

Sant Khalsa: Confluence

PASADENA CITY COLLEGE CENTER FOR THE ARTS

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Confluence, by Southern California based artist, educator, and activist Sant Khalsa, was a modest and intelligently constructed exhibition of selected works spanning from 1989 to 2015. Centered around the theme of water and its relationship to the American West, the work on view comprised a personal investigation of the spiritual, economic, and environmental concerns around water as they pertain to the landscape that surrounds her.

Khalsa has turned her camera toward changes in the landscape over the years, poetically and systematically documenting the results of fires, floods, and drought. The sixteen black-and-white photographs from the larger series *Paving Paradise* (1990–2012) were shot along the ninety-six-mile length of the Santa Ana River (a river that flows from the San Bernardino mountains to the Pacific Ocean). The photographs trace the changes in the natural landscape due to both environmental and human conditions. As indicated by the title, the series is critical of what Khalsa terms “constructed settings” within the natural world. Each photograph elegantly captures environmental changes—for example, contrasting dry riverbeds to trees surrounded by flooded waters. The series also documents human presence in the landscape, as evidenced by digging equipment, tire-scarred hills, and barricade tape protecting dilapidated houses. Khalsa’s disquieting images track these changes over time, depicting the river as, according to the artist, a “place of community, economic resource, recreational site, natural habitat, sanctuary, and both source of life and destruction.”¹

The flow of water, as well as its lack, is a vital issue for the desert communities in and around Southern California, and Khalsa’s series of photographs *Western Waters* (2000–2010) calls attention to its commodification. Installed in a loose grid expanding across the gallery wall, the sixty black-and-white photographs document small stores where water is sold in Arizona, New Mexico, Southern California, and Southern Nevada. Arranged to follow Khalsa’s road trips through the states, the layout was clearly a reference to mapping and in direct contrast to the photographs of Ed Ruscha and Bernd and Hilla Becher, to whom this work pays homage. The black-and-white photographs depict storefront businesses where water is sold. Khalsa positions her camera directly in front of the buildings, making straightforward images usually devoid of people, and hones in on each enterprise’s name, the price of its products (be they pure water or ice), and whether they are available inside or outside the store. Some storefronts display handwritten signs while others promote “good water,” “water land,” “water to go,” “the water wagon,” or “cactus water” through more formal and bombastic typography.

Khalsa is fascinated by the irony of these enterprises when water is available for free from the tap and is thoroughly invested in why and to whom the water is sold in these communities. The water has been filtered to taste better, and through that process (a reverse osmosis system), chlorine, fluoride, salts, and other minerals are removed, which might or might not result in health benefits for consumers. Khalsa also notes that immigrant populations are used to buying water, as they often come from countries where it is not safe to drink straight from the tap. The images point to the absurdity of packaging and marketing a natural substance in order to make the consumer feel closer to “nature.” Their neutral stance and objective framing allow the viewer to focus on the signage and the setting of the stores, emphasizing the way they fit seamlessly into our constructed environment.

While a project like *Western Waters* appears to be on the didactic end of the spectrum, works like the multipaneled installation of *Trees and Seedlings* (2002) are more poetic musings on the fragility and resilience of nature. In this work, small silver gelatin transparencies of trees burnt and destroyed by fire are sandwiched

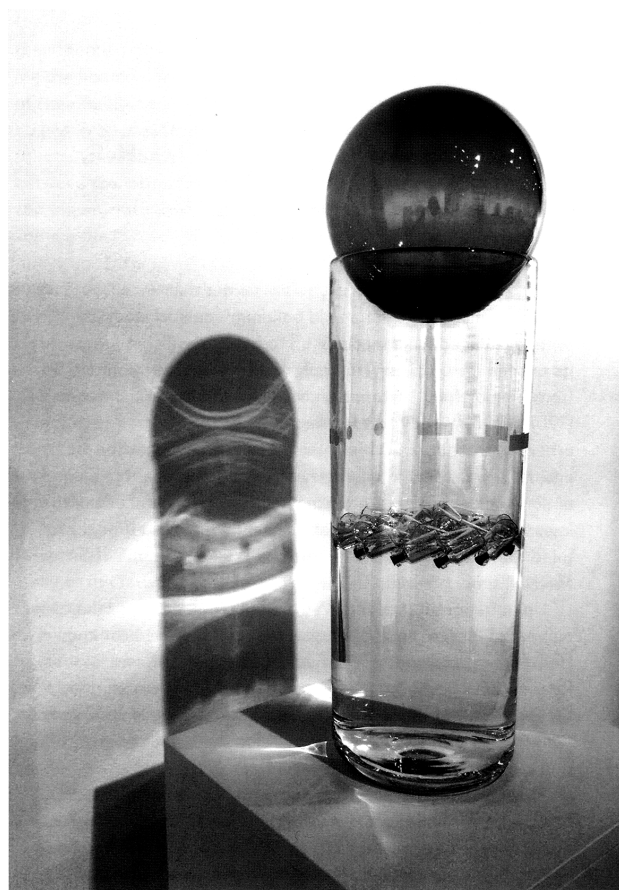
between two pieces of clear glass and inserted into wooden planks of various sizes. The planks were presented leaning against the wall, reminiscent of how wood is found in a lumberyard, and allowing light to project the images onto the wall. The piece not only calls attention to how lumber is created, how burnt forests rebound, and to the endless cycle of life, death, and rebirth, but also addresses issues of memory and photographic representation, asking whether a photograph can encapsulate an environmental experience.

Although the work in this evocative exhibition was primarily photo-based, Khalsa also included a thought-provoking sculpture. *Pray for Rain (Prayer Wheel)* (2015) is a nuanced piece that celebrates many issues central to her practice. The work, a representation of our world and its dependence on water, is comprised of a blue, blown-glass sphere that caps a half-empty/half-full clear glass cylinder containing water in which float twenty-eight small glass bottles, each inscribed with a word loosely associated with water. The cylinder is etched with the word for water in Morse code—a distress signal for the planet. The entire object slowly spins in a clockwise direction, linking the self-spinning object to the Tibetan Buddhist practice in which a prayer (in this instance for rain) is silently recited with each rotation. A distant spotlight shines through the water in the spinning glass cylinder, creating a flickering light on the wall behind it. Like a reflection on ocean waves, the sculpture reifies the ephemeral nature of water in Southern California.

It was difficult not to equate the riveting movement of the waters’ reflection with the evocative shadows cast by the light passing through the transparencies of *Trees and Seedlings*. No matter what their medium, Khalsa’s works resonate on multiple levels. Undoubtedly, the creation of aesthetically pleasing objects is important—however, her pursuit goes beyond formal investigations. The work is a confluence of personal and social concerns that continue to combat the ever-changing, never predictable, yet essential issues pertaining to water and life in the landscape of the American West.

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NOTE 1. “Paving Paradise,” Sant Khalsa artist website, <http://santkhalsa.com/Portfolio.cfm?nK=2481>.



Pray for Rain (Prayer Wheel) (2015) by Sant Khalsa