



Water, Water Everywhere at the Natural History Museum

Watercolor Exhibit Pays Heed to the Centennial of the Los Angeles Aqueduct and the Exposition Park Attraction

photo by Gary Leonard



Water, Water Everywhere at the Natural History Museum

Artist Robert Reynolds' 10-piece exhibit Just Add Water at the Natural History Museum commemorates the 100th anniversary of the opening of the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Posted: Thursday, November 14, 2013 5:00 am | Updated: 2:55 pm, Fri Nov 15, 2013.

By Donna Evans | [0 comments](#)

DOWNTOWN LOS ANGELES - At first glance, Robert Reynolds' watercolor of a glass of water, which is hanging in the [Natural History Museum's](#) rotunda, might seem banal. After all, it's a sight people see every day: on a desk, a kitchen counter, your bedside table.

The work, appropriately titled "Glass of Water," is asking a bigger question than, would you like a drink?: The query instead is, what did it take to get that thirst quenching, life-sustaining liquid into your faucet?

[BE THE FIRST TO READ THE](#)

[LATEST DOWNTOWN NEWS, FOOD AND CULTURE STORIES. CLICK HERE AND SIGN UP FOR OUR DAILY HEADLINES NEWSLETTER.](#)

The answer, as Los Angeles was reminded last week, is that much of the wet stuff we use and consume is here because the city annexed the Owens Valley as a reservoir 100 years ago, and that thousands of people, from civic leaders and barkeeps to ditch diggers and dynamite workers, conceived, constructed and opened the Los Angeles Aqueduct.

Reynolds' 10-piece exhibit [*Just Add Water: Artworks Inspired by the L.A. Aqueduct*](#) commemorates the 100th anniversary of the aqueduct, through which the Owens River water surged from the San Fernando Reservoir into Los Angeles on Nov. 5, 1913. Additionally, the exhibit marks another milestone: the centennial of the Natural History Museum, which opened on Nov. 6, 1913, as the Museum of Science, History and Art.

The exhibit, which is on display through Aug. 3, 2014, is the final piece to come online in a seven-year, \$135 million renovation of the once dusty Exposition Park attraction. It follows the July opening of *Becoming Los Angeles*, a 14,000-square-foot permanent exhibition that chronicles the story of the city and its inhabitants over 500 years. The reinvented NHM has five new permanent exhibits, including a 3.5-acre garden.

Just Add Water was curated by Charlotte Eyerman, an art historian and director of the [Monterey Museum of Art](#). She knew she wanted a Los Angeles artist for the project and was familiar with Reynolds' body of work.

Reynolds' task was mammoth: Create 10 original, large-scale watercolors — the medium chosen for obvious symbolism — that interpret the significance of the aqueduct through the lenses of history, geography and time.

“And by the way, you have six months to do it,” Eyerman recalled telling him last week as she appeared at the exhibit's opening.

Deep Research

Reynolds began working on the project in April, not the typical pace for a solo show of this magnitude, Eyerman said. She noted that in addition to reading books about the aqueduct's history, he pored over historical archives, trekked to the Owens Valley, assembled field trips and mobilized teams of historians and archeologists. Ultimately, he investigated myriad sites, moments and episodes around the aqueduct.

Reynolds' references range from the sublime 19th-century landscapes of Thomas Moran and Albert Bierstadt to the deadpan wit of pop and conceptual artists such as Andy Warhol and Ed Ruscha, all of whom have connections to California's natural or cultural landscape, Eyerman said.

She called one aspect of the project “groundbreaking”: Reynolds created 13 banners listing the names of 7,000 people who participated in or were affected by the aqueduct in some way. Reynolds and a team scoured the National Archives, voter registration lists, census and medical records and the attic of the Department of Water and Power.

“In addition to the founders, William Mulholland and Fred Eaton, I wanted to pay tribute to everybody,” Reynolds said at the opening. “From the Teamsters to the people who died when the St. Francis Dam collapsed.”

The reference is to the 1928 catastrophe and ensuing flood that killed 600 people. The civil engineering disaster 10 miles north of Santa Clarita ended the storied career of Mulholland, the DWP's general manager

and chief engineer. Mulholland took full responsibility for the calamity. Reynolds depicted the dam in “Photograph of the St. Francis Dam at Capacity.”

The work is drawing praise from others involved in mounting the exhibit.

“Rob has incredible respect for the historical record,” said Karen Wise, vice president of education exhibits for the museum. “His accuracy is remarkable and his eye is amazing.”

Wise wanted the double anniversary exhibit to be something “great and worthy” of the museum’s soaring space. She prefers projects with many layers, which she believes visitors will find in *Just Add Water*.

In the weeks he spent traveling up north, along the aqueduct’s 233-mile route, Reynolds took hundreds of photographs. He spoke with Owens Valley residents and marveled at their depth of knowledge about water.

“People in the bars, on the streets, in restaurants: They talk with such sophistication about hydrology,” he said. “It’s as though water is on everybody’s mind up there, where it seems to be on few people’s minds here.”

Reynolds sees water awareness in the shape of a Venn diagram, with extreme activists on one side and extreme consumption on the other. The part that overlaps is where we realize we need to use a lot less water.

Not that Reynolds is a shrill opponent of consumption. While watering the vegetable garden at his Silver Lake home last week, from where he can see the DWP building he painted in one of the pieces, Reynolds recalled becoming introspective about the show and his own habits as a consumer.

“I don’t have a critical voice where I’m blaming other people,” he said. “We’re all participating in this. To the extent that I have a mission, I’d say transparency and discussion and discourse and the exchange of ideas are central to my project.”

Of course, many people know the story of water in Los Angeles only through the 1974 Roman Polanski film *Chinatown*. Reynolds pays heed to that fictional view too, as one of his watercolors is of the film’s protagonist, Jake Gittes, donning a fedora and sporting bandages across his nose and standing in front of a “Sold” sign for seemingly worthless land.

Just Add Water runs through Aug. 3, 2014, at the Natural History Museum, 900 Exposition Blvd. (213) 763-3466 or nhm.org