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TOP STORY

Nor any drop to drink: Artists in exhibition at GreenHill consider water, pollution and the search for solutions

TOM PATTERSON Special Correspondent

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“Water, water everywhere, Nor any drop to drink ...”

In Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s iconic poem written in 1798, the ancient mariner was ironically lamenting his overwhelming thirst, even as he was surrounded by undrinkable ocean salt water.

Nowadays, the quotation is sadly applicable to water’s increasing pollution by industry and human carelessness — a theme picked up and developed by several of the artists represented in a group exhibition at GreenHill Center for NC Art in Greensboro.

“H₂O,” as it’s titled, brings together works by seven artists who recognize the vital importance of water and the increasing urgency surrounding its widespread pollution.

Barbara Tyroler’s large-format photographs take a largely aesthetic approach to the theme. From a little distance, these “Water Crossing Portraits” resemble boldly colored abstract-expressionist paintings, but at closer range their flatness becomes apparent, and close-up views reveal their pictorial content as water itself, with

glimpses of human bodies submerged in it. Because the water is evidently in motion — as are the bodies, in some cases — the figural elements are visually distorted, as in a funhouse mirror.

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Kevin Palme employs a more conventional pictorial strategy in his drawing installation titled “How to Become a Cloud,” which centers on an enlarged but otherwise realistic rendering of somewhat precariously stacked ice cubes beginning to melt.

Instead of using traditional drawing mediums, Palme took a cue from the tradition of Tibetan sand mandalas, creating the image from sand meticulously manipulated on a surface of black-painted wood atop a low pedestal. Furthermore, he doubled it, using the same technique and scale to render negative mirror-images of the stacked cubes on two identically sized, black-painted pedestals installed side-by-side on the gallery’s floor. It makes for a poetically effective meditation on impermanence and physical transformation.

“Sea Stars,” the site-specific installation that is the focus of Carolyn Henne’s contribution to the show, is on an intertidal sandbar in eastern North Carolina’s Newport River. It’s represented here by a looping video sequence of aerial photographs and explanatory texts.

Using a special, biodegradable “hardscape” material developed by a marine ecologist, Henne created a group of sculptures that read from above as a monumental drawing of an octopus and three identical groups of life-size, synchronized swimmers — five in each group, lying on their backs with their feet touching to form a five-pointed star shape.

These sculpted images were installed in May of last year, since which time they’ve been encrusted with oysters native to this intertidal region. In that respect the piece is an inter-species collaboration. The exhibited video can also be viewed on Henne’s website (carolynhenne.com/sea-stars).

Each of the other artists are more direct in addressing water-pollution concerns.

Over the last 40 years Bryant Holsenbeck has built a reputation for creating sculptural installations entirely from plastic detritus she scavenges from the environment and saves in large quantities. Her two pieces at GreenHill suggest bodies of moving water — falling in one case and flowing in the other — and are made entirely of discarded plastic items that she has found in various aquatic environments. In each case the effect is striking and the point is clear.

Caroline Armijo takes on the issue of toxic waste-disposal by an electrical-power company, namely Duke Energy, in a series of works that identify and comment on Duke’s coal-ash storage ponds across the state. Spills and leaks from some of these ponds have generated controversy in recent years, often centering on the question of who pays for the necessary clean-up.

Personal connections prompted Armijo’s particular focus on a Duke Energy coal-ash pond adjoining Belew’s Lake near Walnut Cove. *A looping video juxtaposes her still photographs of local citizens with excerpts from taped interviews in which they talk about the coal ash’s deleterious effects on their lives and on the local environment.

Displayed on pedestals arrayed in front of the screen are a few personal artifacts chosen by the interview subjects for their connection with the coal-ash issue. Each of these objects has been scattered with gray coal ash to highlight the connection.

Armijo is also represented by several works made of coal ash compacted into lightweight hexagonal forms, exemplifying one way in which the surplus material might be put to safer, practical use, as opposed to being dumped into natural bodies of water.

James Barnhill is known primarily for his carefully detailed, realistic figural sculptures, one example of which is included here — a milk-painted, carved-wood effigy of a “Cachalot Whale,” aka sperm whale — a massive aquatic mammal that remains ubiquitous in the world’s oceans.

Such whales are among the many aquatic beings potentially endangered by the massive oil spills documented in Barnhill’s other works on view, including two monumental paintings, each measuring about 7-by-15 feet.

One of them is a frontal view of the Exxon tanker ship Valdez, which in late March 1989 ruptured on a reef to release more than 10 million gallons of crude oil into Alaska’s Prince William Sound. It’s a startling sight, placing the viewer in the water directly in front of the tanker. An appropriate metaphor for the increasing urgency of water-pollution concerns, it appears to be bearing down fast.

The other painting, equally startling in its way, is a bird’s-eye view of British Petroleum’s offshore oil well known as Deepwater Horizon, which in April 2010 erupted in a fiery explosion and released some 210 million gallons of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. Barnhill’s painting shows the massive fire in the midst of otherwise tranquil-looking water, surrounded by the nautical equivalent of firetrucks spraying the flames. Tellingly, the Gulf waters as rendered by Barnhill are crystal blue at the surface but increasingly darker toward the bottom, where they’re rendered impenetrably black.

More understated in their critique of human-caused water pollution are Will Warasila’s photographs — 18 images including color and black-and-white. It’s a uniformly strong selection, although relevance to the show’s theme is more obvious in some images than in others.

An air of doom and foreboding seems to emanate from Warasila's "Vultures Over Belew's," which shows a flock of the big birds perched at random on an angular structure that presumably regulates water flow, all in silhouette against a twilight-hued sky. The impression is enhanced for viewers who have already seen Armijo's previously described installation about Duke Energy's coal-ash pond alongside Belew's Lake.

On the other hand, the Belew's site is deceptively pristine-looking and beautiful in a carefully composed bird's-eye view Warasila made in low sunlight. In admiring it, you might never know you're looking at a reservoir of toxic sludge.

A provocative show that takes a head-on approach to an urgently controversial issue, "H2O" hits uncomfortably close to home, no matter where you live.

Duly noted and thanks

In my April 24 column reviewing Reynolda's current show of Kwame Brathwaite's photographs and related items, I commented on the key role of music and musicians in the historical era that Brathwaite's photos document or otherwise reflect, and I suggested it would have been appropriate to include an audio component in the gallery.

Not an original thought, according to a Reynolda spokesperson who alerted me that the show does indeed have a soundtrack that should be audible to viewers.

Apparently, it wasn't working properly on the afternoon I visited the show, or maybe I just couldn't hear it over the voices of viewers crowding the gallery and discussing the exhibition. It was Reynolda's Community Day, when the customary admission fees were waived, and the place was jammed.

Want to go?

What: "H2O" with work by Caroline Armijo, James Barnhill, Carolyn Henne, Bryant Holsenbeck, Kevin Palme, Barbara Tyroler and Will Warasila

Where: GreenHill Center for NC Art, Greensboro Cultural Center, 200 N. Davie St., Greensboro

When: Through June 25

Gallery hours: Noon-5 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday or by appointment.

Information: 336-333-7460 or greenhillInc.org

* Erratum: "A looping video juxtaposes still photographs [taken by H2O photographer Will Warasila]..."