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Moving Water:
Margaret Cogswell's "Wyoming River Fugues"

It has been ever wise to listen to rivers.

The wisest of our ancestors listened. Heraclitus, for instance, one of those Greeks who in philosophy — the love of wisdom — preceded even Socrates, tenders us the insight that "One cannot step twice into the same river." Or again, the traditional wisdom from the Far East assembled in W. S. Merwin's *Asian Figures* includes this riverine verity, which, though ancient in origin, would serve Wyoming well as a guiding truth today:

> rivers go on
> mountains
> go on

The wise among the moderns, too, listened to rivers, as exemplified by Langston Hughes' hearing "the singing of the Mississippi," and so do our wise contemporaries, among whom her "River Fugues" place Margaret Cogswell.

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It takes will matched by patience to listen to rivers.

There's blame to be assigned, we say, for the urban child who *does* know that hamburgers come from fast-food restaurants, but *doesn't* know they come first from cows. Yet how much like such a child are we in relation to water? I know water comes from my kitchen faucet, from the soda aisle at the grocery store, from the fountain down the hall from my office at work, but how much do I know beyond that? Precious little. Margaret Cogswell has taken the time, and gone to the trouble, to find out. Her fugues offer the fruits of her labors, but also invite us into those labors.

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To what will we listen, if not to rivers?

What is Wyoming's most precious resource? By the criterion of *price* (what of our state do we in Wyoming forfeit to others these days in exchange for cash?) the answer must be fuels: coal, oil, natural gas. By the criterion of *pricelessness* (what of our state can we in Wyoming not live without?) the answer is water. Humans lived here, in what we now call Wyoming, for millennia before the first lump of its coal was sold. Those persons' lives were just as full then of sorrows and joys, hardship and grace, as our lives are now. No human, though, has ever lived in this place — nothing at all *could* live here — without water. One of the Wyoming voices to whom Margaret Cogswell listens in one of her narrative fugues says it well. Standing next to a river, he says to her, and says *for* all of us who live here, "You're lookin' at my lifeblood."

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It would be wise to wait, and listen.

By analogy with the musical form of the fugue, Margaret Cogswell has sought to give her installation *layers*, to make it not one- or two-dimensional, but multi-dimensional. "I want the piece to be explored," she says. "I want it to be about a process of discovery." Toward making possible such discovery, the exhibition's elements are multiple: drawings and digital prints of video stills line one wall, and moving images are projected onto other walls; objects — real stock tanks and stylized surveyor's transits — inhabit the space; a "bucket of light" like a mechanical moon moves slowly overhead; recorded voices fill the room. Why so *much* material, offered the viewer by such varied means? So that we may — even *must* — make, each of us, our own way through the accumulation, so that we may make of it our own sense, rather than taking the artist's word for it, or anyone else's. So that, after the viewer's initial visceral response, the work may invite also her cognitive response, her *reflections* and *questions*.

Cogswell says she wants the work to have layers, as a poem has layers: something to offer the viewer the first time through, and something else the second.

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One who listens for wisdom may hear it as music.

If melody propels us forward, harmony draws us down. The sonata progresses, the fugue ruminates. The one is purposeful, the other profound; the one advances, the other waits. Homophony promises money in the bank, polyphony fabricates substance in the soul. Mozart is sudden and swift, Bach solid and strong; Mozart whistles, Bach prays. By organizing her installation in the form of fugues, Margaret Cogswell declares a preference for depth over speed. As a Bach fugue states its theme, then mirrors and manipulates it, creating counterpoint and voicings, so Cogswell mirrors and manipulates *her* theme into a contrapuntal and polyphonic work. The fugue first offers her, the maker, and then also offers us, the viewers, a flexible conceptual framework and a patient mode of investigation.

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Rivers figure wisdom, and our want of it.

Margaret Cogswell's fixation on rivers amounts to more than merely a private, peculiar obsession. For all of us, our *need* for water exceeds our *understanding* of it. We all of us know thirst better than we know the substance that alone can satisfy it. Charles Fishman's laconic statement of that fact also stands as validation of Cogswell's work. "Water is as potent in our daily lives as gravity, but also as mysterious."

That thirst, though, the distance between our physiological need for water and our want of knowledge about water, is not our only thirst. There is a distance, too, one with economic, political, and ecological consequences, between the amount of fresh water on earth, which is *not*

increasing, and the number of humans, which *is*. We might name this need, as Maude Barlow and Tony Clarke do, "water productivity." We would do well, following Barlow and Clarke, to recognize it as an imperative to thrift in the face of scarcity, as a call to double the benefit we currently get "from each liter of water we remove from rivers, lakes, and underground aquifers if we are to have any hope of providing water for the 8 to 9 billion people who will need it in the next several decades."

Our thirst, though, also shows itself in, and shows itself *as*, artistic and cultural expression. To this thirst David Clarke testifies, implicitly affirming Cogswell's choice of subject when he attributes to water a thematic prominence in art that, in Europe, starts with Leonardo, and that has special cogency today. "If artistic and cultural meanings in general have tended to become more evanescent, more mutable and difficult to pin down in the modern period," then water, he proposes, "as a substance which is itself without fixed form, may have found a particular relevance for our era of fluidity and dissolution."

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We learn from one song to listen to another.

Margaret Cogswell insists that "my mentors are poets and composers." How well she practices what her preceptors preach may be seen by the fit, for instance, between Cogswell's "Wyoming River Fugues" and these words of poet Muriel Rukeyser: "… all we can be sure of is the profound flow of our living tides of meaning, the river meeting the sea in eternal relationship, in a dance of power, in a dance of love." Sureness, Rukeyser suggests, does not secure but is secured by what is profound, and what is profound is flow.

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To listen to rivers is to look, and to look is to look *again*.

It's not that the standard images of Wyoming water are *wrong*, exactly. Sometimes a lone human figure *does* stand in a winding stream casting a fly against a placid backdrop of mountains outlined by crepuscular light and matched by scattered clouds purple for purple. There *are* waterfalls here that tourists may frame with trees for snapshots sure to win the oohs and ahs of their friends back home.

It's not that such clichés are wrong. It's just that what we want others to see of this our home, what we ourselves may wish to think of it, is not all we need to know to honor the place, to make our lives *prove* the respect we *say* we have for it, to leave it to our children whole. For that we must see also what Margaret Cogswell sees, must see also *as* she sees:

Two boots, waders with their tops turned down, stand astride a stone. Two hands lift the stone from shallow water in a concrete irrigation channel and set it down again, now atop the corner of an orange tarp.

Two trout swim in place, now synchronized, now not, against the current of a stream, the way two crows might for a moment fly in place in the face of a Wyoming wind.

Cows lumber in an awkward line toward a stock tank. Cows convened around a stock tank bellow.

A ghostly snowplow floats along a highway, its lights softened by a scrim of the very snow that makes this first pass futile and necessitates the next.

Those boots, the waders, walk now through prairie grass.

A dead fish floats on its side near a shore, animated by waves, measured by a horsefly.

Shallow water flows, given contour in its rushing by the very stones that insistent rushing has smoothed.

Prayer flags assent to the sacredness observed by the circumference of a prayer wheel.

Water surges from the sluice gate of a dam.

A loose grid of cracks crazes a close-up of parched ground.

That orange tarp, now draped across a pole, carried behind those boots, asserts that the one who holds the deed may claim the land, but the one who moves the water owns it.

A sprinkler head sprays water in persistent, rapid, metronomic bursts.

A junked truck immersed in what looks like a quarry, its cab above the surface, invites first target practice, then rust to emphasize the bullet holes.

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To hear the river, listen to the people.

An art that listens is a *democratic* art. "What I want in my work," Margaret Cogswell avers, "is to bring disparate voices together." She wants the work to record and facilitate conversation. She wants it, in other words, to fulfill the most fundamental principle of democracy, which, if Amartya Sen is right, is not only "the institutions that formally exist" but more importantly "the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the people can actually be heard." Democracy, Sen asserts, is not realized by voting alone, which, as proven by, say, North Korea, can be corrupted, but by voting undergirded by "what goes with balloting, such as free speech, access to information and freedom of dissent."

If democracy is not only voting, but also and more crucially the exercise of public reason, then the basic right is the right to *speak*, for which the right to vote is merely metonym, and the basic responsibility is to *listen*. Which makes Margaret Cogswell's artistic process an emblem, and an instance, of democracy at work.

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To listen wisely is to listen for *voices*, to listen *to* voices.

Ours may be an age of information, but what information informs is voice. When Margaret Cogswell describes the process of creating her fugues, she does not speak of gathering

information but of gathering *stories*. Her narrative fugues include information, but they do so because they create a chorus, because, in other words, they assemble voices.

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A river bears a name because it has a voice, because it *is* a voice.

One measure of my prior inattentiveness to rivers, the inattentiveness Margaret Cogswell's fugues mitigate against, is how few of Wyoming's rivers I could have named, out of the countless flows, ephemeral to mighty, that vein the state, translating seasonal snowmelt and occasional storms into lasting sustenance.

North Platte, yes, and Yellowstone, Laramie and Wind, Powder and Snake.

But what of the rest? Crazy Woman Creek, Bald Mountain Creek, Hoback River, Sourdough Creek, Wagon Box Creek, Tongue River, Paint Rock Creek, Pole Creek, Porcupine. Shoshone River, Encampment River, Little Popo Agie River, Greys River, Gros Ventre, Bighorn, Salt, Greybull, Sweetwater. Cold Springs Creek, Tensleep Creek, Blue Creek, Clear Creek, Rock Creek, Shell Creek, Trout Creek. Pass Creek, French Creek, La Bonte, Babione. Old King Ditch, Oasis Ditch, Chugwater Creek. Porter Draw, Antelope Draw, Chivington Draw, Stinking Water Creek. Big Sandy River, Killpecker Creek, Potash Wash, Ninemile Wash, Greasewood Wash. Stratton Draw, Eagles Nest Draw, Battle Spring Draw, Laundry Draw, Junk Creek. Sand Creek, Bone Creek, Difficulty Creek, Red Cloud Slough.

That each has a name indicates it has spoken to someone before, and suggests it would speak now to any of us who proved, like Margaret Cogswell, willing to listen.

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