

THE PLUCK OF WATER

exhibition essay by hannah_g

During a rare period when the river path was not flooded, I walked along a small stretch of the Assiniboine every morning. I'd heard that exposure to the morning sun helps reset one's circadian rhythm, which can help with trouble sleeping and melancholy. I made myself a playlist to accompany me but after the first couple of days I stopped bringing my headphones: I didn't want to be distracted from everything to see and be part of along the river. There were the other folks also attracted to the water, with the regulars among us exchanging greetings in the early hours with the pleasure of recognition. About once a week I saw a seventy-something lady walk carefully down to the river's edge to fill an old ice cream pail she used to water a thriving clump of cosmos she'd guerrilla-gardened. I learned that the occasional splashes I would hear, and sometimes be quick enough to see, were made by fish jumping to catch some breakfast in the air. I watched the surface of the water for the pleasure of seeing the wind's cat paws upon it or the tell of a hidden obstruction. I began to understand the river was exercising "the pluck of water" on me, a phrase the Irish poet Seamus Heaney used in his poem 'The Diviner.' It describes the sensation experienced by a man using a fork of hazel wood to detect water hidden underground. Water attracts us and often gives us something we need, whether that's a beach party with pails or contemplation and solace. Heaney's words also aptly describe the pull of the artworks in this exhibition, which have a kinship to divining rods bringing us to rills of meaning and connections, beauty and questions.

The works in this exhibition are connected by water just as everything in life is. Some of these connections are more obvious than others. Water gives life to plants and animals but it is also integral to everything else whether it's the production of energy, the powering of AI, or the simple pleasure of having an ice cream. All the water present on Earth is all the water there's ever been, new water cannot be made, so it's important we look after it. Unfortunately, it's easier to pollute than not to. Think of all the products we put into the water system each day: soap, shampoo, laundry detergent, ingested medication.

There are other impacts too. Most of the energy used in Winnipeg is provided by Manitoba Hydro which uses the kinetic energy of flowing rivers, mostly in the North, as well as deposits of natural gas, to generate power. Water is a renewable energy source and the company is one of the most important in this province. However, even though the energy itself is relatively clean, hydroelectric infrastructure projects have had profound and devastating effects on some communities, many of them Indigenous.

Despite Canada ranking fourth among OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries with an A grade for performance, drinking water is not always a given in this country. One hundred and forty-five Drinking Water Advisories have been lifted nationwide since 2015 but there are still thirty long term DWAs currently in effect in twenty-eight communities, including four in Manitoba. The water our city uses is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation, a reserve that was under a Drinking Water Advisory from 1997 until 2021 because the infrastructure built to facilitate the transport of potable water from there to Winnipeg contaminated the community's own drinking water.

Winnipeg has been shaped by water—by that extracted from Indigenous communities, by two great rivers the city is built around, and by another historical event: the opening of the Panama Canal. Once a major railroad hub, Winnipeg was in the ascendant in the early twentieth century earning it the nickname "Chicago of the North": a few eye-catching remnants of architecture from the period attest to this. This period of growth ended with the outbreak of the First World War, which reduced European investment and immigration to Canada, and the opening of the Panama Canal which reconfigured international trade routes and made the country's east-west rail system less important. The city went from being one of the most prosperous and geographically critical to something much more modest.

Our brains are 95% water meaning most of our thoughts and emotions are actually facilitated by it. With this exhibition I wanted to offer ways to think and feel about water, to see where we might be led when we are receptive to "the pluck" of this strange, beguiling element, one that is shaping our lives and giving us life even at this very instant.

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