MISSISSIPPI RIVER FUGUES

Essay for exhibition catalogue by Tom Sleigh
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Margaret Cogswell, a student in 1968 at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee, has just been to hear Martin Luther King speak in support of the sanitation workers' strike: she's elated by King's oratory, his passionate conviction that he's "been to the mountaintop"—and though he understands that "I may not get there with you," he knows "that we, as a people will get to the Promised Land." The next day she is climbing the steps to her dorm, her foot "raised in mid-air like a freeze-frame in my mind," when she hears the news that he's been murdered. The power goes out, tanks roll onto campus, she hears sniper fire around the dorms: devastated by fear, grief, and anger, she eventually decides to leave the South. But that isn't so easy: born in Memphis (though raised in Japan), she is and is not a Southerner: King Cotton, slavery, Civil Rights, the mystique and myth of the agrarian South, these are all part of her cultural inheritance.

But after she graduates, Margaret Cogswell does indeed leave the South for New York City, where she makes sculpture, then installation work. Over the years, her artistic explorations show her to be a polymath, one of those quiet visionaries who aspire to the complexity that Nathaniel Hawthorne once defined as happiness: the ability to live as deeply as possible in all our faculties.

In the last five years, Margaret Cogswell has focused her faculties on exploring the ever-shifting banks and waters of American rivers—and produced a series of installations that are among the most original in contemporary art. Like Thomas Cole before her, she's captured, in a fugue of voices and video, the Hudson River Valley, though she's tempered Cole's mystical effects of light and shadow with the river's diesel-powered clang and thrum. And her fugues on the Buffalo and Cuyahoga Rivers transform Blake's "dark Satanic mills" into an empathetic understanding of the steel mill workers and the peculiar poetry of their daily work lives.

Now, perhaps inevitably, given her Southern roots, King Cotton and the Mississippi have woven themselves back into her life. In keeping with Hawthorne's dictum, she has paddled down the river with a canoe builder in his hand-hewn pirogue, talked to the Army Corps of Engineers, African American art historians, the Yazoo Levee Board, cotton growers, gin owners, earth science geologists, cotton journalists, a levee inspector and former barge-hand/ state trooper (who does a mean "cow in distress" imitation), and the only African American riverboat captain on the Mississippi who is piloting the Memphis Queen.

In the ante-room to the installation, these voices resonate from hurricane lanterns that Cogswell has fabricated from copper and sheet metal. In each lantern, she has installed a video screen and a DVD player. Suspended at different heights, the lanterns house these disembodied voices, each voice accompanied by the projection of a candle coming alight, until the voice falls silent and the flame flickers out. A sense of elegy and ghostly presence pervades this part of the installation, the voices interweaving with the river's ambient sounds: whistles, pulse of engines, rush of water.

In the main gallery hall, Cogswell surrounds us with buoy-like structures that serve as swiveling projectors casting images of cotton production on the walls: a huge mound of cotton lint is scooped up by a caterpillar tractor's jaws, a presser tamps the cotton down into huge bales; or a crop duster flies low over the cotton bolls, covering them in spray, while cows in a neighboring field look on and the sound of water rising fills the air; or we see the fields on fire, the revolving stainless-steel teeth of a cotton harvester, the strangely unsettling vision of the sun rising through mist or the full moon pulsating above the fields.

Underneath all this, you hear the sound of treading feet ominously flooding the room, and reinforcing the installation's most spectacular elements: two large paddle wheel-like forms that double as projection screens; and a construction based on a drawing of a pre-steam 18th century dredger powered by men who walk round and round in enormous squirrel wheels. Cogswell's dredger, looking a little like a medieval weapon, projects a hint of threat and menace. This is in radiant contrast to the projections in the paddle wheels that show the ghostly figure of a man walking round and round in the soft blue light emanating from the circular screens.

It's hard not to think of the collapsing levees on the Mississippi, of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath, of the industrial and agricultural pollution fostered by our need for King Cotton, and of Martin Luther King quoting the prophet Amos in his Memphis speech, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." And yet the installation, whose apocalyptic overtones are unmistakable, never succumbs to an oversimplified view of the consequences of global capitalism, in which Memphis still figures as one of the largest cotton brokers in Africa. Instead, Cogswell presents us with the irreducible and unforgettable details of the Mississippi River valley's cotton fields. Human transience and the ghosts that press around us may be at the heart of this vision, but in her life-long commitment as an artist to the clear expression of mixed emotions, she demonstrates how the waters that may cover us over can also buoy us up.