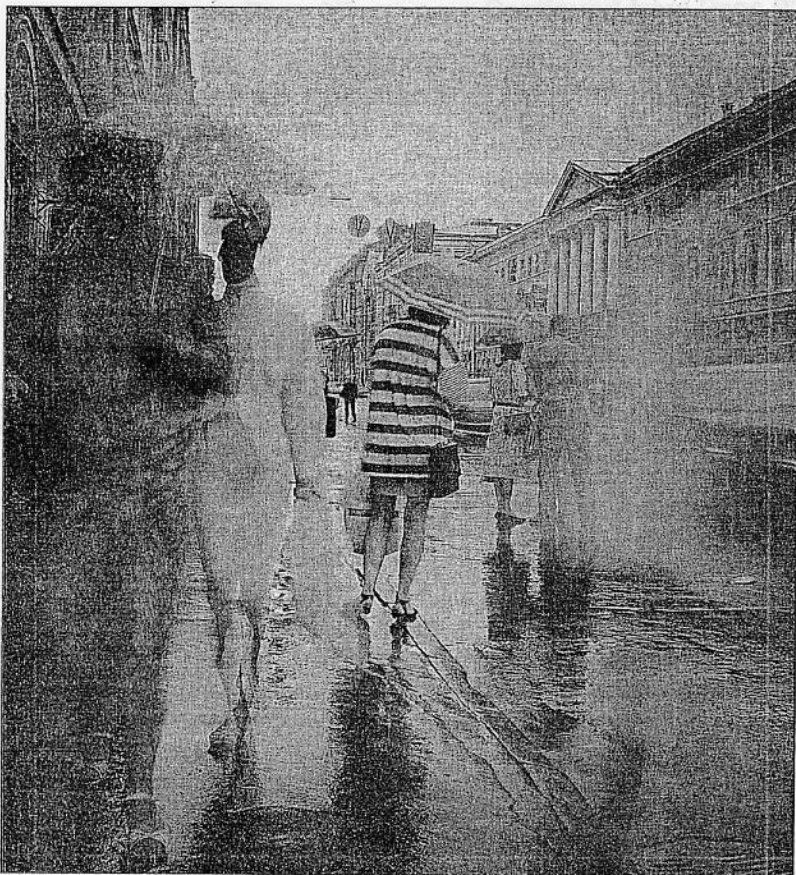


ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

WATER: THE THEME THAT RUNS THROUGH FOTOFEST 2004



A fluid experience

By PATRICIA C. JOHNSON / Houston Chronicle

“WATER is mobile, water is sensitive, water is open,” wrote scientists Wolfram Schwenk, Andreas Wilkens and Michael Jacobi in the prologue to a 1995 publication.

Their words make an apt mantra for the Houston FotoFest 2004 exhibits now open across the city. Nine solo shows at HFF's Vine Street Studios and a group show at Williams Tower, *Water in the West*, beautifully capture the scope of the festival's theme.

The key word is “water,” in its multiple forms and in its absence.

At Vine Street, David Maisel's C-prints are abstract, almost painterly images in intense, poisonous hues of red, blue, yellow and green. The glossy, 30-by-30-inch aerial photographs document depleted Owens Lake, which fed a thirsty Los Angeles

from 1913 until it dried up 13 years later. Fierce winds whip the lake's dry bed, loosing an estimated 300,000 tons of chromium, arsenic and other toxic substances annually.

On the other side of the world, engineers are building dams to control the great Yangtze River of China. In 1999, Steven Benson traveled the river, documenting ways of life that will cease to be when the gigantic Three Gorges Dam is completed. Approximately 30 million people will be affected by the project.

Reservoir Department, Wislisan shows a lone man walking on a mountain path, pole across his shoulders, balancing his load.

He is dwarfed by a sign painted high on a mountainside that reads “175 M” — roughly the water level at project completion.

Alexey Titarenko and Andrey Chezhin focus on St. Petersburg, Russia, with different aims and results.

Titarenko's prints are contemporary views of the city and its people, made fuzzy by the inclement weather, motion, falling and drifting snow, wind, and distorted reflections. Throughout, however, there remains a certain gentility and romance, like late Impressionist paintings of rain-soaked Paris.

Flooding is the subject of Chezhin's series *The Nevsky*

Left: Alexey Titarenko records a rain-soaked street in St. Petersburg, Russia, in an untitled image recalling Impressionist paintings. At Houston FotoFest/Vine Street Studios.

Top: *Disabled Space* (1995), an ironic photograph by Geoffrey Fricker, is from *Water in the West* at Williams Tower.

Above: Steven Benson River traveled the Yangtze for a series on the Three Gorges Dam project. At Houston FotoFest/Vine Street Studios.

Baptistry. The city and its monastery on the Neva River were built by Czar Peter the Great in the 1700s — and destined, legend has it, to go down in its waters. In one silver-gelatin print, water has reached the ankles of a monumental statue, threatening an 18th-century building in the background. In another, only the head of the city's founder remains visible above the flood. The images are narrative and symbolic — as history is washed away with the tides of time.

Water in the West features varied images by 11 photographers — silver-gelatin prints, manipulated composites, inkjets, documentary works and one installation.

Geoffrey Fricker is among the most traditional. His large-scale silver gelatin prints depict West Coast landscapes where land, water and humanity intersect, not always for the better. *Disabled Space* (1995) is an ironic view of a broad river, framed by

leafless trees and shrouded in dense fog. You can almost hear the silence. But the pristine beauty is marred, disabled, by man-made structures: two Porta Potties and parking spaces on a fabricated spur in the river.

Surely complying with a federal mandate didn't demand such an obnoxious intrusion?

On the other hand, composites by Mark Klett say things may not be so bad. A color print shows a gorge in Yellowstone Park, its white cliffs, tall pines and a distant horizon under a pale blue sky. The photo has been cropped to approximate the view American artist Thomas Moran painted more than 100 years earlier. A book is open to show a reproduction of Moran's painting, held just so to match landscape with reproduced interpretation.

The reproduction, of course, is the only way most of us will ever

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