contemporary Artists

My work is inspired by Neo-Expressionism and various artists such as Lauren Bon, Lane Barden, Anselm Kiefer, Susan Leibovitz Steinman, and Matthew Brandt.

Neo-expressionism was an art movement, primarily within the painting world, that arose in the early 1980s to contrast the previous Modernist movement.¹⁹ Neo-expressionists shifted from Modernism and its emphasis on materials, form, and technique²⁰ to the production of work that revitalized the intent of art. Their impetus was centered on a desire to produce work that generated an emotional response within viewers about culturally and socially relevant issues of the physical world.²¹ Neo-expressionist artists often used vivid strokes, styles, and movements to turn inward and pursue the emotional self.²² The impassioned nature of neo-expressionist painting has inspired this body of work in so far as it has influenced my aggressive and emotional style and the environmentally and socially relevant content represented.

This same emotional drive is echoed in current day LA public-works artist, Lauren Bon, whose practice also inspires and influences my body of work. Bon and her Metabolic Studio create work around the history of water in Los Angeles that directly interrogates and reclaims the construction of LA infrastructure.²³ One public project, in particular, *Bending the River Back into the City*, 2012-on, speaks to the theme of my senior art thesis. In her piece, Bon proposes to re-directing the LA river back through a

¹⁹ "What Was Neo-Expressionism? How Artists Turned Aggressive Emotion into Arresting Paintings." Artspace. September 22, 2016.

²⁰ Tate. "Modernism – Art Term." Tate.

²¹ "Neo-Expressionism." Artsy.

²² "What Was Neo-Expressionism? How Artists Turned Aggressive Emotion into Arresting Paintings." Artspace. September 22, 2016.

²³ Bianca Barragan. "Artist is one step away from building a water wheel on the LA River." Curbed LA. June 06, 2017.

water-wheel and underground tunnel that will lead it to cleaning facilities and then on to public space where it can be consumed and enjoyed by the local people.²⁴ The attention to detail, insight and subject matter in Bon's work is what inspires and influences this thesis.

The subject of LA's infrastructure and waterways is further emphasized in the works of the LA photographer, Lane Barden. The imagery of this senior project, *Waterways: Soon Dry*, is very much influenced by his photographs. He captures aerial views of the infrastructure of LA and illustrates the undulating and expanding nature of the metropolitan empire. His works lay bare the crisscrossing lines of LA's highways and buildings that flank the LA River.²⁵

Anselm Kiefer produces large-scale paintings with deeply expressive styles that are evocative of infrastructure and manipulated landscape.²⁶ His style and content both impact my work. His work is also monumentally large, which is something I am working towards. Kiefer's works are reminiscent of Neo-Expressionism in their style and emotionally evocative nature.²⁷

Susan Leibovitz Steinman's style and subject inspire this senior thesis. Steinman's paintings are thick, textural and emotionally expressive. Her works all deal with subjects within the realm of environmentalism. She creates sculptures, public installations, and paintings that physically involve the viewer and engage them in the process of environmental responsibility.²⁸ Steinman's thick layered and passionate style

²⁴ "Hammer Projects: Lauren Bon and Metabolic Studio." Hammer Projects. 2015.

²⁵ "Linear City: Los Angeles River." Lane Barden Architecture and Interiors Photography.

²⁶ "Anselm Kiefer." 98 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy.

²⁷ "Anselm Kiefer Biography, Art, and Analysis of Works." The Art Story.

²⁸ "Author Profile Susan Leibovitz Steinman." Susan Leibovitz Steinman | Studio Potter.

influence the subject matter and technique of my works. She incorporates mixed media into her paintings such that they have life, movement, and texture. They are reminiscent of naturally occurring life forms in the world, which is a deliberate distinction I aim to replicate in the style of my works.

Matthew Brandt is a photographer with an environmental focus. His work captures various lakes around the region, but during the developing process, he soaks them in water collected from these respective lakes.²⁹ The result is a mixture of washed away, painterly photographs that have reacted in some cases so strongly to the chemicals occurring in the lake water that they have brought on an image of their own. These works are not entirely focused on the literal content of the photograph, but rather the chemical pollution of the lake. This contamination brings inquiry to the environmental effects of contemporary living, which is a central question in my work.

PART V: Conclusion

By painting this series of four locations I am attempting to capture the juxtaposition of the objectionable beauty of human creation and the profundity of the natural landscape in order to nurture the question of coexistence and sustainability between the environment and humans, in the context of future existence. I aspire to continue growing this series by adding layers and depth and incorporating aspects of each place into the paintings. I plan to expand this project further by traveling the route of the LA Waterway and incorporating the physical, visual and emotional information I gather

²⁹"Matthew Brandt." 72 Artworks, Bio & Shows on Artsy.

into my works through the use of water, dirt and found objects collected along the journey. Through the process of creating this thesis, I have come to recognize the necessity of intersectional and cross-cultural cooperation in the development of urban spaces. The construction of metropolitan infrastructure must involve voices across diverse demographic areas in such a way as to uplift and protect those that came before and those made less visible today. The process of creating this thesis has inspired me to view myself as a conduit for this kind of cross-demographical work and continue this project as an advocate for both environmental and underprivileged voices.

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