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Review: 'Facing the Sublime in Water, CA' delves deep

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From the environmental devastation of the Salton Sea to the walling off of the L.A. River, water — where it comes from, who controls it — has been a troublesome issue in Southern California. An ambitious group exhibition at the Armory Center for the Arts, “Facing the Sublime in Water, CA” looks at these struggles and their aftermath while finding an analogue for their complexity in the nature of water itself.

Part of the Pasadena Water Centennial celebration, and curated by Armory gallery director Irene Tsatsos, the exhibition consists of two parts, divided between the downstairs and upstairs galleries. The show downstairs is the splashier (forgive me) and more general of the two; on its own it would be simply a mini-survey of water imagery. Upstairs is a more ideological show-within-a-show, assembled by the artists Nicole Antebi and Enid Baxter Blader as part of their initiative, Water, CA (www.watercalifornia.org), a collaborative exhibition, book and website on water in California. It provides much-needed context for the rest of the exhibition.

This section opens with two paintings by Baxter Blader depicting maps of California before and after the damming of its rivers. The verdant areas that resulted in the second image drive home quite starkly the fantastic artifice on which California’s agricultural bounty rests. And while one may long for a more natural past it feels hypocritical, standing in an art gallery in a beautiful, artificially irrigated city, to do so. Similarly compromised is Douglas McCulloh’s photograph of the mountains and penstock — a gate that controls water flow — at Mono Lake. The edge of a large white pipe almost, but not quite blends into the majestic slopes. Is human engineering encroaching or coexisting with nature?

Other artists take a more whimsical approach. Amy Blount Lay’s sculpture is a vision of global warming: a colony of elephant seals invading a small Western town. Lara Bank’s “The Portable Forest” is a tree lending library complete with its own water supply and irrigation system. Sometimes preserving and propagating nature requires the most unnatural apparatus.

The works downstairs treat water more generally: Roi Clarkson Colman’s early 20th-century oil of crashing waves and Whitney Bedford’s schematic paintings of foundering ships and icebergs convey water’s power and threat, while Mineo Mizuno’s ovoid ceramic planter, moist with live mosses, suggests its generative possibilities. Works by Judie Bamber, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and D’nell Larson focus on the surface of the ocean as an encounter with the sublime.

Emilie Halpern’s installation consists of 4 liters of sea water — enough to drown a person — poured daily into a sepulchral vault at the back of the gallery. The sandy puddle, left to evaporate over the course of the day, turns the odd space into an eerie torture chamber. Luis G. Hernandez’s installation suggests another kind of watery danger. It features a jar of brownish “Mexican” water jerry-rigged to a drinking fountain. The piece is both a dare and a pointed question. If water is fluid, why is it so different on the other side of the border?

But perhaps the best expression of water’s unmanageable nature is Ger van Elk’s short video of himself, floating down a placid canal in an inflatable raft, futilely trying to smooth the ripples it makes with a trowel. He’s attempting to solve the problem he has created, but it continually eludes him.

Armory Center for the Arts, 145 N. Raymond Ave., Pasadena, (626) 792-5101, through Jan. 20. Closed Mondays. www.armoryarts.org