

BUFFALO RIVER FUGUES

Essay for exhibition catalogue by John Massier
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Margaret Cogswell's site-specific installation *Buffalo River Fugues* belies its own reality of hard, emphatic industrial materials with a lyrical eloquence that is almost tender in its application. It is as though the remnants of industrial ghosts past to which Cogswell is alluding surface as lines of melody realized in a gallery space. Ductwork and conduit are drawn three-dimensionally throughout the space and the multiple allusions to heavy industry emanate with reverent lightness.

Experientially, Cogswell's installation is striking in its unavoidable contrasts. The gargantuan forms of industry diminish us when they loom before and over us—paradoxically, in much the same way that natural forms such as mountains, canyons, and rivers diminish and humble us. Cogswell uses our familiarity with this relationship to her advantage and great effect. Though her installation is succinct and concise, the physical presence of enormous ductwork in the gallery is nonetheless startling by its allusion to an omnivorous scale.

Undercutting the weighty presence of the ductwork, electrical conduit snakes about with a serene grace, punctuated at specific points with lantern boxes, housing the looped images of white candles, burning down and then burning up again. The conduit, in particular, elaborates the sensation that the installation has been drawn in space. It all looks convincingly functional (and some of the conduit does, in fact, power specific elements in the exhibition), while simultaneously reading as what it is: a purposely-aesthetic realization, both a sculptural installation and a drawing rendered with galvanized steel and electricity. Industrial calligraphy.

The scale and materials set us up with certain expectations of volume and noise and cacophony and yet almost everything else in the installation cuts against the grain of this expectation. The environment is astonishingly serene and the sounds that are heard reach us not through an abrasive dissonance but at levels so intimate they almost whisper. A lone radio beside some abandoned toolboxes emits a remix fugue of aspirations and lost dreams: fragments of songs, evangelical prophecies, and tourists exclaiming the wonder of Niagara Falls. Cogswell's audio elements are sentiments with no place to go and enhance the notion of abandonment within the space, particularly the sounds of an old steel mill like a labored exhausted breath.

Fugue is a double-edged reference that Cogswell utilizes with maximum flexibility. It is a musical reference relating to the repetition of a particular theme with variations within the repeated lines. It also refers to a disordered state of mind, specifically when one has wandered from home and experiences a memory loss related to the environment that has been rejected and left. Taken together, one could surmise a hauntingly elegant cycle of lostness, fueled perpetually by a forgetfulness as to the nature of the loss.

Buffalo River Fugues is the third in a series of *River Fugues*, in which Cogswell has explored the complex and still-changing relationship between humans, industry, and river systems—not merely in an elegiac manner, but in consideration of multiple layers of meaning within these relationships. She does not simplify the equation and lionize the natural world at the expense of industry, as though the latter's contribution were merely degradation and environmental havoc. The elegance with which the installation is realized extends to each component and not merely the sense of loss.

Industry too has a certain irrefutable magnificence about it and it is impossible not to recognize this in Cogswell's treatment of her industrial materials and components, and the undeniably hypnotic—one might almost say *romantic*—footage of hot steel running through a mill. In some sense, that is beauty incarnate. Her use of ductwork reflects a thicker brushstroke, but one equally compelling and valid as the lines of conduit or the delicate flicker of a candle. Industry is not a villain; it is an equal partner, a co-conspirator and enabler of progress.

It feeds us, fuels us, burns us, scars us. It's beautiful and horrible. It makes our lives better, easier, and devastates the natural world. Like a musical composition, *Buffalo River Fugues* is constructed from fragmented parts because only a collection of elegant fragments suffices to reference the complex interdependence we share with the natural world we subsume and the industry that enables us to do so.