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Just Add Water: Artist Rob Reynolds Explores the Aqueduct
Liz Ohanesian

It's the most ordinary image in Rob Reynolds' new solo show that's packed with the most significance: a still life of a glass of water. There's nothing extraordinary about the glass. It looks like something you would see on the table of a restaurant. (In fact, his model for this piece came from Little Dom's in Los Feliz.) The liquid inside the glass is reminiscent of what flows out of an L.A. tap. It's painted in watercolor, with the wet stuff sourced from a kitchen sink.

Reynolds' show, "Just Add Water: Artworks Inspired by the L.A. Aqueduct," explores Los Angeles' complicated relationship with something as seemingly ubiquitous as H₂O. "One of the simplest aspects of the project is the most radical," says Reynolds. "The most radical aspect of this project is that all of our water comes from somewhere else."

November 5 is the 100th anniversary of the Los Angeles Aqueduct. The following day, the Natural History Museum celebrates a century of serving the city. To commemorate those two events, the museum brought in guest curator Charlotte Eyerman, who put together the Pacific Standard Time show "Artistic Evolution." Eyerman sought out Reynolds as the artist to handle the project. "I thought of Rob because his work investigates history and myths about American history," says Eyerman, mentioning Reynolds' previous series that revolved around the history of the seas. "He was already doing a kind of practice that he still does that uses historical texts and images and puts together a kind of range of conceptual ideas, historical ideas, visual ideas in his own particular way, which is Rob-specific."

Reynolds' show incorporates various aspects of L.A. water. The thirst-quencher in the Little Dom's glass is only part of it. There's a painting of Mono Lake. It's hours away from the city, but the height of its rock formations, called tufa, indicate how much water is consumed in Los Angeles. Reynolds traveled to the lake, and stayed up all night, to capture that image. "I didn't want to do the Internet tour and make just pictures," he says. "I felt like going to the actual places and feeling what it feels like to actually be there." He went to Owens Valley to get a close-up look of the pipeline. He stopped in towns like Bishop, Independence and Lone Pine.

Altogether, Reynolds composed 30 sketches. Ten of those became the watercolors that will be on display inside the museum's Rotunda through next August. The biggest job wasn't necessarily the painting, though. Reynolds worked with a team that included researchers and a movie credit designer to create 13 banners that will appear in the space. The banners feature the names of those who worked on, or were affected by, the aqueduct.

"I thought it would be as simple as going to DWP and finding a ledger and then going through and, hey, we get a bunch of names," says Reynolds. But, that's not how the project unfolded.

Reynolds went to the Department of Water and Power, where he gained access to the final aqueduct report

from 1913. "It refers to the obvious folks," he says. "Yet, there are citations that estimate that as many as 100,000 people worked on it over the seven years of its production, which I think is apocryphal." While 100,000 might be a steep estimate, Reynolds' research indicates that there were a lot of people working to bring water to Los Angeles. "If you consider that there were 3,900 people in any given month and sometimes as many as 7,000 on the payroll during the hot months, because a lot of people circled in, a lot of people worked on it," he says.

The new goal of the project was to try to discern who were the people behind this monumental feat of engineering. That's why Reynolds headed deep into Inyo County, visiting towns on the eastern edge of the state. He dug through their local records and visited the Eastern California Museum. "I learned a lot more about the story itself, which is a lot more complicated than one would have expected," he says.

Reynolds discovered that sometimes, the mules were worth more than people. The payout for a dead mule proved to be greater than what was spent on burials for the workers. He learned a lot about William Mulholland. "He's a much more complicated and interesting person," says Reynolds, "that this ditch digger could become the highest paid civil servant in the country, a kind of Mark Twain-like folk hero in certain respects, who would be the most celebrated and then one of the most disgraced figures in that part of American history by his own confession."

Mulholland's fall from grace came with the devastating flood brought about by the failure of the St. Francis Dam in 1928. "Really, he bore the brunt of the responsibility for the St. Francis Dam catastrophe," says Reynolds. He worked with a graduate student from California State University Northridge, Ann Stansell, who had compiled a list of the hundreds of victims of the dam disaster. Those names became part of the banner project. So did the names of those who were displaced by the construction of the aqueduct. The list of those involved in the construction of the aqueduct goes far beyond those who now have streets named in their honor. Reynolds and his research team looked up ditch diggers and kitchen workers. They searched for the people who handled dynamite and the ones who handled the mules. When Reynolds told the museum that he wanted to include "everybody" involved in the construction of the aqueduct, he meant it.

"In the sort of way that credits roll at the end of a movie, everyone gets their due, to the greatest extent possible in this case," says Reynolds. The researchers went through medical, census and voting records. They combed the pages of books and dug up information on land transactions. In a matter of a few months, they came up with 8500 names. Reynolds brought in Andy Goldman, a movie title designer, to help design the banners. They worked on an algorithm to organize the names. "It's not hierarchical," says Reynolds. "The idea is that it's a chance for the first to be last and the last to be first, something like that."

Reynolds does note that there is a chronological aspect to the banners. Early on, you'll see the early backers of the project. As the banners progress, more names emerge. "You really can get a sense of an accurate cross-section of what life was like then in terms of who they were and how old they were and where they came from," says Reynolds. He noted the impact that immigrant workers — from Ireland, China and various Eastern European countries — had on the project.

In the end, all those names and those big paintings of places miles away from the center of Los Angeles and of pieces of massive aqueduct built a century ago result in a glass of water. It's the thing that we take for granted. "I think, unconsciously, you feel a little weird on a hot summer day when your garden is blooming green," says Reynolds. "You don't even think twice about it, necessarily, until you figure it out and then you see water everywhere because you realize how precious it is."

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About the Author: Liz Ohanesian writes about art, pop culture, music and, sometimes, a combination of the three.