

Mario Reis: Riverwork

Chapter 3

JG: Your way of working with nature is very particular, almost scientific. Traveling in Europe, North America, Africa and elsewhere, you select specific river sites along a projected route. The method is simple. Once there, you put stretchers with cotton cloth in the water and nature does the rest of the work. The results are infinitely variable, revealing the patterns, colours, textures and residue of each site in microcosm. The nature watercolours give a sense of the specific micro-ecology of a place. Brought together as an ensemble of works, from numerous sites, they become a microcosmic study of the world's waterways, yet each is very specific. What impact do these works have when exhibited in galleries? What is the response?

MR: Before answering your question, I need to explain my working method in more detail. I don't simply place a stretcher in a stream and let nature do the rest of the work. Before placing the stretcher, I have to carefully select a site that provides the working conditions I need. For instance, the water level and the speed of the current have to be right. The installation of the stretcher is the most demanding part of the work. It is truly an interaction between myself and the river. I actually use the floating water as my paintbrush. By placing stones on the stretcher, I influence the flow of the water, and can control the painting's result to a certain degree. That means I decide where the natural pigments, transported by the river, will settle down, or where there will later on be lighter parts in the painting. So from the beginning I compose a painting. That is particularly important when bringing together several paintings from the same river into large format grids. Of course, the degree to which I can control the outcome of a painting is limited. Having installed the piece, I leave it on its own, and the river then works on it. It is thus influenced by any natural changes that might occur. It might be rain or snow, the water level could rise or fall, and animals might come along and leave their imprint. Whatever happens, it's an expression of nature in its own voice. Each stream has a specific character. Some paint in a really hard edge manner, others paint more softly. In this way, each painting, influenced by the interaction between myself and the river, is a kind of a self-portrait of that specific river.

To answer your question, I must say that when my works are exhibited in galleries, people are initially drawn to the works because of their colors and patterns. The texture of the works is very earth-like, and the colors awaken memories that, at first sight, cannot be clearly specified. As their curiosity is aroused, they get closer and closer, visually exploring the tactile sense of the work. It is only after reading the inscription at the bottom of the piece (the date, location, state, and river's name), that they realize they are actually looking to a river painting. For most, no holds are then barred. They begin to ask questions about how the work is made, and why, and what the starting point was. They want to see river paintings from their homeland, and think of rivers they know and so on. Most are fascinated with the concept behind the nature watercolours. They find it almost unbelievable how different each piece is, and how many colors can be found in the rivers. They are puzzled by the beauty of the waterways and by their individuality. The works change the spectators' way of looking at nature and rivers. They become more sensitized, and begin to appreciate the diversity and beauty of rivers more and more. The works have a deep impact on the viewer. Once on the walls, these works change the whole gallery environment into something totally different. It creates a dense atmosphere, a purity and clarity that is unusual. The works transform the space and there is an eloquent calm. Even when shown in a massive quantity they never overwhelm you, and are like windows into the world.

JG: Jackson Pollock used to talk of how he could control the way he dripped paint on canvas. Your Nature Watercolours seem to be a statement against the modernist artist's willingness to control the process of their creativity. They are not segregated from nature's processes the way much postModern work is. You once commented that you are neither a traditional landscape painter nor a post-Modernist. What do you mean by this?

MR: What distinguishes me from traditional painters is the medium I use to paint with. It is a direct approach. The rivers in my paintings are both the object and subject of my work. I am not creating an illusion of rivers, but catching some of the real essence of the rivers in my painting. They leave their imprint on the cotton and show us how they are. That is partly what separates me from the post-Modernists. As you correctly stated, my work is not detached from nature's processes.

JG: In a strange way your Nature Watercolours remind me of American colour field paintings, of Rothko, for instance. Yet the effect seems all the more mysterious and fascinating because flowing water is part author of these works...

MR: Mark Rothko is one of the greatest artists. I truly admire his works. It is a pity that he is dead, for it would be interesting how he answered that particular question. Actually the thought of an exhibition that brings his works together with mine is really inspiring.

JG: The journey, the nomadic traveling and site visits, all this must sensitize you to local geography, landmarks, and the earth's bio-specific character. Is the travel part of your art process?

MR: The traveling, or hiking to the sites, is definitely not a part of the art process. It is simply how I get to the places where I create my works. For an artist who works with artificial color, the way to the shop isn't a part of the art process either. When I began making the river paintings I did not realize that this would lead to a nomadic life. The works themselves showed me I would have to travel to catch as broad a spectrum as possible, a spectrum that would enrich the work. My paintings have changed dramatically over the years. Fortunately, I am a person that cannot stand still. I have to move on in order to gather new experiences that enrich my life wherever they happen. So traveling is, in a way, an essential part of my nature. I am lucky this is part of my work because I like to be outdoors and love nature. So I do not consider the traveling to be part of my art process.

I would again like to return to the art process. The process involves more than installing a piece in a river. After the pieces are stabilized, I group them. When putting pieces together from a single stream, I put the emphasis on a strong composition. My aim is to create a sense of boundless space, full of light and shadows, floating transitions, unusual perspectives, and pulsating motions. My color fields change anew with every view. For each viewer, including myself, they can be perceived in different ways. For some people, my pieces are very zen, while for others they are an adventure. They captivate the alert eye, and invite the viewer on a journey through time and space. Of course, this doesn't happen by accident. It results from the compositions I create within the art process.

JG: Do you think of your particular brand of artmaking as a celebration of nature? Does it consist of a reversal of the artist's role from primogenitor to postgenitor?

MR: I wouldn't go so far as considering my art being a celebration of nature. Nature does not need me to celebrate. She does so by herself, simply

by being what she is. My role as an artist, is neither as primogenitor nor postgenitor. In a way it is both. But the main thing, to be even more explicit, is the interaction with the river, the collaboration between us.

JG: Clean water is an increasingly rare resource. You have created works on some of the most polluted waterways on earth like the Rhine, as well as in pristine, largely untouched rivers in Alaska and the Yukon. There are traces of man-made intervention, of pollutants, in some works, as much as there are nature traces in others? Is the selection of your sites a conscious choice or is it random?

MR: The question of pollution is an interesting one. Basically you can not see the pollution of a river, just the effects. The crudest one would be dead fish and wiped out vegetation. But destroyed micro-organisms can only be detected with the help of microscopes and other tests. Of course, if someone spills oil into a river, one would see it, and the canvas would catch it too. But most pollution is invisible, especially for the untrained eye. Therefore, my pieces more often show the traces of nature.

When I began to do the river paintings back in 1977, environmental concerns were slowly growing. The Green Party wasn't even founded. To be honest, my motives at that stage had nothing to do with environmental questions. I was simply fascinated by fleeting phenomena, by natural forces, and was trying to find a new expression that involved painting rivers. It had to be an expression that would show what was really going on in a river and what makes a particular river unique. I wanted to get the real thing onto the canvas. As time went by, my river paintings gained a different impact, because now almost everybody is conscious of the desolate state of nature. Pristine nature has become as much a treasure as clean water. There is no denying, however, that my art documents the state of nature, but I do not see them as a „raised index finger“ telling the people: „Look here! That is pollution! Our nature and therefore our living base is endangered, so watch out and behave well!“ Things don't work that way. It is almost the other way around. People care for things that they appreciate and love. If through their beauty and meaning, my works are able to sensitize people, and leads them to appreciate and love nature more, this would be a fantastic result.

But through art I dare say that one could force people to change their attitudes by attacking them. Laws can possibly do this. I, for myself, have great environmental concerns, but this would never be a reason to choose a specific river. I have to fall in love with a certain place, a certain river, or a certain color to make that river my partner in action. I do not go for names or trendy places. Often I inform myself, when possible, about where one can expect special features that result from geological particularities, but often I choose river sites at random. I am just driving or hiking by, and there it is, the perfect river to work with!

JG: Do you eliminate certain of your Nature Watercolours after they have been created, select which ones will be appropriate or inappropriate for exhibition? How do you decide?

MR: I never destroy works because I do not like them. This would be of great inconsequence. I am asking a question and I am getting the answer. It is not relevant if the answer does not please me. For my exhibitions I choose the works that I like most and that I feel are the strongest. The selection of works also depends on the specific space and location, so every show looks totally different.

JG: There is so little intervention in your art. It's a natural process that involves reinventing the artist's role as someone who sensitizes the public to nature. Rather than leaving your expression on materials, materials leave

their impression on your art...

MR: That is true, but only to a certain degree. I will not and can not influence the material's imprint, the natural pigments and their specific appearance, „hard edged or soft“. The crucial point is putting them together in grids. Grouping them involves a lot of personal expression. The compositions come out of my inner feelings, my personal experiences, and the handling of autonomous material.

JG: Do you ever feel marginalized from the mainstream art establishment? Does your audience extend beyond the traditional artgoing public?

MR: I would first like to answer that question in general. Every art that does not follow the mainstream or a momentary trend will be marginalized, especially when the art involves deep meaning. The tendency is like that today. Art is approached with an attitude trained by consumerism. Art is almost treated like fast food. The notion of consumerism is: We want to have it all, here and now, easy and cheap. No effort please! Unfortunately, the cultural institutions, being in money trouble, are beginning to react to public demand by transforming the exhibitions into thrilling events that attract the masses. To achieve this they must compromise at the lowest possible level. That means that in the long run, we will see more and more exhibitions with less and less quality. Thrilling sensations, nice little shocks, easygoing and fun. That is what attracts the masses. So for an honest artist, who follows his visions in a straight manner, it will be ever more difficult to receive recognition. Making money just for the goal of making money is becoming more trendy even in the artist community. Many artists out there are jumping on every train that is leaving the station. But fortunately, for the time being, there are still a good many people willing to appreciate sensitive and meaningful art, people who like to use their brains and encounter new experiences that will enrich their lives.

Another aspect of your question is the notion of categorizing. I am somewhat troubled by the way the art establishment usually puts my works into the category of land art. Much more is involved in my work than landscape. Maybe the title of the works are what created this trap. When I began working, I chose the title Nature Watercolors to indicate the medium, just as photography, sculpture, painting, drawing, or watercolor refer to the medium being used. At the same time, this title refers to the work itself as being river painting. Though, I have a broader vision of my paintings. If someone has to categorize them they also fall into the field of color field paintings, arte povera, abstract art, conceptual art, process art, and even realistic painting. So, the Nature Watercolors cannot be easily categorized. They step beyond the borders of definition. The phenomenon of time is an aspect crucial to my work. Time is not an easy phenomenon to deal with. One can experience time because nothing is the same the very next moment. Everything is in a constant state of flux and change. But time also involves leaving tracks or traces behind. My works make one aware of this phenomenon. The Nature Watercolors record a fixed period of time, and at the same time, imaging the process of creation, they emphasize the constant flow of time as well. The process is like sedimentation. As time goes by, layer after layer accumulates on the cotton cloth. So what happens on a large scale in nature is also what happens in the little stretchers that contain my works. A lot of the natural pigment, that is the sediment that accumulates on the cloth, is many thousand of years old. Looking at the works, we can actually see into the distant past. But besides all that, my work can be appreciated without any knowledge of the process of creation. They stand on their own.

The audience for my art does extend beyond the traditional artgoing public. A lot of people from scientific backgrounds like biologists, geologists,

hydrologists, microbiologists, as well as educators, are interested in my work. So are a lot of people who have never been in a contemporary art museum. I meet them when doing my work outdoors: farmers, ranchers, fisherman, people digging for gold and so on. They catch the idea of the works immediately. I have had many inspiring conversations with these people.

JG: Early land artist like Robert Smithson whose works imposed on the landscape, seemed to conceive of nature as a fiction onto which the artist left his or her imprint. What is your opinion?

MR: You can see it both ways. It depends on your point of view. I don't have any objections to the viewpoint. For my part Smithson did some great work. But I chose a path that leaves few traces, other than some footprints. I do not mess with the environment or change it through my work. I don't even take out very much. The material residue on the cotton is no more than a few tablespoons worth and it is on its way to the ocean anyways. It is actually leaving the environment where I am doing my work. So my artwork doesn't harm the environment much at all. To say that nature is a fiction is a philosophical standpoint I do not hold. But I would still prefer to see the Spiral Jetty at Great Salt Lake than a drilling construction in the Arctic.

JG: Screen technology, television, media culture and so-called virtual reality inadvertently send us the signal that tactile living reality is secondary to the image. Your works are sending out a different message, that what is out there really is beautiful, and has its own form, design, and layering process and that it does it all naturally.

Does the artist have a role to play in guiding us towards a more ethical understanding of how nature works, and how important it is to our children's future survival on this planet?

MR: I can only speak for myself. I do not see my role in such a defined way. My pieces do send the message you have described, and if this message reaches people it is a positive result. Tactile living is the real thing. Of course, one cannot deny that new technology like the internet opens up new ways and forms of communication. The internet is able to connect people all over the world. But face to face communication is essential to human life. It involves vivid experiences like joy, trust, and sharing. The matter of trust is a very crucial one. Most of our life is based on trust and I dare say that virtuality can teach trust and being trustworthy. So in a certain sense, the new media are disconnecting people at the same time as they connect them. And that might also be true for the arts. Experiencing art, for me, is always very sensual, almost erotic. We cannot deny that we, ourselves, are tactile living realities as is the whole world around us. Overlooking this would be a total misunderstanding. In the long run, the idea that the tactile living reality is secondary to the image could be very misleading. But I do not believe the artist's primary role is as a teacher of ethics. I strongly object to any guidance that is exclusive. For my part, if the artist has a role, it is to open peoples' minds, to sensitize them, to bring new experiences to them that enrich their lives, and our lives too.

JG: Why this fascination with water?

MR: We could talk about that for hours. Basically it is the unstable character of water, as well as the fact that we are deeply connected with water anyway. Water always changes, by nature. Sometimes it is fluid, sometimes gas or solid. Water is able to carve deep canyons out of the hardest rock. It acts as an landscape architect, but it also runs softly through our hands.

My fascination is a very basic one. I would like to let the Roman poet Ovid answer this question:

..., there is nothing in all the world that keeps its form
All things are in a constant state of flux, and everything is brought into being with a changing nature. Time itself flows in constant motion, just like a river. For neither the river nor the swift hour can stop its course; but, as wave is pushed on by wave, and as each wave as it comes is both pressed on and itself presses the wave in front, so time both flees and follows and is ever new. For that, which once existed, is no more, and that, which was not, has come to be; and so the whole round of motion is gone through again.

Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, 15, 177-185, 234

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