PAUL W. ZUCCAIRE GALLERY | STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

Connecting the Drops The Power of Water
Lillian Ball • Betsy Damon • Erin Genia • Alicia Grullón
Courtney M. Leonard • Mary Mattingly • Jaanika Peerna
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Connecting the Drops: The Power of Water brings together seven artists whose work focuses on environmental justice and the vital importance of water. In sculpture, drawing, performance, video and a computer game, the artists explore topics including the Shinnecocks’ historical ties to water and oyster farming, access to clean water, rising ocean levels and melting glaciers, carbon absorption by the oceans, and personal narratives around water. Here, their work is in dialogue with science, history and communities, connecting their creative practice to real-world activism.

My gratitude to the exhibition’s artists whose work inspires contemplation and action to make our world a better place for people, animals and plants and the water that sustains us all. Our conversations over the past months have energized the development of this project. My deep appreciation to Erica Cirino for her beautiful Introduction to this catalog.

I also want to express my gratitude to the staff of the Staller Center for the Arts, especially Director Alan Inkles, for his enthusiastic support of this project, and Public Programs Manager Georgia LaMair Tomczak, who has been vital to every aspect of this exhibition, catalog and programming. Thanks as well to the faculty, staff, scientists, researchers and students across campus who have contributed to the collaborative nature of this exhibition.

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Karen Levitov
Director and Curator, Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery
Professor of Practice, Department of Art

Water is powerful.

One drop contains thousands of microorganisms—a miniature world of its own. It nourishes and sustains life and carries stories and people around the world.

Yet water also has the power to destroy.

Torrents of water brought together by the forces of nature can ravage the natural and built environments, made more frequent and stronger by climate change, just as lack of water and polluted water can devastate lives and communities.
Water. It flows, it floods, it crashes, it cascades, it soaks, it seeps, and it keeps each of us alive.

Each molecule is nothing more than three atoms bound in an essential combination: Hydrogen-Oxygen-Hydrogen. No life on this planet would be if it weren’t for this simple union between two of Earth’s most abundant elements, in this specific sequence. Water molecules cling tightly to one another, possessing strength in numbers; their scarcity or abundance marking the difference between a drizzle and a monsoon, a puddle and an ocean.

Like us people, who constantly mill and meander as we go about our days, water is always on the move, adapting—far more gracefully than we—as part of a chaotic system that by nature seeks equilibrium.

The waters are rising and Long Island is vulnerable. Every year, seawater permanently gains between 0.10 to 0.16 inches on Long Island’s shorelines. That’s a rate fifty percent faster than the global average of 6.5 inches over the last 100 years.

And Long Island’s people are vulnerable. Beneath our feet saltwater spills upward, intruding as once-abundant groundwater is sucked out from below, mostly to be poured wastefully on lawns or industrial farms treated with toxins, which seep down. Landfills, incinerators, leaking subterranean petrochemical tanks, oil spills, and a history of industry further contaminates our sole source of drinking water—which exists wholly underground.

Who suffers most from pollution and a lack of clean water but repeatedly Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities. This is injustice, clearly. Yet, the systems fueling destruction carry on with their lethal business-as-usual.

The waters are closing in on us from all angles. Acute flooding is becoming chronic, and deadly. Water causing loss of property and life has become commonplace; is almost no longer shocking. Storms are more frequent and less predictable. Water has the power to create, but through our neglect and disrespect, we force water to destroy.

Some people say they strive to “be like water,” ignorant or perhaps ignoring the fact that they are water. Mostly.

While humans could learn from water, being like water is not enough: We must offer water our love, protection, respect, and reflection.

We must learn to connect the drops.

Erica Cirino, Writer, Artist, and Author of Thicker Than Water: The Quest for Solutions to the Plastic Crisis
GO H.O.M.E. Bimini is an interactive video game about threatened mangrove wetlands in Bimini, Bahamas. The mangrove restoration project began in 2019 and continued in 2020 after Hurricane Dorian’s devastation. The restoration was initiated by WATERWASH Projects in collaboration with Waterkeepers Bahamas and Mr. Pinder’s art class at Louise McDonald High School, Bimini. The project’s title H.O.M.E. (Help Our Mangrove Ecosystem) was chosen from student suggestions.

Originally commissioned by the 2008 international Seville Biennial, the GO series can vary to illustrate different environmental situations. It is based on the ancient Asian game of GO, which uses strategies to capture territory. The game is only over once both sides have won through cooperation.

lillianball.com
As an artist, activist and teacher, my creative curiosity has focused on water for forty years. I have explored water from the interior of the drop to the systems that function as the veins of the earth. I seek to invite people to know their waters, to be in relationship with each other, and to work within and across communities worldwide to repair the living system. My journey with water has opened my body, mind and heart to a vast interconnectedness of living in a watery world.

betsydamon.com
Earthling is a playful and unnerving being who was born from dissonance: collective understandings of life have come far away from the reality that humans are not separate from the earth. Actually, we are the earth—we are part of the earth’s body. Earthling is a reminder that underneath people’s closely held ideas, underneath the systems that capitalize upon us and colonize us, our adopted ideologies, we are earth-based and water-based beings. By appearing in normal places, doing day-to-day activities, my performative character, or alter ego, Earthling, asks: How would our responsibilities to ourselves, each other, and our world change if this reality was the basis of our collective thought and action?

eringenia.studio

ERIN GENIA
SISSETON-WAHPETON OYATE

Earthling, 2019
Acrylic on canvas, architectural model turf

What are the geometries of interconnectedness? Within the powerful iconography of the Morningstar symbol as a representation of Dakota cosmology, an image of mni omni, which means “whirlpool” in the Dakota language, shows water as a unifying force across elements.
7 Stories About Water is a multichannel video installation, reflecting on the consciousness of water and how it interconnects people’s lives. Meant to be fragmentary, I utilize storytelling techniques to retell water stories shared with me or found through my research from activists, artists, and educators in different parts of the world. I use text and narration to highlight the perspectives in each story. The work serves as an extension of my process which explores collective and individual memories through embodied research, looking at the critiques on the politics of presence that argue for the inclusion of disinvested communities in political and social spheres.

alicagrullon.com
Shinnecock in our language translates to “people of the level land” or “people of the shore.” The Shinnecock Bay, the ecological estuary to which our nation’s traditional territories border, and of which bears our name, is key to who we are as water people. This waterscape exists as a part of our cultural landscape, its movement, its abundance, its life, shapes our relationship and understanding of and with one another.

As a Shinnecock artist, my work explores marine biology, Indigenous food sovereignty, migration, and human environmental impact through a visual logbook that investigates the multiple definitions of the term “breach” as documentation of the impact of our anthropogenic time. BREACH, as a whole, is an annual logbook and visual account. It tracks from year to year what lies above and below the sightline of water and land horizons—its record, a marker of the previous year’s account explored through relationships of environmental fragility, shifting adaptations, and/or the ability to simply become anew.

BREACH: Logbook 22 | CULL is an exploration of the intercultural relationships, reliances, impacts and impositions that Shinnecock Bay has endured as a part of our Anthropogenic time. The viewpoint of the installation is mapped from the abstracted memory of docks, the import and export of extraction, and the culling of oysters as a means of consumption and ecological aid.

courtneymleonard.com
Between transportation, electricity, agriculture, industry, commercial and residential activity, almost 5 million tons of carbon are currently produced each hour around the world. In response to the power of the ocean and its uphill battle to sequester carbon, this clepsydra absurdly counts carbon absorption by the ocean’s living systems in response to how much of a “western world” has separated and compartmentalized and imposed an order on water. When the water hits the water line, it records the time it takes for the oceans around the world to absorb roughly 1 million tons of carbon, although over time and with the acidification of oceans around the world, their ability to sequester carbon slows down.

marymattingly.com
Ice Memory offers an opportunity to witness an evolution of the work, not unlike the changes we witness in our natural landscapes, encouraging us to meditate on the way human actions alter the environment that surrounds us. The title refers to an ongoing climate research project where core samples of the world’s vanishing glaciers are being archived in long preserved frozen cylinders to retain a tangible record of past climate changes.

Each week, ice is inserted into the perforated tube at top and allowed to melt onto the drawing. Through the release of water, the drawing itself will slowly be transformed over the course of the exhibition.

jaanikapeerna.net
Karen Levitov: In curating this exhibition, my intention was to bring together artists whose work is inspired by water and who actively seek positive change in water systems and the communities affected by them. Can you describe how your work does this?

Betsy Damon: Water is needed for every detail of our lives. It is hard to notice water until there is a problem. All actions and activities arise from relationships both with community members and with water. I invite people and communities to notice water and organize around restoring and protecting their waters. When possible, I started real, on-the-ground projects that model resin water collection, or restore the living system through flow plants and movement.

Lillian Ball: Water issues have been a constant element of my environmental work from the very beginning. My ongoing WATERWASH series was designed as a collaborative green infrastructure solution to stormwater runoff which would also restore native habitat, create public space and educate visitors on relevant environmental concerns. My more recent work in Bimini, Bahamas, deals with the restoration of mangroves in an area faced with the overwhelming construction of large hotels and other tourist attractions. Mangroves play an integral role in Bimini as well as in many coastal areas worldwide, providing an essential shoreline protection against hurricanes.

Both of these projects were grounded in relationship building within a specific community that helped guide the process. For example, it was the collaboration between local scientists, educators, and students that helped shape the mangrove restoration project in Bimini. Community involvement is an integral element of my environmental work, with a strong emphasis on the educational outreach component. And it’s truly been a great pleasure to see many of the students and community members, being inspired by their participation and showing interest in furthering their interests in related fields, including marine ecology.

Erin Genia: I am an artist and cultural worker creating art and community at the intersection of social justice and Indigenous arts, sciences and cultures. My goals as an artist go beyond the personal practice of creating art in my studio and go out into my communities. I use the power of the creative process to address challenges from my unique lens: I am a Dakota person and tribal member of the Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate. I am concerned with stopping pollution of our watersways and the poisoning of our people and non-human relatives, and the disproportionate effect of environmental racism in Native communities. In the community where I come from—the Lake Traverse reservation in Sisseton, South Dakota—there is a concentrated animal feeding operation (CAFO) that has been contaminating the groundwater sources of tribal members for years with impunity. Our community believes that there is a correlation between high rates of cancer and the CAFO. Our reservation also experienced a huge oil spill on our traditional lands by the Keystone pipeline in 2017. Unfortunately, this situation is a familiar one to Native peoples, as it is happening in Indigenous territories all across the land and sea.

In Dakota culture, water is life—the words mni wiconi, meaning water is life, have become associated with the mass movement opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline in the traditional homelands of my tribe. These words illustrate a way of life that is inclusive of the Dakota philosophy of mitakuye oasin, which means we are all related. In Dakota culture, water is not viewed as a resource, dead or inert, or as a place to dump waste as it is in the dominant culture. In our culture, the water that sustains life is also respected as life itself. In our culture, it has its own agency, and is treated with the respect it deserves. My work advocates for a shift in the public perception of water towards respect and reverence for the lifegiving entity it is.

Alicia Grullón: The nature of my work has consisted of understanding the camera as an imperial tool and using embodied research through self-portraiture, performance and organizing to dismantle the gaze. And this has been in itself, a complicated endeavor as a person of color raised in the first-world within the lexicon of US exceptionalism. Undoing how I see myself has been an intellectual endeavor as well as an emotional and psychological one. For me, the image and the documentation of my performances are anchors for understanding the power the colonial patriarchal gaze has had and how to unwield it.
In creating 7 Stories about Water, I consider, “how do people encounter water?” The contexts under which these encounters occur in the 21st century are capitalism, settler-colonialism and colonialism. Racial capitalism’s effects have been reaching their peak directly evinced through climate chaos—a direct result of resource extraction, attempted genocide of indigenous peoples and erasure of earth-based spiritual practices. As so-called developed countries wrestle with their cultures of consumption, families fleeing political and climatic turmoil are detained at borders or risk death on the seas and roads trying to find relief. First Nation peoples on Turtle Island have been and continue to fight to protect their unceded lands and waters as the US and Canada continually disregard treaties and agreements in clear violation of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. When I address these questions to myself, I cannot remove my positionality which includes my histories and lived experiences. I am neither settler nor native. In the early 1960’s, fleeing a US-backed dictator and subsequent US military invasion, my parents came from the unceded land of the Taino in the Caribbean, known as Ayiti or Kiskeya—“land of the most bountiful.” It is also known by its colonial name Hispaniola; currently divided into two predominately Black nations, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. Both countries are inclusive of a global understanding. Often, many water poses questions and explorations from this perspective that other individual beliefs in any group. However, my hope is to this research as an Indigenous person might conflict with this fragmentary quality of reality, perspectives and what narrative and text or there is silence. It is meant to highlight the regional truth that binds their stories together under the context in which we live. My story is implied through the specific blue background reminiscent of the color of the ocean where they are from.

Courtney M. Leonard: BREACH, as a whole, is an annual logbook and visual account. It tracks from year to year what lies above and below the sightline of water and land horizons— its record, a marker of the previous year’s account explored through relationships of environmental fragility, shifting adaptations, and/or the ability to simply become anew.

With each BREACH logbook, the question that persists is, “Can a culture sustain itself when it no longer has access to the environment that fashions that culture?” How I navigate this research as an Indigenous person might conflict with other individual beliefs in any group. However, my hope is to pose questions and explorations from this perspective that is inclusive of a global understanding. Often, many water communities are not meaningfully acknowledged as actors in the larger climate crisis conversation, despite being on the frontlines of climate change and directly affected by global climate decisions.

Mary Mattingly: Growing up in a rural agricultural town outside of New York City, without access to clean drinking water due to insecticides, herbicides and nitrates in the water table, I continually worried about water. I was made aware of industrial farming practices as a young person, and of the connection of environmental issues to human and nonhuman health. There are many forms of water crisis—including the crisis of water pollution, of rising costs with privatization, and lack of access to water—most recently in the US with Detroit’s water shut-offs during the height of the coronavirus and with extreme droughts. What has driven me to focus on water in much of the work I do, and to follow the business of water privatization, was when Bechtel (with the World Bank) privatized water in and around Cochabamba Bolivia in the year 2000. The water became unaffordable for most people, and in Cochabamba tens of thousands of people protested until unrest led the government to revoke the water contracts. Since learning about Cochabamba’s water crisis, water privatization has been something I’ve followed closely. While many rural areas in the US can’t afford privatization costs, many cities have found that employing public/private water partnerships have helped allying budgets, but almost always in the short term only. This type of partnership came to a head during the beginning of the Flint, MI water crisis. Flint’s public private partnership was in the hands of Veolia and the city government—cutting corners with water is a health issue and a life-or-death issue.

Karen Levitov: Collaboration is an integral part of many of your projects. Can you describe some of these collaborations and how they have worked?

Betsy: Over 30 years, I’ve invited artists to collaborate with each other, with scientists, and with their own communities. Beginning with a workshop in which everyone learns the larger scientific issues, the community finds the best ways to start their collaborations. These collaborations have led to the cleanup of the San Antonio River, a stormwater collection project in a school, and the first inner city water garden in China, to name a few.

Karen Levitov (co-founder of the BREACH project) shares stories about the project’s origins and how it has evolved over time, focusing on the importance of collaboration and community engagement in addressing water-related issues. The project began in 2006 with a series of workshops aimed at fostering dialogue and action around water issues, and has since expanded to include partnerships with scientists, artists, and community organizations. The project’s success is attributed to its commitment to collaboration and to addressing the complex, multifaceted nature of water-related issues.

Lillian Ball: An essential part of WATERWASH Bronx River was the collaboration with local non-profit Rocking the Boat, that teaches neighborhood youth to build wooden boats and do environmental work. The students helped plant over 800 native wetland and grassland plants and continued doing maintenance on the site years after the park’s construction, learning in the process the difference between native and invasive plant species. This sense of collaboration has also been evident in the project’s prototype, WATERWASH Mattituck Inlet, which was designed in 2007 and even to this day relies on the participation of local community members in the removal of invasive species growing in and around the wetland.

Courtney M. Leonard: Collaboration exists as both an understanding of and responsibility to each community and cultural landscape that has been a part of BREACH. If we consider water itself to be a sentient being, a community of drops to which we are in connection with, then at what point do we seek consent, ask permission, give acknowledgement and express gratitude to the water (the community) for all that it has given within this collaboration? How do we communicate collaboration as a practice of responsibility to and with one another? Shinnecock Bay borders our traditional territories as a part of the Shinnecock Nation and has been a key estuary for our people lending to generations of built knowledge. Indigenous epistemologies exist as scientific records of the place based knowledge and responsibility we hold and practice. These include protection of the waters, shores, and marine ecologies our community has always and continues to connect with; the bay which bears the name of who we are, “Shinnecock” Bay. We honor and give thanks to the water as a means of who we are and where we come from.
Mary Mattingly: Because everyone is continually acting and interacting in relation, sometimes silently and sometimes intentionally, collaboration is a daily act, and it can be more thoughtful. Collaboration is what drives my work—I thrive when co-learning and working together because it turns up other ways of building and creating—we can be in a support role holding someone’s ideas or we can lead, but collaboration is always a form of compromise and that’s part of its strength. I really appreciate this way of learning and being together and it is key in most of the artwork I do or get involved in, in a support role. I’ve found that no matter the work, the best collaborations tend to be the ones where compromise and context are foregrounded, and collaborators share their skills in a way that allows each person to lead and hold a part of the whole.

Jaanika Peerna: I tend to prefer being a solitary artist type in my studio. It’s essential for me to distill down everything that I take in during my wakeful hours. At the same time I find myself doing more and more performance art that invites participatory involvement from audience members and is so much about collaborative action. There are no words exchanged yet it takes a lot of sensing and listening to others that makes these performances tick.

As the current project’s prep got prolonged due to covid it’s been such a treasure to have Karen and Betsy encouraging conversations between us the participating artists and also with Stony Brook professors. There is so much I have learned from Betsy’s approach for example—she is much more grounded and action oriented, and her knowledge about water is vast.

Karen Levitov: As a university art gallery, our mission is to foster learning and critical thinking. What do you hope visitors take away from this exhibition?

Betsy Damon: My greatest hope is that visitors take away ideas—not only what they can do on their own property but within the larger water systems in which they live.

Lillian Ball: I consider my job as an artist and environmental pro-activist to be getting people to care about these essential environmental concerns. And I believe Stony Brook is an excellent community to get people involved and invested. I hope that visitors will be able to place themselves within the greater framework of crucial ecosystem issues and see how truly impactful their actions, and perhaps in some cases how detrimental their inaction, can actually be.

Jaanika Peerna: I believe that if there is even only one participant in my performance who leaves being changed from inside or with an experience that has gotten under her/his skin, it is better than a thousand politely clapping hands.

To evoke awe towards water, give space to be with our grief for vanishing glacial landscapes, and, as a result, feel transformed and able to take on some action is probably the most I can hope to achieve. Art has its own ways to offer us solace, inspire and inform—art does it the way no other discipline does. It’s at times magical and can’t be explained.

Erin Genia: I would like viewers to consider how Indigenous methodologies, creative practice, Western science and community-based organizing are methods that, when used in conjunction in a manner that centers respect and reciprocity, can be a potent problem-solving combination to address and solve many of the water issues that we face.

Alicia Grullón: Awareness—in its most amplified and all-embracing way possible.