

Raquel Rabinovich: Excerpts

Since 2002 Raquel Rabinovich has been sourcing mud from the beds of various rivers across the globe to produce her ongoing series of River Library drawings. For these Rabinovich binds the mud to handmade Essindia paper with glue, often layering the resulting “pages,” just barely revealing their edges. She is drawn to the way that, in rivers, mud accumulates in layers, in the process capturing a practical, material history of the earth and its populations, and especially how they interact with the natural world. Further, these rivers, and the mud that limns them, flow freely and indiscriminately across man-made boundaries. Mud is a truly global material, as well as one charged with the deep and profound histories of the uses to which it has been put as everything from a building material to a vehicle for the presentation of text. Thus, as with the clay tablets of the first libraries, here mud can be said to function as a site of inscription. However, in this case the “text” that has been inscribed is not immediately legible, at least not in a conventional sense, but rather is present as the history and use that is quite literally embodied by the mud, whose constitution and topography presents itself as a materialist language of sorts.

The thirty four River Library works presented here in Rabinovich’s exhibition at the Pratt Library are collectively titled *Excerpts*, highlighting the selective nature of this culling from the hundreds of River Library drawings Rabinovich has been making over the past fifteen years. Nine rivers (the Jordan, Nile, Ganges, Hudson, Urubamba, Orinoco, Paraná, Ayeyarwady, and Mississippi) from four different continents (North and South America, Africa, and Asia) are represented. They exemplify their distinctions from one another formally through the different colors characteristic of the respective muds that constitute them. These colors reference not only geographic differences, but also the multifarious ways in which people have interacted with the various rivers, thus registering both their natural and man-made histories and specificities.

These works are displayed horizontally in vitrines, as well as on the wall. They are supplemented by two vitrines, each containing a set of ten scrolls. The scrolls are River Library drawings that have been rolled up and sealed, and thus express the idea of knowledge contained and latent, ready to be uncovered or decoded, and also by *Emergences*, a video documentation by Camilo Rojas of a series of Rabinovich’s site-specific stone sculpture pieces. These sculptures are located in bodies of water, where they are activated by the advance and recession of the tides, which progressively conceal and reveal the stones in an ongoing, cyclical fashion.

The exhibition’s title, *Excerpts* is also meant to suggest the literary aspect of the works on display. Their “content” is fully abstract, even obdurately material in nature. However, in this way the mud becomes activated as a “text,” one that is at once literal and metaphorical: the drawing is the text and the text is the drawing. This relates to previous works by Rabinovich, where she embeds actual texts, barely perceptible, into painted or drawn surfaces. There they are concealed and revealed at the same time, a questioning of disclosure that Rabinovich seeks to achieve in her work as a whole. In this way the show can be considered as an insertion of one library, Rabinovich’s, within another, Pratt’s, which is further underscored by the inclusion in the

three floors of the installation of vitrines of books that have been significant to Rabinovich. This encourages the viewer to engage in a personal journey of discovery to find all the different components of this “library.”

These works further relate to ancient image-making practices, from cave painting to Native American sand drawings, that made use of, and in doing so made reference to, natural materials and their functions and symbolic powers. Not to mention to the practices of other contemporary artists who deploy non-traditional materials within the frame of established mediums like painting, drawing, and sculpture. For example, Richard Long paints with mud on the wall, and Wolfgang Laib executes forms in wax. There is a strong tradition in modern and contemporary art of using organic materials to extend the relationship of the work to the natural environment, going back at least to Picasso and Braque’s introduction of sand to give texture and presence to their painted surfaces. This continues to be of interest to artists, Rabinovich included, in part because of numerous pressing issues regarding ecology and the environment, and also the ways that digital technology has changed the way we relate to materials and the world around us. For this reason her work can be considered mainly formal and contemplative, but in being so incites the active participation of the viewer in the world around him or her.

Alex Bacon, 2017