

MARGARET COGSWELL: *CUYAHOGA FUGUES*

An Essay by Eleanor Heartney
for SPACES World Artist Program catalogue brochure
published September 2003

"The authentic artist cannot turn his back on the contradictions that inhabit our landscapes." Robert Smithson

It is rare for an artist today to dwell on images of industry. From the perspective of contemporary art, it is as if the factory, the steel mill and the oil refinery do not exist, or have been relegated to that portion of consciousness where unwelcome realities are entombed and repressed.

Yet this was not always so. The history of art and literature since the industrial revolution are full of depictions of the world of smoke stacks and factories. Sometimes these are presented as metaphors for lost innocence, as when Milton serves up the "great furnace flam'd" with its "adamantine chains and penal fire" as the image of hell in *Paradise Lost*, or D H Lawrence conjures the coal mine to suggest the blighted landscape of modernity.

But for others, industry is a symbol of progress and hope. Carl Sandburg's Chicago is the "City of the Big Shoulders" personified thus:

*"Under the smoke, dust all over his mouth, laughing with white teeth,
Under the terrible burden of destiny laughing as a young man laughs. .."*

Charles Sheeler's sleek precisionist factories and Joseph Stella's cathedral like suspension bridges are the visual equivalent of this optimistic vision.

Whatever their particular position, such artists draw on the great shaping tension of the modern world brought about by the intrusion, in Leo Marx's apt phrase, of "the Machine in the Garden." Nostalgia for an imagined pastoral past mingles with recognition of the transformative power of industry to create an almost schizophrenic sense of reality. As Leo Marx notes, our national myths are rural but our reality is urban.

Margaret Cogswell's *Cuyahoga Fugues* is a rare artistic exploration of this complex terrain. She has taken as her subject the Cuyahoga River which winds along a 120-mile journey through Ohio to Cleveland before emptying into Lake Erie. Known by the native inhabitants of the area as the "crooked river", the Cuyahoga gained notoriety in 1969 when its surface caught fire, a disaster which helped spark the passage of the Clean Water Act.

Cogswell was struck by the multiple roles which the river plays in the lives of those who live along its shores. It offers recreation, glimpses of natural beauty, and for many inhabitants, a means of livelihood. Without the river, and the trade routes it provided, Cleveland would never have grown into a major city. Nor would the Republic Steel Corporation and Jones and Laughlin steel mills, which at one time employed 3,400 have ensconced themselves there.

Today the mills are only a shadow of their former selves. Most of the blast furnaces, basic oxygen furnaces, continuous slab caster, hot mills, and finishing divisions have been abandoned. Their empty shells lie crumbling throughout the Flats, like ruins of an ancient city left to the elements. However, Cogswell discovered that there is still a functioning blast furnace where molten iron is made from coke, iron ore and limestone.

Cuyahoga Fugues is just that - an installation which weaves together voices, the sounds of river and steel mill, and video images of nature and industry to convey a sense of the overlapping realities that find their center in the Cuyahoga River. To create this work, Cogswell traveled the length of the river during the winter of 2003, taping the landscape and its inhabitants. She gained entry into the working blast furnace and recorded its sights and sounds. And she interviewed the river's residents - steel workers, children, environmentalists, fishermen, city planners and a local social and cultural historian.

The resulting installation brings all these elements together in a darkened gallery whose windows have been closed off by sheets of the same steel made at the mill. Dominating the gallery are two large steel pipes of the sort used for conducting the wind from the power house to the blast furnaces to feed the fires. These become literal conduits for the sounds and images of river and industry. Coiling from the back corner is a pipe which has been partially cut away and covered with plexiglass which creates a screen on which an interior projector casts images of the Cuyahoga River. Distorted from the oblique angle of the projection, we see the reflected landscape of the river as it moves from its rural source to its industrial mouth at Lake Erie. The indigenous sounds of "civilization" along the way belie the beauty of the landscape. At one point a siren warns of an approaching train and ghostly reflections of ducks in the water float by. At another the shadowy figure of an ice fisherman perched atop a cooler appears. The sounds of the river mix together - mingling birds chirping, rushing water, sirens, a symphony of car horns. The film carries us from the relative purity of the upper river to the densely populated industrial section below. Meanwhile, the circular opening of the pipe distorts the images in another way, abstracting them to create a whirlpool effect.

The other pipe is suspended in the middle of the room, making a right angle whose intersection is also filled with a video screen. Here, the sounds of the mills dominate, filling the air with whistles, sirens, and the harmonic sounds of the wind rushing through pipes to feed the blast furnaces. The images projected on the screen are equally dramatic - we see the fire radiating from the mill, rolling steam from the cooling process, the flatbed railroad cars carrying hot slabs from the continuous slab caster to be rolled into sheets at the hot mills, billows of smoke from the basic oxygen furnaces, an eerie tour of an abandoned mill, and finally the rushing of river water used as a coolant throughout the mills.

Placed between the two pipes is a mini-installation inspired by the ice fishermen, Cogswell encountered on her trip upriver. A small monitor which proffers a blurry video of the men sits atop a cooler of the sort they carried onto the ice. A fishing rod is propped against a small log. A small transistor radio has been outfitted to project a series of conversations with river denizens. A woman talks about the way her husband courted her on the river, a man recalls the long history of the river, and children discuss the color of water and where it comes from. These voices mingle with others which emanate from the transistor radio, a portable item hardwired with electrical conduits to the thermos and portable TV. The second set of voices belong to

former and present mill workers who talk about the river and the mills, as well as the dangers and exertions of the job.

Together, the visual and aural elements of *Cuyahoga Fugues* form a story that is at once celebratory and elegiac. It reflects a set of relationships between people, nature and industry which is changing and a way of life which is ending. But it also acknowledges the intense bond between the river and the people who live on its banks. The river, both eternal and ever in flux, becomes a metaphor for life itself.