

Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery  
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Erin Christovale: Blue McRight will be in conversation with Kay Whitney and then we'll go to a Q&A. So, thank you guys for being here and enjoy.

Kay Whitney: I'm Kay Whitney, a critic and a sculptor. I'm going to be speaking with Blue about *Font*, and a little bit about her body of work previous to this incredible piece. Blue is an artist who's been making work for several decades about water, and different aspects of water. The lack of the resource, the way water gets used, all the issues we're dealing with now in this terrible drought.

In view of this, her work is poetic invocation to nature; what she does involves the natural world, the beauty of the natural world, and the fleetingness of that beauty.

Blue is someone uniquely able to combine aesthetics with a very clear political statement, to manage what is a very difficult juggling act. While her work makes a distinct statement, it's in balance with her interest in beauty. Her work is neither completely abstract nor totally about a message; it's somewhere in between. She is also one of very few people able to deal with an issue that's deadly serious, but deal with it in a way that's also humorous. This is a really extraordinary piece-

How many books are there?

Blue McRight: Close to 1,000.

Kay Whitney: A thousand books. And, as with any work of art, there are issues that have to do with how it's sited in this particular space, decisions that have to do with the scale of the unit, where to hang it on the wall; these things combine to create the impact that this piece has.

Everything is a condensation of decisions made along the way. The way the colors are grouped together, the way the faucets are dispersed. It's obvious there is a certain amount of spontaneity, but also a great deal of planning.

I'd like to know where this work stands in relationship to your previous work, and how you got here.

Blue McRight: Much of my sculpture over the last few years has come from found objects. But I guess I should back up and talk about how I became interested in water?

In the mid 70's I was living in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and working as a mountain guide, a river guide and an Outward Bound instructor. So I was a real wilderness person at that point, and still am. But there was one day in particular that the world shifted, and that was the day when we couldn't drink the water anymore. We couldn't drink the water from the lakes or the streams in the mountains anymore. I mean, I witnessed that, I lived that, and the world changed from one day to another. It made a huge impact on me, but it wasn't until the 90's when I had moved to Los Angeles that I started bringing ideas about water into my work.

At first it was through a series of paintings, and then one day I happened to be reading the LA Times, and I saw this article about lawn paint, and I thought, "What?" - and only in Los Angeles, right? We were having a drought at that point too, and Caltrans was using this lawn paint to paint the sides of the freeway, you know, where it was dead grass... Oh, like I believe that that's actual green grass, I mean, really? But, anyway, it said in the article that people were using it on their lawns, too, so I thought: "This is perfect, I'm a painter, this is paint, I'm so using this". In that moment I realized that the lawn for me could be the interface between nature and culture that would allow me to talk about water, as well as a number of other things, so that was the beginning of using water in my work, and I've done it ever since.

Kay Whitney: What are some of the nuts and bolts issues that went in to putting this together? Where do the books come from?

Blue McRight: Well, over a period of about six months, every Saturday I went to different library sales all around Los Angeles and Ventura, which was super interesting. Most of the books came from library sales, which is kind of a great symmetry, because this was a city grant, and I'm out there buying a lot of rejected city library books. A number of them also came from thrift stores. So I probably bought about 1,300 or so books, and then edited them down to this amount, which is close to 1,000 books now. And the vintage faucets and sprinklers came from eBay, which is the source of all treasure.

It was a big process of editing the books. I had two criteria that I was looking for: one was color. They needed to be the colors of water. So I decided no pink, no orange, and no red. They had to be black, white, grey, green, blue, brown. Like that. And the other criteria was that the text on the books' spines had to be related to water in some way, whether it was the author's name or the title of the book. Those were my two big criteria for choosing the books. And, as far as deciding how the installation should be, the dimensions are variable. It can be configured in a number of different ways, but for this particular site I had always envisioned it as a vertical piece,

and the reference for me is that of a “water column”, which is a term for a conceptual column of water that goes from a particular point on the surface to a point directly below on the bottom.

As a scuba diver, I've been in the water column many times, and I like it. So, I thought, let's have it be vertical, and I wanted it to be encased, like water is in a channel. So my wonderful crew built these two beautiful sidewalls, so the books can be embedded as if they were in channel. And the scale, also, was really important to me; I wanted it to be immersive. It needed to be way bigger than the viewers, towering over us. I like to think of it as waterfall scale, that's what I call it myself. So that is some of the thinking that went into it.

Kay Whitney: I notice that many of these books are novels. And, they do have water in the title.

Blue McRight: Yes. I encourage everyone to check out the titles because there are some great ones.

Kay Whitney: *Thicker Than Water, Bridge of Sighs, Voyage of the Narwhal, Snow, River Cross My Heart*; this is a great selection of chick lit!

Blue McRight: (Laughs) And *Tears of the Giraffe*. Well, it was interesting because when I started the project, I mean, when I wrote the grant, I thought, "Oh, this is no problem, I can do this", but when I actually got it and went to buy the books, I thought, "Oh my god, I wonder if there are really enough books with water in their titles to pull this off?" And what I found was that, yes, there are many, many. And since my interpretation was pretty wide, I could allow things like the *South Beach Diet* - okay that's not strictly about water, but it is about the beach. (Laughs). And the beach is next to the water, so I said, "Okay, you're green, you're about a beach, you can go in". And there were so many copies of that, I thought, "Wow, really? Okay". But they were rejected, so, what does that tell you? Not a popular diet, I guess.

The way I arranged the titles was, it's not a narrative piece, there's no set order for the titles. Their arrangement was more about visual rhythm and conceptual rhythm. It's not a narrative. Their placement relative to each other is totally flexible and it's fluid, if I may. They shift and they flow.

They can shift and change in the same way water is constantly moving and shifting and changing, so the connections are one way in this installation, but in another iteration, they can be different.

Kay Whitney: So text does have a function?

Blue McRight: Well, what was really interesting, what I discovered in all the dozens and dozens of books I found that were appropriate for this installation is that metaphors about water are very pervasive throughout our culture. And that was an affirmation for me as an artist that this subject really matters; I mean, not only as an ecological or an environmental issue, but as a psychological one, and for so many other reasons too, because when you look at all the different titles, they're used in so many different ways that it demonstrates how important that subject is to our culture. I would go to the library and I would find books in fiction, non-fiction, science, technology, mystery, you know, all the different areas and categories in the library had books about water. And so, it's not like they were all novels, although most of them were from the fiction department. But there were a lot of other ones, and I thought that that was very interesting. I felt that by doing this piece I was sharing in a metaphor that is such a deep part of our cultural moment.

Kay Whitney: It occurred to me while writing the catalog piece, that in a way you're engaging with technologies that are passing us by. For example, this kind of use of water is discouraged now; you can't use water like you used to.

Also, the whole issue of the disappearance of the printed word is something that particularity strikes me as a writer.

I have to think, are we going to have books and water in ten years?

Blue McRight: Yeah, well there is that, too. It's definitely about resources. It's not just about water; it has much bigger metaphorical implications.

Kay Whitney: Technology and circulation of information-

Blue McRight: Yes, exactly. Exactly. Also, I made a decision that I wasn't going to allow people to open the books and read the contents, because I wanted to talk about ideas of interiority and potential, and how those are unseen. For me, the metaphor that came up was that of an aquifer, where what is valuable and sought after is hidden, and its extent is unknown but ultimately finite. And if you allow people to access the contents of the books, then that metaphor is diminished. I wanted to preserve that.

Kay Whitney: With this work you emphasize your labor in a different way. It actually engages with very particular objects. This is kind of a jump.

Blue McRight: Jump, step, whatever. Much of my sculpture has been made out of found objects, such as trees, and tree branches, vintage canteens, vintage nozzles and faucets, sprinklers, lawn ornaments, books, book cases, all kinds of hoses. I've been working with all this stuff as found

objects, and a lot of times those objects have been wrapped. Their surfaces have been transformed, they've been masked, just like Kay pointed out with *The Book of Rain*, which is a found object wrapped in a way that I've been working with for about five years, which is to use elastic bandage that's put on horses' legs when they injure themselves. And then I use a sewing needle and heavy thread to weave this intricate web around the object. The wrapped objects reference transformation, protection and repair. The process of binding and wrapping talks about scarcity and constriction.

So, a lot of my previous sculpture has been treated in that way. But this time I decided not to wrap the books; I wanted to let them speak for themselves and be themselves, and to work with color. Because I've been working with creating monochromatic fields of objects, usually black, for years, and I'm like... I like black, but can we have something else? (Laughs) And besides, who is going to wrap 1,000 books? Even I am not that crazy. I am into labor, as Kay pointed out, I'm into laborious process, but... So I decided I would look at using the objects by themselves. And titles have always been a really important part of my work, whether it's painting or sculpture. But this is the first time that I've actually worked with found titles and text - it's really the first time I've incorporated text physically into my artworks. Those are some ways that my previous work has led to this work.

Kay Whitney: And why *Font*? The title of the installation?

Blue McRight: Because it has so many layers of meaning. It refers to a baptismal font, to a natural spring, to the font of knowledge, to typefaces, and thus to books. It was perfect. (Laughs) That's why.

Kay Whitney: This piece is incredibly metaphorical. In a way you've stripped off the detail that characterized your older work. At the same time, so much is revealed in this piece; you truly exposing your vision because what this piece represents is really fundamental to your body of work.

Blue McRight: Yes, that was an interesting step, but I felt like I really needed to take it. I'm still working with wrapping in some of the new work that I'm doing now, creating hybrid objects by combining wildly different things - but yeah, this stripped-down approach is something that the COLA award gave me the opportunity to try.

Kay Whitney: It's a very public object. Particularly in terms of the way you physically relate to it in this big public space.

Blue McRight: Well, I depend on people to interact with this piece. I really want for people to come up close and read the titles, because not only does it give them increased awareness of what I'm trying to say as an artist,

but every time someone approaches and starts reading these titles at random, according to the choices they make, they're creating their own unique prose poem. And for me that's really interesting; I've never worked with anything like that before, either. In compiling the list of titles, which I needed to do to get the installation right, because I worked this all out in my studio before I brought it over here, I would be reading these titles out loud, and they became, at times, almost incantatory. They became like a chant. I'm hoping that people who view the work will engage in that way, on some level. Up to them. Or not... (Laughs)

Thanks to all of you for coming today!

Erin Christovale: Thank you, Blue.