

From Sublimity to Ecopornography: Assessing the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection

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Abstract

Beginning in 1968, during a period of growing environmental activism and concern in the United States, the U.S. Federal agency named the Bureau of Reclamation commissioned work from visual artists willing to depict the “imaginative aspects of the Reclamation Program.” The result was a collection of paintings, drawings, and etchings that often worked within the well-known traditions of American exceptionalism and that served to promote the Bureau’s activities. As such, the collection not only exemplifies the Bureau of Reclamation’s self-promotion and “issues management” style of public relations, but it also exemplifies ecopornography, a concept that is further theorized in the paper.

Introduction

The U.S. government long has commissioned artists who could further its agendas, but rarely on the scale undertaken in 1968. That is when the Bureau of Reclamation began soliciting the aid of painters “to depict the imaginative aspects of the Reclamation Program.” The quoted notice, entitled “International Opportunities for Artists” and issued in the art journal *Leonardo*, explained to its audience of artists the Bureau of Reclamation’s mission: “to conserve and develop the water resources of the arid areas of the U.S.A., the 17 westernmost States, in order to make dry lands arable and to augment water supplies for their expanding population.” BuRec, a nickname used by employees and detractors alike, commissioned paintings for six years, from 1968 through 1974.

Some artists responded to ads placed in trade magazines, others heard by word of mouth, and still others got private solicitations from federal agents. The 40 artists that signed on to the Reclamation art project benefited additionally from expense-paid tours of dam sites, including helicopter tours. Altogether they produced at least 355 paintings, sketches, etchings, and prints. Using public funds to tour public lands, labouring to discover “imaginative aspects” of engineering feats such as Hoover and Grand Coulee dams, the artists may have been lured by

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the promise of exposure in the National Gallery show opening, in the traveling exhibition that was to follow, and in the 73-page accompanying colour catalogue. The artists also would have gotten satisfaction from being chosen to produce public art, i.e., artworks that are “directed toward official activities: government-sponsored programs”¹ The resulting 1972 exhibition, like the catalogue that accompanied it, was entitled *The American Artist and Water Reclamation*.

Audiences attending the exhibition and reading the catalogue could be excused for assuming the artists had gravitated on their own toward the water-reclamation projects and the magnificent western landscapes that enshrine them. Nearly half the paintings, in the 70 pieces that toured the nation and came to represent the collection as a whole, disclose no dams or irrigation canals. Awesome scenery takes priority and shapes the more compelling works. The advertisement for “International Opportunities” avoided language that might invite social-realist aesthetics only, probably to forestall any assumptions that John DeWitt, the nominal organizer of the project,² hoped for Soviet-style art – didactic, representational, and proletarian. “It is stressed that nonfigurative or abstract subjects are as welcome as traditional figurative ones.” The ad included DeWitt’s contact information and probably was written by him. Significantly, his qualifications to organize the show included earlier work as a publicist. After the show opened in Washington, DC, it commenced an extended tour of the nation. Sponsored in part by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibitions Service, *The American Artist and Water Reclamation* came in 1974 to a college campus in Spokane, Washington. An art critic who reviewed the show there for the daily newspaper found very little to admire. “Why state-sponsored art has to be safe, uncontroversial and uninteresting is beyond me,” Allegra Berrian mused (16). Ms. Berrian concluded her subdued review in language that might seem facile and antique now, no matter how accurate. “The best reason to go see the exhibition,” she wrote, “is to look at some original artwork deemed worthy by the establishment.” As will be further discussed, government commissions had generated a purpose-driven art collection. The result was art that focused on the control of nature, art that functioned to promote the Bureau’s activities. Accordingly, it is possible to theorize the collection not only as an example of the Bureau of Reclamation’s self-promotion and “issues management” style of public relations, but also as an example of ecopornography, a concept more fully developed and theorized below.

An Embattled Agency

Today, the reasons the Bureau sought artistic aid seem plain to see. A division of the Department of the Interior, which manages public lands, Reclamation was under mounting pressure in the 1960s. Americans had made advances in environmental literacy and were regarding with a jaded gaze the thousands of major dams erected in the West since the agency’s founding at the turn of the century. Moreover, after the passage of landmark legislation – including the Wilderness Act of 1964, the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 – the Bureau found itself on the defensive, facing threats of litigation and bad faith.³ By 1973, when Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act and it was adopted into law, the legislative handwriting appeared clearly on the wall for all to see. The ESA would become the single most powerful legal tool in U.S. history to be wielded on behalf of the salmon, steelhead trout, and other riparian wildlife species threatened with extinction by dams in the West.

The Bureau's motives for commissioning public art under such historical conditions as these seem self-evident today. Hindsight also might explain why journalists and scholars have overlooked the hundreds of artworks the Bureau commissioned – overlooked them even after a scandal erupted in 1990, when many of those paintings were reported to have been lost, stolen or returned to the painters.⁴ That the U.S. government was exploiting well-known artists and its large budget, to try to exculpate itself during a bad time, must not have seemed newsworthy or significant enough to prompt any scholarly investigation to date. Recent knowledge and methodologies, though, suggest that the art program – in its peculiar fusion of aesthetics, patronage, rhetoric, and malfeasance – may yield itself to theoretical scrutiny at last and after all. Environmental historian Donald Worster has written, regarding the control of water in the American West, that it is “quite a story, one unsurpassed for greed, deception, violence, foolishness, and unbounded idealism” (346). The “imaginative aspects” of dams, as they came to be enunciated in paint by famous artists and in print by avid bureaucrats, helped the Bureau manage its troubled customer relations.

To confirm that public relations motivated BuRec to commission the art, one may look to the article published jointly in 1999 by Leslie Stinger, Bureau intern, and Bobbie Ferguson, “lead technical specialist for cultural resources, Technical Services Center, Bureau of Reclamation in Denver.” Written three decades after the inauguration of the collection that would be known as the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection, the article traced the program's history and speculated about its inception. Whether the authors openly acknowledged it or not, their article also studied customer-relations management, implying that the art program succeeded as an effort to patch up damage inflicted by propaganda conservationists had spread. At the same time that corporations were learning, government agencies were learning as well that they needed to move beyond primitive public relations, beyond the faces of healthy children smiling near churning turbines. As Patricia Paystrup has shown, “Faced with increasing public pressures in recent decades, business and industry turned to a more powerful form of public relations called issues management. Issues management is a strategic planning approach aimed at combating the public policy agendas of activist groups” (179). PR is still considered the runway to customer trust, and takes were as high at the time for the Interior Department as for the private sector. On the premise that a picture is worth a thousand words, pictorial surfaces of dam sites got higher priority than the emerging scientific research regarding evaporation rates, silt build-up, mud flats, salts, leaching, depletion of aquifers, imperiled species, lost habitats, and the subsidies that the public ends up paying to large farmers. Instead of portraying hydrological debacles, the artworks mostly position dams and reservoirs as prime recreation sites, i.e., as places to recharge the soul. So confident was the Bureau that its audiences would not see through its mild impostures that it links the article, “Portraits of Reclamation,” to its web site, along with 46 of the more glorious portraits inspired by water-impoundment projects. A curator of fine art, the Bureau seems to be implying, has nothing to hide.

As Stinger and Ferguson show, though, and as history has demonstrated, the Bureau was not interested in generating lasting masterpieces of art for posterity, nor in making work for starving artists as the New Deal had done, nor in assembling a precious art collection that its curators would watchfully and proudly see through the ages. The impetus was political not aesthetic, reactive not proactive. The authors acknowledged that the Bureau was reacting primarily to the conservation movement, whose “members were quite vocal in protesting Reclamation projects that they viewed as detrimental to the natural environment” (48).

Between 1968 and 1974, Stinger and Ferguson show, the agency had had to toe a tricky line of audience accommodation. It needed to satisfy not only a restive environmental community; it also had to keep an eye on “its traditional clients, the irrigators,” as well as those legislators in charge of funding the big dam programs – that is, the “congressmen and by extension, their constituents.” Stinger and Ferguson posed a rhetorical question: why did the Bureau choose to use visual art as the device to satisfy its constituencies? Why painting, “instead of, say, community service and educational programs?” The authors speculate about why the Bureau decided art would fill the bill better than education or service.

Although the thoughts behind the decision are unknown today there are possible answers. These include the permanence of art – a work of art continues to communicate long after both the artist and the patron, in this case Reclamation, are gone. There is also the multiplicity of readings inherent in a work of art. Although one message may dominate, there are many other ways to interpret and understand a painting, which allows dialogue to occur. The program organizers may have been aware of the tradition of western landscape painting; commissions such as these would have added another chapter in a recognizable school of painting, adding all sorts of secondary meanings and messages to the artwork. Perhaps the most compelling reason was that government-sponsored art programs seemed to be *en vogue* at the time (48).

The reasoning about allowing “dialogue to occur” would be more plausible if any pundits had seen fit to parse the art or assess it in historical perspective before now; in fact, though, no one but Stinger and Ferguson seems to have given the paintings a second glance or wasted any praise on them. The rationale that “government-sponsored art programs seemed to be *en vogue* at the time” is true – NASA had chartered its own art program in the early 1960s – but it oversimplifies a complex issue, for NASA was never tried and convicted in the courts of public opinion as the Bureau of Reclamation was. Finally, though, the rationale that the artworks build upon “the tradition of western landscape painting” is perceptive enough to prompt some elaboration, inasmuch as government commissions fueled the Reclamation art program, just as they fueled some of the most enduring western landscape art in the previous century, a tradition that has been theorized enough to open a deeper analysis here.

A brief illustration might suffice. *Flaming Gorge Overlook* (Fig.1) – one of 46 paintings linked in color on the Bureau of Reclamation site – positions a dam project as a tourist attraction. The setting is southern Wyoming. Four of the fifteen featureless people appear to be dressed in prison stripes. All of them face the dam. They ride bicycles, stroll, meditate, practice photography, and paint from easels. The watercolorist, Dong Kingman, was a veteran of the WPA arts program. As in *The Oxbow* (1836) by Thomas Cole (a picture that shows Cole and his easel in the foreground, where he is sheltering from a storm), Kingman may be depicting himself at Flaming Gorge in the act of painting. Given the details that both pieces share – of water, storm clouds, and blasted trees in the left foregrounds – Kingman seems to be echoing Cole, although his landscape is much subdued. Power lines and concrete stand in for Cole’s meandering river and vegetation. These imagistic parallels recall a quotation from Aldo Leopold, who wrote in his Foreword to *A Sand County Almanac* that “a shift in values can be achieved by reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free” (xix). Only in this case, the “shift in values” has been inverted to reveal a new relationship between nature and art – one that measures the natural against its representation.

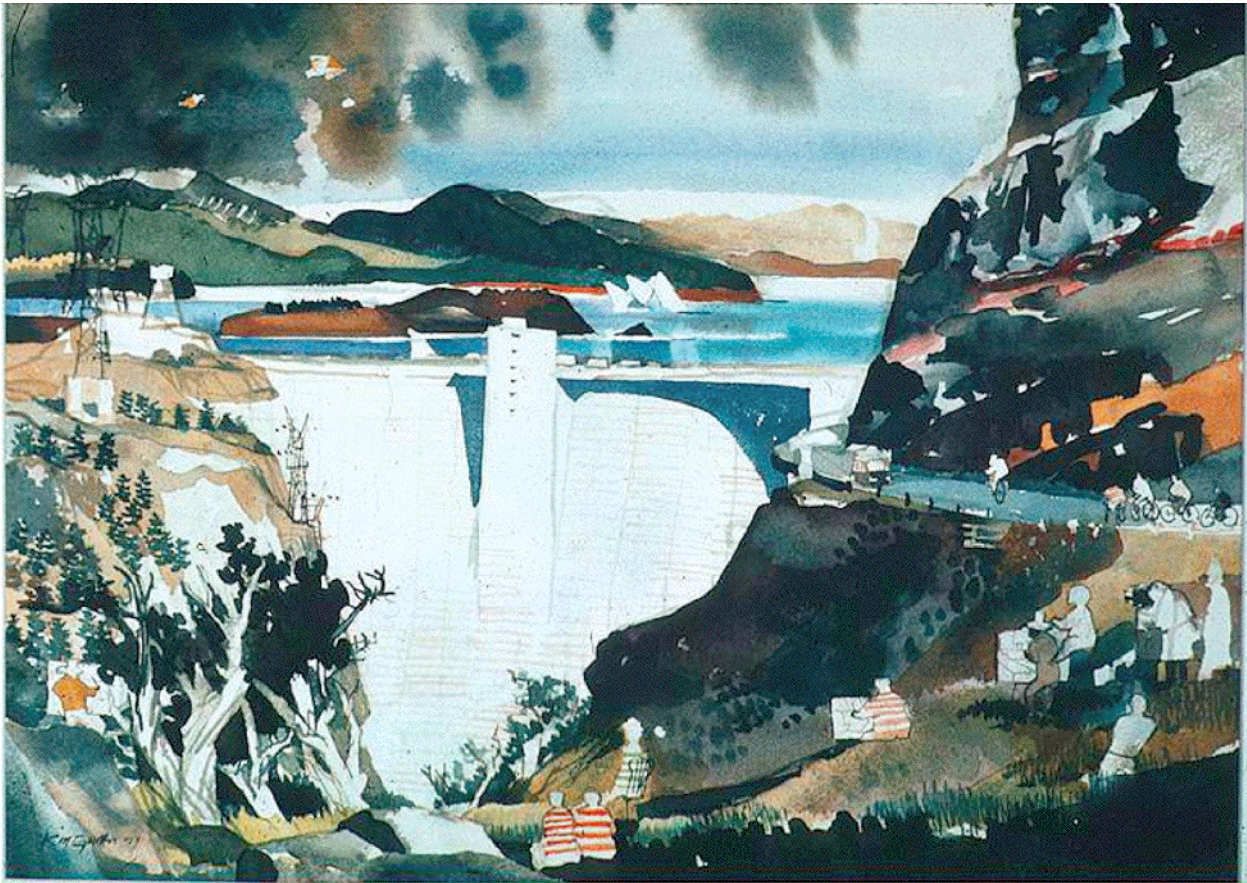


Figure 1: *Flaming Gorge Overlook*, by Dong Kingman (b. 1911).
Watercolor, 22" X 30," of Flaming Gorge Dam, Utah.

Overtures to Sublimity

In *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*, Barbara Novak observes incisively that the nineteenth century's "apparently innocent nationalism, so mingled with moral and religious ideas, could survive into another century as an imperial iconography" (7). That observation rings true for the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection, which arguably portrays an empire in iconographic terms. It builds an iconography of western public lands that have been "reclaimed" to advance and harmonize with Manifest Destiny. To make manifest the national fate to extend from sea to shining sea, the innocent nationalism that fueled expansion had to *take back* from nature, and from the indigenous people, lands that primordial forces long before had claimed. What preceded that reclamation – that taking back – would have been unacceptable to portray, even though there was narrative precedent in Thomas Cole's *Progress of Civilization* series. In that series Cole depicted humankind progressing from a savage state, to scattered communities, to a flourishing civilization, and down into a state of declension or decay where artifacts and memorials are laid waste.

One of the Reclamation paintings proves exceptionally reminiscent of the Hudson River principles that focus Hughes, Novak, and other commentators on nineteenth-century American art. It is *Olympus Dam* (Fig. 2), by Xavier Gonzalez. It recalls *Cotopaxi* by Frederic Edwin Church, whose trips to Ecuador in 1853 and 1857 resulted in paintings of that volcano in 1855 and 1862. In one of those pieces by Church, the mountain is erupting or smoking; in the other it lies dormant. The Olympus Dam, in the Gonzalez tempera, emerges from a wash of earth tones in the landscape, surmounted only by a snow-covered peak in the distance, Longs Peak in Colorado. In the painting it emerges like a peep of heaven, thus performing a trope on Greek mythology, in which Mount Olympus is the home of the twelve gods. The dam, what one sees of it, scarcely visible amid the dominant rocks and water, shares qualities of ancient columns that further enforce the classical age. Those suggestive columns appear to be buttressing Longs Peak, as though the engineering feat were serving as a foundation for the mountain's grandeur. The painting elevates the dam to an altitude that rivals Longs Peak, exalting it above the spindly aspen saplings and granite that govern the foreground, through which an outlet stream flows. The painting exalts the dam as if the dam were a variant of paradise. In doing so, it envisions an imperial icon made from base concrete. The painting is an oblong lozenge, its soft edges serving to soothe the tension of cultural conflict that occasioned the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection.



Figure 2: *Olympus Dam*, by Xavier Gonzalez (1898-1993).
Tempera, 21.5" X 30," of Olympus Dam, Colorado.

In serving a healing or soothing function, the painting effectively reprises (minus any irony) "The Anecdote of the Jar" by American poet Wallace Stevens. The chief irony in this poem is the

animated subservience of nature in the face of a technological artifact: the jar. Nature fairly genuflects as it pays obeisance to the force of a common canning jar. To suggest that a simple jar should have this power is improbable, hyperbolic, ironic. There is little evidence of irony in *Olympus Dam* by Xavier Gonzales. The actual Olympus Dam built by the Bureau of Reclamation forms Lake Estes, a major recreation reservoir that glimmers dully in the painting's middle ground. Dams are focal points in the landscapes they appropriate; like Stevens' jar, they are products of technology that dominate and constrain ecological processes. A technological artifact, the jar stands as a synecdoche for the entirety of technological processes that gave rise to the jar, thus demonstrating in humankind a virtual rage for order. While the painting elevates the dam to a level that represents or at least suggests a higher moral order, the poem elevates the jar to an amoral supremacy above the land. The massive dam approaches divinity, while the minuscule jar supplants it.

The West has been subject to frequent assertions that it functions for the rest of the world as a resource colony, a far-flung part of a continental realm (see, e.g., Robbins 59-82). Bruce Babbitt, former Secretary of the Interior and Governor of Arizona, stated it this way: "Traditionally, the American West has been something of a third-world economy based on resource extraction" (qtd. in Wilkinson ix). In that respect the public-relations makeover the BuRec paintings aimed to help bring about – the pictorial recommendations of remade landscapes that they embody and imply – was not only a response to ideology. It was also meant for more than quelling strident environmentalist complaints. Broader public interests were involved. The economic fabric of western rural regions had been tattered by traditional conditions of cut and run, slash and burn, boom and bust. Federal agencies abetted those patterns, as it still does, via subsidies. In this respect the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection aimed to effect more than simple damage control; it was reacting to more than the legislative power of environmentalism and the emerging scientific consensus that enabled it. Technology or applied science, especially federally subsidized technology, was implicated in negative models of failed sustainability. In his summary of these historical patterns of exploitation, Richard Lowitt left the federal presence off the accountability list when he noted that, "In the West, thanks to advanced technology, spectacular engineering feats, and ill-conceived agricultural practices, extractive enterprises of all kinds left in their wake devastated areas and declining communities that benefited briefly, if at all, from these corporate and metropolitan-based endeavors" (131). BuRec, just as much as corporations or metropolises, practiced unsustainable development under a guise of public works, and in that respect it may have served as a model for businesses and cities. Using the rallying cries of cheap power, flood control, recreation access, and economic development, the agency carried the cooperation of technically savvy corporations and western politicians, entities that sought in common to profit from the abundant natural resources and the federal largesse. Only in retrospect – only since revisionist historians, novelists, and other intellectuals began to take the measure of these dynamics – has the federal presence come to be examined with much critical sophistication. Harmonizing with Bernard Devoto, Rick Bass, Edward Abbey, and Marc Reisner – to mention only the most vocal of the agency's critics – Wallace Stegner maintained of the Bureau that, "From the beginning, its aim has been not the preservation but the remaking – in effect the mining – of the West" (44). Inasmuch as Reclamation's aims were imperial, then, its water projects warranted celebrations laved with solemnity and pomp. Its projects needed to be dedicated, honored, and rendered iconic by artworks that might forever grace the nation and be displayed as trophies by the federal government to justify its expansionist claims to fame. Weighing on the government, too, was the *noblesse oblige* to patronize its working artists, and in so doing inspire testimonials to the nation's greatness. High dams, arguably the grandest U.S. counterparts to Middle Eastern mosques and European cathedrals, came to serve quite well as monuments to empire.⁵ The Grand Coulee Dam, built by BuRec during World War II, is

the largest concrete structure in North America. Dam technology, then, perpetuated the tenets of Manifest Destiny and American exceptionalism.

Themes of American exceptionalism had pervaded the continental sense of self since John Winthrop preached his famous sermon aboard the *Arbella*, urging his fellow Puritans migrating with him to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 to see themselves and their experiment as conspicuous and exemplary, as “a city on a hill.” Exceptionalism helps shape religions, based on faith that the Creator had selected the North American continent to be the culminating civilization in world history. If Nature had accorded American genius everything it needed to ennoble itself, natural resources fittingly would be boundless and inexhaustible. Wide, fertile, this world without end warranted a correspondingly magnanimous amen, a generosity of the spirit, a national dream of development and growth. Paul Bunyan, Davy Crockett, John Henry, and Mike Fink – demigods who tamed rivers, razed forests, and primed paths for civilization – were precursors to the BuRec’s technology and the bureaucrats who applied the science to help dams come to pass. An exceptional people and land demanded a sublime art, one that made the perceptive painter working in the nineteenth century an amanuensis to deity, “God’s stenographer,” in the view of Robert Hughes. As Barbara Novak held, “Since the landscape was a holy text which revealed truth and also offered it for interpretation, artists who painted the landscape had a choice of what to transcribe and interpret” (7). They transcribed and interpreted an exceptionalist ethos.

That held true for commissioned painters as well. They, too, were free to read the landscape, although human technology and its outgrowths were apt to be perceived as most holy under the directive of a Reclamation patronage. That is, the agent shaped the message: the means foretold the end. The artists commissioned by the government were painting *de facto* landscape histories. “The overtures to sublimity in America’s early history painting were readily transferred to the landscape, and [they] lead to a study of artistic rhetoric, that style of formal declamation which is the appropriate mode for public utterance” (Novak 19). To be held up as sublime is to be inspiring, in the etymological sense of God’s respiration, God’s breath, washing across the tender recipient.

Government art commissions began in the 19th century; consequences of their work varied. Some artists played a part in exploration, some had a hand in conservation, and still others promoted tourism. A key critical distinction is whether the paintings resulting from those forays have lasting value or instead are documentary (a discussion to be taken up in later pages). Just as the BuRec underwrote the paintings of its dam projects from 1968 to 1974, for example, the Union Pacific Railroad underwrote the travels of landscape painter Thomas Moran on the journey of 1871 by Ferdinand Vandeveer Hayden. While the railroad hoped Moran’s work might help generate new tourist destinations, Hayden used Moran’s watercolors as tools to lobby Congress for the protection of Yellowstone (the earliest national park) and thus prompted a belief that Moran himself had conservationist leanings. “*The Grand Cañon of the Yellowstone* was the first painting ever purchased by the U.S. government, having been acquired soon after the passage of the act making Yellowstone a national park” (Oravec 59). Such dynamic interchanges between conservation and expansionism are a neglected aspect of art history.

As early as the 1850s, “well-known names begin to appear on the list of artists-explorers. John F. Kensett went west in 1854, and again in 1857, 1868, and 1870. Albert Bierstadt made the first of several journeys to the Rockies with Colonel Frederick Lander’s expedition in 1859”

(Novak 144). The West thus became a proving ground for the earliest government patronage of visual arts on the North American continent. In 1853 Theodore Winthrop (two centuries after his Puritan ancestor, en route to Massachusetts Bay, preached his shipboard doctrine of American exceptionalism) traveled the Cascades and Northern Rockies. Following in the wake of a railroad survey, Winthrop noted in one of his books, “Wood-choppers had passed through the forest, like a tornado, making a broad belt of confusion” (70). A champion of progress like Winthrop, though, had to defend “the destruction that precedes reconstruction,” the devastation that technology so conveniently abetted and availed. Private rail lines would soon afterward transect bison calving grounds and transport dudes to the Great Plains to shoot the beasts from the safety of train decks. The BuRec sought similarly to make nature safe for humankind when it brought technology to bear on floods that altered wild rivers.

While the BuRec used art and artifice to manage its issues – to effect an “issues management” style in its relationship with the public – its great dam projects themselves were forms of artifice. They artificially altered ecology and landforms by the devices of engineering. To reverence BuRec dam projects using the aesthetics of artistic sublimity, then, was tantamount to reverencing technocracy, a term used here to denote a philosophy that advocates the enlisting of a bureaucracy of highly trained engineers, scientists or technicians to run society or government. In the U.S., the only serious competitor with the BuRec for the title of top technocratic bureaucracy is the Army Corps of Engineers, and the competitive fervor that drove the two to build new dams furnishes much of the cynical entertainment value in Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert*.

The new places on public lands (the dams, as well as the paintings that resulted from the attention lavished on dams) had to be acknowledged formally, had to be dedicated to confer monumental sweep. Formal acknowledgments and dedications also served another function: to extinguish memories of (and desires for) pre-dam places. Had the public not laid eyes on a certain ecosystem prior to the incursion of a dam, then public memory, expectation, and desire in large part might be shaped by those artifices the public had beheld in museums, galleries, catalogues, and poster reproductions of the Reclamation Art Collection. Given away and sold in 1972, the poster reproductions were given away and sold again in 2002 to commemorate the centennial of the Bureau’s founding. Reproductions (virtual realities or “virtualities,” to coin a phrase) supplanted the original landscapes. In his Introduction to *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, William Cronon describes such exchanges this way: “Once we believe we know what nature *ought* to look like – once our vision of its ideal form becomes a moral or cultural imperative – we can remake it so completely that we become altogether indifferent or even hostile toward its prior condition” (40). So the hopes of promoters have always inclined, in colonial times and in recent decades. Promoters aspire to redirect attention so fully – through language, music, and visual imagery – that artifice or projection might displace prior conditions, the undeveloped or natural state.⁶

By these means the BuRec paintings were from their inception, and remain today, promotional instruments. In “Telling Tales on Canvas,” Cronon wrote more to the purpose regarding the use of visual arts: “Booster images are ubiquitous in western art, so much so that they occur at every stage of the frontier process and often reflect promotional expectations far more accurately than they record historical landscapes” (44). For many of the landscapes portrayed in BuRec-commissioned art, we have only that one commissioned portrait of that particular dammed place; there is no record of the place before the dam. Just as an artist’s rendering of a resort or housing development helps persuade potential clients or buyers, Reclamation artworks

often idealize western landscapes whose realities are more sterile, intrusive, institutional or stark. To consider BuRec leaders in step with boosters and promoters is to see them in a brave new light.

In the Eyes of the Beholder

Aesthetic measures often rise to the surface when partisans assess dams. Just as engineers and bureaucrats as a rule find dam designs attractive to behold, so environmentalists in general think that they will never see a dam as lovely as a stream. The classic statement of the environmentalist position on this matter is Aldo Leopold's. "A thing is right," he wrote, "when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (262). As Anne Marie Todd phrased it in *Environmental Ethics*, paraphrasing Leopold without acknowledging the debt, "An ecological aesthetic emphasizes the interconnectedness of ecosystems, linking nature's beauty to its ecological sustainability" (91). Todd also appealed to Aristotle to argue that perceptions often regulate ethics (90). Humans are sight animals, and the ways we see are culturally determined to greater or lesser degrees, or so do many social scientists believe. In such philosophical contexts, then, the Reclamation art program may be seen as an agency effort to recover common ground (if not moral high ground) by claiming beauty for its water-development projects. Perhaps, leaders of the agency may have reasoned, if it could regulate perceptions of its dams by placing its commissioned paintings before the public eye, then it could in turn regulate the ethical responses to those dams. In *The American Artist and Water Reclamation* catalogue, and in the touring exhibition that it accompanied, the agency endeavored to show (by the most pleasing aesthetic means available for commissioning) that excavation sites, dams, penstocks, spillways, batch plants, turbines, power-lines, trash-racks, irrigated fields, reservoirs, and feeder canals could be things of beauty. Such artwork constitutes an "aesthetic turn in green marketing," as Todd titles her article, an artistic innovation that gained government funding and succeeded in ways corporate and municipal organizations would emulate in years to come.

Floyd Dominy, Commissioner of the Bureau of Reclamation from 1959 to 1969, also made personal forays into aesthetics-as-marketing when he wrote a pictorial tract in 1965 and funded the production of a short film in 1969, both of them tendentiously entitled *Lake Powell: Jewel of the Colorado*. (Lake Powell, remember, is the reservoir formed behind Glen Canyon Dam.) However, neither tract nor film holds up as an example of effective PR nearly as well as the series of paintings and drawings DeWitt would later spearhead, even though it could be argued that they did influence the direction the BuRec painters would later take. The twenty-eight-page *Jewel* tract contains thirty glorious color photos, along with sundry black-and-whites and maps of the manmade lake, which extends 186 miles into Utah from the dam itself in Arizona. The tract also contains instances of poetry and prose. Jared Farmer called the former "engineered poems," which (according to an internal memo from the Bureau of Reclamation) were meant "to combat the corrosive influence" of the commercially successful Sierra Club coffee-table books that focused public attention on ecological losses in Glen Canyon and on threats to the Grand Canyon (149). Printed in 63,000 copies, the *Jewel* tract was given to lawmakers and foreign dignitaries and ended by being investigated as illegal lobbying (Farmer 150-51).

The film version of the tract, released four years later in 1969, is twenty-eight minutes long. It opens with the words, "A winding sheet of blue, stretching across parts of Utah and Arizona, is Lake Powell." (A good editor would have recognized that "a winding sheet" is a garment to wrap

a corpse in before it is buried.) As the film advances, a fantasy unfolds slowly. A family of four camps and romps through the wonders that are Lake Powell. The original classical score, composed for the film, segues into jazzy riffs when footage pops onscreen of fish being dropped into Lake Powell from the air by floatplane. Very soon, a mounted Indian appears dressed in red shirt, white pants, and a white headscarf tied behind. The solemn voiceover reminds viewers that this is the “land of the Navaho.” The Indian looks approvingly at the skiers being towed behind a boat below. “Into his land came Lake Powell, which he has woven into his pattern of ancient ways.” He leans over on his horse from atop a precipice and watches the family; he reappears at film’s end as if to assure viewers he is still content with his ancestral homeland. When the imagery and language move to the dam, the narrator’s voice waxes sonorous and inspirational. “Impressive in its silent strength, the dam, with its ten million tons of concrete, rises 710 feet from sandstone bedrock.”



Figure 3: *Glen Canyon Dam*, by Norman Rockwell (1895-1978).
Oil on canvas, 51” x 77,” of Glen Canyon Dam, Arizona.

The narrator names the various jobs and jobbers, at the same time footage of the excavation makes it seem as if building a dam were a traditional occupation, as if custom and culture were involved. The film segues to spectacled men in thin black ties and short-sleeve dress shirts – engineers who start the turbines moving. Scenes of pleasant camping and beach frolics follow, with fishing, bikinis, and boating abundant. A Lee’s Ferry history lesson includes a tour boat with

“Wahweap Marina” painted on the side, then more bikinis, stringers of bass, filets frying. Inspirational music leads to abstract ripples in the water, paired with pictographs, sandstone patterns, and a history lesson on Wild West miners. The family crouches flat to drink from Lake Powell then engages in a water fight. The musical score moves from jaunty classical to meditative when the “wonder” of the Rainbow Bridge appears – a natural stone arch whose ready access had become a source of much contention. “Now easily accessible by powerboat,” it was seen only by Indians before the dam. Lake Powell serves a healthy leveling function, the film implies, allowing everyone to view the bridge now.

The red-shirted Indian of this 1969 promotional film is worth pausing over, for he would appear also in the oil-on-canvas painting by Norman Rockwell, entitled *Glen Canyon Dam* (see Fig. 3). His location in the painting, high above the dam, and his red shirt are unlikely to have been coincidental. In the Rockwell painting he appears with his family: wife on horseback, son beside him, scrawny dog taking up the rear. Members of this ensemble – threatened with extinction, pushed to the continent’s edge – peer across a dizzying expanse toward the dam face. Their body language is more akin to resignation or forced cohabitation than to approval. The dog cringes; two hawks soar above the gulf. Life goes on, even in the aftermath of massive technology. “Over five million cubic yards of concrete make up the dam and power plant,” one History of Lake Powell web site boasts; “– that’s equal to enough to build a four-lane highway stretching from Phoenix, Arizona to Chicago, Illinois.” Unlike the BuRec-produced film, where the dam has been “woven into his pattern of ancient ways,” the Indians in the Rockwell painting seem hindered by the concrete monolith in their way. Nomadic people historically, they see their travel baffled, slowed, constricted.

A related American painting, *The Last of the Race* (Fig. 4), by Tompkins Matteson, also depicts an Indian family group, including a dog, looking down from atop a precipice. Again the elevation suggests a moral order that has grown irrelevant. In its subject’s vantage point, too, the Rockwell piece bears comparison to John Mix Stanley’s *Oregon City on the Willamette River* (ca. 1850), in which an Indian couple overlooks a broad valley that has grown a number of white homes. Rockwell was working within an identifiable tradition by positioning his Indian family in precisely the way he did.

In the essay “Telling Tales on Canvas,” William Cronon aptly recognized in such representations an “icon that is repeated over and over in nineteenth-century frontier imagery: Indians witnessing a landscape of progress that also marks the end of their familiar world” (70). Like James Earle Fraser’s 18-foot plaster *The End of the Trail* (Fig. 5), such pieces are apt to be read one way by the dominant culture and another by the marginalized one, either as respectful memorials to a valiant race of people, or as reminders of conquest and defeat for those same people. Mediating between the two extremes may be a kind of “imperialist nostalgia,” a yearning for bygone times that absolves participants from complicity and guilt in the displacement of native people and species; this theory originated with anthropologist Renato Rosaldo (69). Norman Rockwell, borrowing imagery from the BuRec film, brought a dose of cold reality to the upbeat acquiescence depicted by the agency. (That film might very well have been required viewing for artists commissioned to portray water reclamation, as it was for John McPhee while gathering material for the book that would become *Encounters with the Archdruid*.) Still and all, Rockwell’s Indians appear to be survivors – able to surmount the odds of conquest, able to persist and survive.



Figure 4: *The Last of His Race*, Tompkins Matteson (1847).

A New Critical Framework

Having reviewed some of the background pertinent to the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection, and having touched on several of the paintings, one may turn again to the particular artworks and adopt a critical tool known as ecocriticism. This deliberately diffuse approach to the arts and culture is tough to typify, for it is united not by a theory but by a focus: the environment. Simon C. Estok offers a definition. Ecocriticism's chief goal is "analyzing the function – thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise – of the natural environment, or aspects of it, represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds" (16-17). Ecological criticism, in short, studies how texts reflect attitudes toward nature.

The semantic range of "texts" is wide. Texts may vary from a volume of poems, to a film, to a set of government documents. Texts can be verbal, visual, cultural or musical. Taking the BuRec artworks as texts, we must acknowledge an insurmountable difficulty in detaching them from their historical contexts. Those historical contexts include the epiphanies in environmental literacy that the American public was undergoing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, the culture battles that helped to prompt the commissions given to the artists, the need for the Bureau of Reclamation to mitigate the reputation it was gaining, the vogue in government-sponsored art collections or patronage, and the willingness of Commissioner Dominy to spend agency funds to make public-relations gains. Taken together, the mass of related texts that comprise the Art

Collection may be seen as one cultural text connected by thin membranes. Having established the artistic contexts, then, one may more narrowly refine the critical focus.



Figure 5: *The End of the Trail*, James Earle Fraser (1915).
Plaster, 18'h.

That focus is best expressed by the neologism *ecopornography*. While it has yet to enter standard dictionaries, it is current in key academic communities today, particularly in communication studies, marketing, literary studies, visual arts, and environmental studies. It originated with adman-cum-author Gerry Mander, who used it first in the periodical *Communication and Arts* in 1972, a date that makes the inceptions of the Bureau of

Reclamation Art Collection and the neologism *ecoporn*. At first blush the concept may seem trendy, easy to dismiss as the latest flourish of political correctness, but it perfectly fills an empty language function and is too important to reject as simply flip. Language is dynamic, changing and adapting constantly to admit new words, and to widen or narrow the meanings or semantics of other words. At this early stage in its development, *ecoporn* carries a moral smack and a visual edge; it disparages the analogous exploitations of nature and the human body. The word suffers from certain semantic noise, i.e., what “occurs when people attach different meanings to words or phrases, or when a communicator’s message is poorly worded or presented” (Demers 216). Besides the major weight of negative connotations the concept of *ecoporn* carries, for instance, it also has to shoulder a divergent European meaning that is largely positive. Practitioners of European *ecoporn* are second-language speakers of English, and perhaps for that reason “Fuck for Forest,” founded in Norway and based now in Berlin, maintains a members-only website and purveys what it calls *ecopornography* to save trees.

Straight porn and *ecoporn* both tend to objectify for aesthetic pleasure, for audience approval, or for commercial gain. *Ecoporn* resembles human porn in that “it masks sordid agendas with illusions of beauty and perfection,” wrote Bart Welling (paraphrasing Mander). In his essay in a forthcoming anthology of scholarship on visual ecology, Welling asserts that *ecopornographic* images “work to conceal both the material circumstances of their creation by humans and whatever impact humans may have had on the landforms and animals they depict” (7). To propose to apply this concept to the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection is to call upon the consensus of historians who assert that the pattern of rampant dam building in the decades after World War II was, in retrospect, ill advised and unsustainable. Whether the commissioned paintings masked a truly “sordid agenda” would require deeper research, particularly into archival materials, than this brief introduction to the collection may undertake. Whether many of the paintings worked to conceal human impacts on the environment, however, is a question we may address with greater certitude. The expansionist ethos was alive far into the twentieth century, even if reverential sentiments found their focus no longer in godhead but instead in humanism and human technology.

Like human porn, *ecoporn* traffics in staged intimacies or ecstasies. In the visual media, it may deploy provocative lighting, tricks with perspective, and close-up shots to enhance and tantalize. As it applies to the BuRec paintings, such staging is implicit in the language of Stinger and Ferguson. They write of Reclamation as the “sitter,” a willing subject that the sundry artists primed, posed, prompted, and represented selectively, subjectively, even seductively. The root word of *ecopornography* has an enormously broad (and growing) semantic range. There is current in usage today, for example, “the pornography of poverty,” a phrase used by ad people and public-interest organizations around the globe. There is the implicit pornography of meat, as used to study the relations between carnivory and male dominance (Adams). There is also “the pornography of war” (Engel). All such usages imply degrees of titillation and exploitation. Pornography itself has been defined variously, but it typically involves morally objectionable depictions of sexual domination and degradation. Applying a hermeneutics of suspicion like this one to a heterogeneous series of paintings necessitates a disclaimer: those paintings that most lend themselves to *ecopornographic* interpretations have been chosen for purposes of illustration here. Additionally, it must be admitted, a number of the artworks will be found pleasing in their own right, apart from any agency agenda, nor should analytical intention ever squelch the possibility of beauty. Unyoking these artworks from their cultural context, though, removes them from historical narrative and from scientific understanding alike. If Bureau of Reclamation artworks incompletely disclose ecological contexts, that failure of disclosure is due not to hidden government agendas exclusively but also to limitations of the media and to

constraints of the commissions. Just as human pornographers would find no benefit in telling the histories of their subjects or portraying the indignities they suffered, paintings added to the permanent collection of the Bureau would not risk portrayal of the ecological damage created by a dam, for such a portrayal would be counter-productive to the intended message. But as public art, commissioned by an agency, displayed in catalogues and museums and web sites, these artworks do bear messages.

In media studies, ecoporn is closely allied with greenwashing, a coinage that enjoys wider currency. Such a formation is called a portmanteau word. In *Advertising Annual* in 2004, Ellen Shapiro wrote: "The word 'greenwash,' the dictionary tells us, is formed from two existing words, 'green,' committed to the environment, and 'whitewash,' a deliberate attempt by concealment to clear the reputation of a person or an institution" (196). Corporations endeavor to cleanse themselves of culpability by making over their images in other hues. Like a moth at rest on hickory bark, they camouflage themselves. Such analogies, however, break down when one considers the active rather than the passive nature of greenwashing enterprises. Closely allied to such organizational practices is astroturf marketing, so named for the ersatz grassroots surface it displays. As Michael E. Kraft and Diana Wuertz note, it is "often called astroturf campaigning because it is said to create the illusion of public opposition, when in fact most of the letters and telephone calls are arranged by public relations firms employed by industry for this purpose" (119 n. 2). Again, the walls between government strategies and corporate approaches totter when one critically examines the practices that the Bureau of Reclamation pioneered as early as the 1960s, practices that later came to be mainstreamed. Such practices would be less apt to succeed today due to the greater sophistication of many viewers, and due to their growing visual and environmental literacies. From the best greenwashing and astroturf campaigns, though, a protective coloration still ensues, a green façade that makes it harder for detractors to single out the most offensive anti-environmental organizations for castigation or blame. Whether it is alluding to public relations, to art, to literature or to landscape photography, ecopornography has pejorative connotations. Significantly, the seminal statements that most help quiet the semantic noise of *greenwashing* and *ecopornography* originated from publications in the advertising industry.

Reading the Art Collection

To return to the BuRec collection, it would be well to recall the paintings by Kingman, Gonzalez, and Rockwell. All three depict dams. *Flaming Gorge Overlook* by Dong Kingman makes the dam a site where tourists assemble. They paint, play, and engage in recreation. The dam resembles a giant easel, its concrete edifice a screen to project human desires and expectations vis-à-vis the landscape. Films and laser light shows, in fact, long have been projected using dams as screens. At the massive Grand Coulee Dam, which Woody Guthrie immortalized in song, people come from miles around to take in colorful shows. Both the BuRec and the Army Corps of Engineers spend lavishly to promote tourism. The painter Dong Kingman was exaggerating, but not by much, when he sketched in more than a dozen walkers, bikers, painters, and photographers in his watercolor. Like Cole's famous oxbow – a ready emblem of restraint and control – the dam drawn by Kingman brings nature into submission. Much as a purveyor of human porn might ask the subject of his portrait to feign passivity, Kingman made the sedate environment of his dam appear docile and inviting. The various lacunae – e.g., the species indigenous to the region, the tons of built-up silt, and the held-back current – all have

been made to submit to human economics and will. Lilliputian humans crawl across the body of the subdued beast.

The *Olympus Dam* tempera by Xavier Gonzalez likewise makes the dam an object of aesthetic pleasure, one that is ineffable, ethereal, and detached, so that the dam appears to have no connection to the massive granite blocks in the foreground. As if it were floating on clouds, the dam is *in* this world but not *of* it, an artifice, an ideal devoutly to be wished for. Hydrology and other sciences tell us, however, that all dams accumulate silt, which backs up behind the dams and in doing so suspends key ecological processes. In time, a given dam might or might not fill up with silt and no longer function properly. In short, heavy geological facts belie the lofty, airy, delicate quality of the Gonzalez picture. Captions in the catalogue admit as much, though to gain an ecological understanding one has to read them backwards, so to speak. The caption for the watercolor *River Bottom* by Lee Weiss offers an example: "The Green River in northern Utah, murky and opaque before construction of Flaming Gorge Dam, now runs clear over the rocky streambed."⁷ Such captions privilege the visual and ignore the ecological fact that the dam under portrayal now is gathering and capturing all the silt that the current used to carry downstream, silt that once was deposited as rich alluvial soil. As for the Rockwell painting, it is one of few extant pieces to include humans in its depiction of a BuRec dam site, and it is the only piece to feature Indians in *The American Artist and Water Reclamation* exhibition from 1972.



Fig. 6: *Campsite at Dawn*, by Dean Fausett (b. 1913).
Oil on panel, 48" x 96," of Lake Powell, Utah.

Rockwell's *Glen Canyon Dam* canvas forces viewers to see the dam from the Indian perspective, both physically and philosophically. The dam is a tourniquet, a technological constraint that any fish remaining downstream will not get past. From the Indian perspective, the engineering achievement may be considered to be manipulative and abusive, a sacrilege, a

scar that will necessitate decades to heal. Still, Rockwell's painting gives every indication that the Indians' resolution to survive will serve them in good stead.⁸ Ecocriticism invites alternative readings, perhaps from the perspective of indigenous peoples, perhaps from the angle of science and its methodologies. Nothing would have compelled the BuRec-commissioned artists to paint what lurked below the surfaces of those dam projects. Inasmuch as agents are apt to shape the content of agency-commissioned artwork, and insofar as means tend to foretell ends, then any art that offered negative commentary in the process of depicting the "imaginative aspects of the Reclamation Program" would almost certainly have been excluded from the exhibition and catalogue in 1972, if not also from the mismanaged permanent collection of some 355 or more pieces.

Lake Powell, due to its high profile in the 1960s-era pile-up that damaged the Bureau of Reclamation, comes in for an unusual number of artworks in the collection. *Campsite at Dawn* (Fig. 6) an oil-on-panel piece by Dean Fausett, strives to show just how placid and serene the reservoir named Lake Powell could be. As the title suggests – and as liner notes included on a poster of the piece confirm – the painting depicts a site where the artist camped as part of his commission with the agency. That site is near the location where the Escalante River enters Lake Powell, a river that would itself become a flashpoint in later battles between the state of Utah and the federal government, once President Clinton, in one of his last acts in office, protected or set aside miles of public lands as a national monument. In the close foreground of the painting, a half-dozen stalks of yucca bloom. Their tall, white flowers, ascending in clusters up the plant stems, resemble smoke in the middle ground, where tents are pitched and boats pulled up. Most remarkable about this painting is its use of light. On the water of Lake Powell, on the cliffs in the distance, and on the wispy clouds, the early-morning glow appears apocalyptic. Exceptionalism is implicit in the scene. As if God had parted the clouds to favor the camps and the dam, a space in the sky above the campsite deepens to an inky blue. Using Hudson River School aesthetics in its landscape scale and its lighting, the piece resembles an overexposed photo, too flooded with a too-stark radiance, as if illumined by a nuclear explosion.⁹ The clouds in the painting seem blasted or blown, though there are no ripples on the lake. The liner notes, on the poster for the painting, slip in a none-too-subtle PR plug: "It is typical of the magnificent scenery which is attracting recreation-seekers to Lake Powell from all over the United States." Overlays of language and paint drive home the PR message hard.

Some paintings from the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection collapse the twin meanings of ecopornography into one. *Sealing the Crevice* (Fig. 7) by Fletcher Martin represents (the caption on the website says) the act of "Sealing a fault in the granite wall of the forebay reservoir for the Grand Coulee Third powerplant, Columbia Basin Project." But the painting is more complicated than the engineering sketch it first suggests. On a level of pure imagery, the crack is vaginal, it must be said, just as the adjuncts of the crevice have been given the shape of legs. Whether the actual fissure or crevice at Grand Coulee Dam looked the same is immaterial; the fact is that the watercolorist cast his geological subject matter in terms of human anatomy. Compositionally speaking, the legs funnel the viewer's vision down to the genitalia, just as gravity channels water down to deepen and enlarge a stone gap. Not in invitation, but in voyeuristic prurience, the eye is made to follow the line. But this watercolor painting offers another perspective as well. Regarding the painting from the angle of vision of the men who are engaged in sealing the crevice – an angle that the piece invites – necessitates an eye-level view of the sexual crevice. From their angle the gaze trends upward along the basalt legs that rest clinically in the air, as if the feet (off the frame) had been positioned in stirrups in a gynecologist's chair. Instead of the tools a gynecologist might use, a crane, a truck, and a massive plug are sealing the crevice or crack. What coloring there is in the painting lends itself to an anatomical understanding. The

striations on the crevice walls imply the muscles in a set of thighs and buttocks, while the crevice in red suggests flesh. Or perhaps that red at the center suggests the bloody mysteries of menstruation, one of the most complex of subjects in male art. To speculate why the crevice (crack, fissure, fault) should need to be sealed would plunge one interpretively into the work of Freud, Lacan, and psychological scholars and critics.

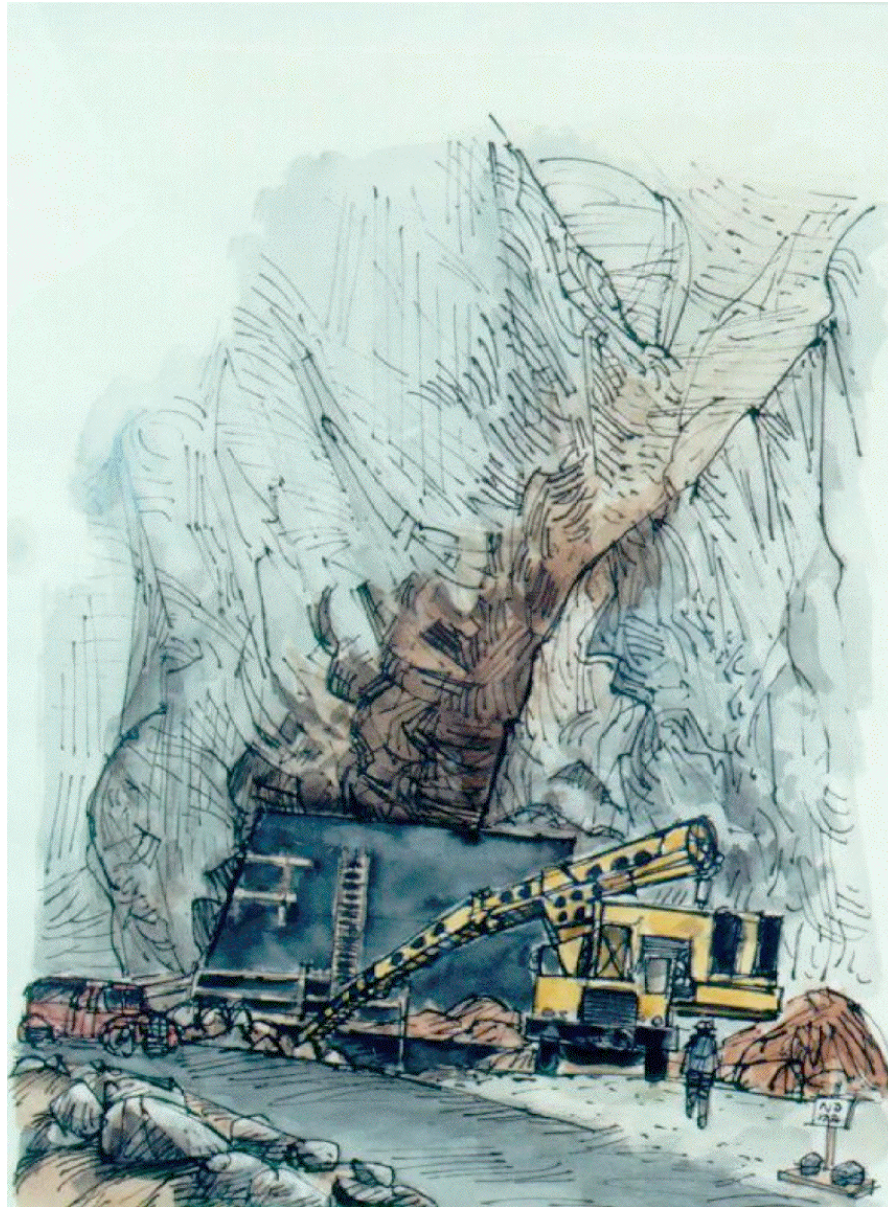


Figure 7: *Sealing the Crevice*, by Fletcher Martin (1904-79).
watercolour on paper, 28 ½" x 21 ½," Grand Coulee Dam, Washington State.

Certainly, though, the present reading of the painting leads to intimations of fecundity and sexuality obstructed. The plug that seals the crevice ensures no leaks. The earth mother is being unsexed, sealed up, and made chaste. Nature forcibly has been brought under technocratic control. No more seepage will hamper the dam, no more betrayals or stains. The flawed rock again has been made whole. In this respect, *Sealing the Crevice* bears intimate comparison to *Mother Earth Laid Bare*, by Alexandre Hogue. (The difference between the two paintings is that the Hogue piece is allegorical and thus leaves little to the imagination.) The artist commissioned by the BuRec, Fletcher Martin, might not have consciously been adding human anatomy to his piece, for which he chose a title that includes the word *crevice*. In geological terms, crevices may compound the geological problems associated with “bank storage absorption of water into porous rock” (Nash 108). The word *fault*, though, was chosen by the one who captioned the painting on the Bureau website. With all its moral baggage, that word may be alluding to an unspoken quality of wrongdoing, blameworthiness. Remembering the Latin *culpa*, one realizes that a sense of culpability has been pressed upon the picture. A feminine environment is at fault, has fallen, and a stern and sturdy technocracy must be called upon to generate the best corrective.

Nothing is unique in a pattern of assigning the feminine gender to nature. It is one of the oldest tropes in the history of humankind, going back at least as far as Greek mythology, wherein father sky pressed himself on mother earth and thus conceived the cosmos. There was to be found at the artists’ disposal a ready storehouse of images and analogies on which to draw “to depict the imaginative aspects of the Reclamation program.” The language of the original ad for artists again is significant here, and it must have liberated them in ways that other government commissions possibly curtailed. Far easier to have dissolved into abstraction, as did Richard Diebenkorn and Lamar Dodd in their pieces for the program, than to have kept grounded in the representational while still granting special latitude to the mind’s eye.

The catalogue of *The American Artist and Water Reclamation* contains language that subtly belittles those who question the environmental legacy of the Reclamation Bureau. Douglas MacAgy of the Smithsonian Institution wrote the introduction. In it, he located the BuRec artworks in frontier pioneer days. “Today’s review is staged before the same awesome backdrop,” he wrote, “after generations of its mutual adjustment to human need and will” (5). The landscape and the ecology, that is, have had to undergo a mere “adjustment” that leaves the “awesome backdrop” the same. Like a human back out of alignment, the land under the purview of Reclamation needed simply to be adjusted, manipulated, to be brought back into working order. “Viewers,” he continued, “now bring with them some notions about technics, economics and ecology – abstract terms often worn thin by glib usage until their users meet the facts face-to-face.” MacAgy’s language is difficult to unpack, but the condescending tone is plain. The limited learning of the dam detractors is a dangerous thing. They are glib – fluent and smooth. They toss around terms that they don’t understand, and those terms crumble once one confronts the pictorial evidence of how much beauty remains. Again, visual considerations take precedent over all else. Condescending, MacAgy suggests that even a vicarious experience of those landscapes may offset everything that technology, economics, and ecology tells us. His faith resides within the tyranny of the eye. “[I]ndividuals who stubbornly hold on to a feeling for wilderness” “don’t contest the importance of technology, but their investment of sentiment in the virginal aspect of nature is not about to be liquidated.” That is, stubborn souls who feel fondly toward nature in a pristine state will not relinquish or liquidate that “sentiment,” a use of the word that diminishes concerns about health implied by ecological considerations. All such concerns are reducible to “the quality and degree of sentiment that survives romantic attachment to a symbol.” Such people, stubborn and idealistic, are out of date and should not be heeded, for

“The lingering romance in their sentiments about picturesque nature is in many respects obsolescent.” They are behind the times. Likewise passé is literary fiction about the West, he says outright, for “the scene of real adventure has shifted from wagon trails and shack towns to sites of impressive technological innovation.” Thoughtful citizens, duly impressed, “have been caught up in the excitement of man’s grandiose teamwork with nature.” As a foursquare proponent of the visual arts, MacAgy grants entire primacy to visual responses to the landscape. In doing so he ignores, belittles, and embargoes the health of ecosystems as measured by scientific research.

Conclusion

On a ten-week professional leave to study ecopornography in 2007, I found my focus returning again and again to the Bureau of Reclamation Art Collection as the best instance of ecoporn. That art collection, described and interpreted here, began in 1968 as a way to deflect public attention away from the harmful effects of western dams and canals. The Bureau commissioned 40 painters to explore the allegedly overlooked dimensions of Reclamation projects in fine-arts media. Some of the paintings remain memorable for genuine beauty and originality, while others are more blatantly promotional in thrust. The aesthetic challenge those painters were asked to address, “to depict the imaginative aspects” of Bureau of Reclamation dam sites, was badly worded or misleading. In point of fact, the artists were being asked to project their imaginations upon the dams, the dam sites, and other reclamation projects. That the resulting paintings should contain discernible subtexts of empire building, dominion, and subjugation was almost inevitable from the start. The trick the painters had to pull off was to accommodate the agency’s need at the same time they fulfilled the mandates of honest art to address some of the environmental implications of the dams.

If the leaders of the Bureau of Reclamation had hoped the agency would be able to draw upon tax dollars to propagandize dam sites and easily influence public opinion in their favor, those bureaucrats were to discover that the cubic feet per second of cultural change could not be redirected. Like a small boat capsized in turbulent water, the agency would not again regain enough buoyancy for its grand dam-building spree of the previous decades to continue as before. Not only had Americans seen through the agency’s technological agenda, but most of the viable dam sites had also been already claimed and developed. In the once-great Columbia River watershed where I live, the only free-flowing stretch of water, the Hanford Reach, has retained its status as salmon spawning habitat only by virtue of its high security as a storehouse of nuclear materials and an erstwhile site for manufacturing atomic bombs used in WWII. In an irony of history and ecology, those public lands and waters reserved for purposes of munitions testing and development, for technological innovation and design, like the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State and the White Sands Missile Range in New Mexico, remain some of the only places still functional as habitat. For its free-flowing water and relatively pristine state, the Hanford Reach is more pleasing visually, and more sustainable ecologically, than any of the hundreds of dam sites the Bureau of Reclamation developed.

Notes

- 1 “The history of public art is enormous and includes commissioned art as well as art initiated by artists,” writes Marc Pally for the National Endowment for the Arts. “Planning efforts for public art are, not surprisingly, almost exclusively directed toward official activities: government sponsored programs that either depend on mandated allocations (e.g. one-percent of capital improvement project budgets or private development projects), or that encourage voluntary participation through incentive programs or through the power of persuasion and mutual benefit.”
- 2 DeWitt’s records of the program were conveyed to the archives of the American Art Journal following his death. “From a background in the Provincetown art colony and an earlier career as a writer for radio and as a publicist, John DeWitt (1910-1984) unexpectedly emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as the organizer for the Department of the Interior of two immense traveling exhibitions celebrating the American landscape” (Brown 38). His second major project was a bicentennial collection, *America 1976*. Responding to DeWitt’s call on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation were a number of noted artists – Kenneth Callahan, Ralston Crawford, Richard Diebenkorn, Lamar Dodd, and Norman Rockwell. The fee paid to the artists never was made known, though, and DeWitt issued a defense for his use of public funds in the BuRec-published magazine *Reclamation Era*. He wrote in those pages, as if in protest, “The commissions offered to the painters were a minimal amount above travel and living expenses given them while visiting the sites of Reclamation projects on sketching trips; the total was far less than the artists regularly receive from sales through their galleries and dealers” (14).
- 3 Consider this 1971 summary, from CQ Researcher, of rising levels of activist engagement and their impact on the Bureau: “Conservation groups actively pushed for many of the protective measures Congress has enacted over the past decade. They have also lobbied, often successfully, against bills they decried as harmful to conservation interests, and on occasion have gone to court to block action by some arm of government. David Brower, then the executive director of the Sierra Club, is credited with bringing together in the 1950s a coordinated lobbying effort by conservationists to prevent the Bureau of Reclamation from building a dam at the juncture of the Green and Yampa rivers that would have flooded sections of Dinosaur National Monument on the Utah-Colorado border” (Blumenfeld).
- 4 See, e.g., “Valuable art missing from Interior Dept.” *San Francisco Chronicle* Aug. 18, 1990: “Among the [missing] pieces are a Norman Rockwell drawing of the natural rock formation known as the Rainbow Bridge, and scores of paintings and sketches commissioned by the department during the past few decades. In all, at least 357 artworks are missing, the investigators said.” “Department investigators said the missing works are worth millions of dollars, although it is impossible to place a precise value on them because of inadequate records.” “[Department Inspector General James R.] Richards said the most disturbing loss occurred in the federal Bureau of Reclamation, a unit of the Interior Department, which had been unable to account for nearly half of 355 paintings it commissioned in the 1960s and ‘70s.” Many major newspapers in the nation covered this story when it broke in 1990, and two years later the Bureau claimed to have “strengthened its accountability and controls over the remaining 201 pieces of art” (“Management of Art”). Also, according to the Senior Historian at the Bureau’s Denver headquarters, Brit Storey, the collection has been scattered around the nation, from Boise, Idaho, to Washington, D.C., a fact that makes it hard for interested parties to assess the permanence of the work.
- 5 Attention to dam design may be found in Condit, Wilson, and Moffett and Wodehouse.
- 6 Joni Louise Kinsey offers corroboration: “After seeing [Moran’s] paintings, visitors to the West often were unable to view the sites without preconceptions; the images forever changed perceptions of the land and its meaning for the culture that inhabited it” (qtd. in Oravec 59).
- 7 A very similar piece, *The Green River*, also by Lee Weiss, bear a nearly identical caption: “The Green River, murky and opaque before construction of Flaming Gorge Dam, now runs clear over the rocky bottom” (17).

- 8 Pacific Northwest residents who live near the once-mighty Columbia River watched during the spring of 2000, a high-water year, as Indians gathered in north-central Washington below Kettle Falls, gathered and chanted, hoping the increased flows were signaling a return of the salmon runs the Grand Coulee Dam had blocked more than sixty years before.
- 9 The Nevada Nuclear Test site had been in operation from 1952 to 1991, and the residents of the state of Utah once would settle in and watch the tests for entertainment. Terry Tempest Williams used those tests as back-story in her book *Refuge*. That book expresses her belief that her grandmother and mother contracted breast cancer from the tests, prompting her to characterize herself as a member of the "clan of the one-breasted women."

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