

## **Floating World: Camping at the Edge of Intersecting Flows**

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Striding across the San Fernando Street Bridge on a brilliant California morning, an urban wanderer enters the shadow of a freeway overpass and is suddenly struck by the appearance of small clusters of tents, five in all, suspended improbably off the guardrail. Gathering like tiny flocks of differently colored tent species, these fragile encampments, familiar but alien, friendly but uncanny, beckon the wanderer who, in the midst of this traffic crossing, now gazes sideward and away from the mechanical river of asphalt and automobile. The tents flutter and shake in the breeze, their bright, Lilliputian frames contrasting with the massive and somber, artificial canyon below and with the dark weight of the suspended freeway above. The encampments cling with metallic, tubular arms to the rim of the bridge as though resisting the forces of some invisible torrent that threatens to carry them, and perhaps the very bridge itself, into the chasm beyond. Now peeking into that chasm, the wanderer finds great cliffs of concrete, containing, overshadowing, yet strangely also monumentalizing a narrow ribbon of water with its own fragile encampments of plants and waterfowl, likewise improbably clinging to the concrete canyon floor. Now hearing the sounds of birdcalls and running water, the wanderer realizes that these are emerging, not from below but from one of the adjacent clusters of tents. Each cluster, in fact, is lecturing, chanting, chirping in a different way, each calling attention to phenomena through which bird and human, bridge and water, are inexorably intertwined.

Intertwined – yet opposed, clashing across that great yawning gap that separates asphalt from running stream, the song of the sparrow from the human discourse upon chemistry and climate, the fluttering encampments proclaim through sound and image the simultaneous equivalences and differences that enmesh this urban, ecological crossing. For who is it that speaks or sings from these nests of refugee encampment, hovering on the border of bridge and chasm? Have the birds come to occupy the indexical architecture of human disaster, or have humans come to occupy the tiny, precarious perches of birds? On the one hand, the gap that separates bird song from human speech renders the ensemble of encampments as an apocalyptic Babel, staged by the specter of that great flood whose punishing force might itself be a product of a communicative gap between humans and the larger natural world. On the other hand, the uncanny reflection of urban dwellers as birds/refugees in the crossing of freeway and river dissolves the typical boundaries that separate city from nature or shelter from environment. As night falls, voices emerge from the path below, speaking of the human attempts to harness nature's course. A voice sings the river's pulsing reply. A projected flood rises up the massive concrete support for the freeway, dramatizing and literalizing the flood whose

latent presence had been merely suggested by the clinging encampments. The flood, an act of nature with perhaps unnatural and human causes, transforms city back to nature or perhaps serves to signal that city and nature were, in some sense, always one.

The tiny replicas of emergency tents, originally designed for humans caught in natural catastrophes, hover like squatter settlements over the engineered image of flood control. Flood control becomes uncontrolled flood. In anthropomorphic dress, nature peers back at the urban citizen, its emergency tents lighting up, taking flight and mocking the rational stability of engineered assurances. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Guadalupe River gave life to that northern, colonial outcropping of New Spain, that would only much later become the “capital of Silicon Valley.” The river, however, was never merely a passive waterway to be used by city builders and orchard growers. It surged and receded with the seasonal rains. It served an array of beings other than the human kind: dragonflies and egrets; snails and algae; reeds and trout. The anthropocentric conception of the river, as either “resource” or “nuisance,” gradually veiled the wider aspects of the river. The current flood control channel, forming the concrete canyon below the bridges, was constructed between 1992 and 2004. It is a curiously hybrid project, both a highly engineered mechanism of water control and an urban park with artificial landscaping and fragments of reconstructed river habitat. The concrete canyon and bridges shelter birds, bicyclists and the urban homeless even as they also seek to protect the city and its traffic from “uncontrolled” waters. The concrete displaces the water from its ancient bed while creating substitute riverbanks to channel the water and salvage its wildlife. Into this dialogic space of urban engineering and contained river park, the speaking, floating tents and the projected ghost of an earlier flood inject a destabilizing element, a third way of conceiving the site. Hanging in the liminal space between the bridge traffic and the river channel, they connect the two elements of circulation, materializing the relationship between the paving over of the landscape and the flooding of the cityscape. Containment is illusory. Against the massive monumentality of concrete and steel, their light forms flutter and flicker, revealing a counterthrust of provisional engineering and liquid surge. Civilized urbanity scatters into nomadic cells. Mingling bird song and human voices, the sounds dissipate in all directions without regard for the distinction of species. The entire city becomes habitat.

Entitled *Floating World*, this series of miniature encampments, with sound, light and projection, is the joint project of artists Robin Lasser and Marguerite Perret, both of whom have long engaged the intersections between cultural representation and non-human nature, between constructed sites and the earth as all-encompassing site. In previous works, such as *Precarious/Precious* (1999) and *Ice Queen* (2008), Lasser staged aspects of the human relationship to landscapes, both visibly nearby and remote, in the first case by having plants grow into hillside signage and in the

second case by inhabiting, in dress-tent form, the personification of a glacier. In works, such as *Prairie Earth* (2006) and *Wonderland* (2009), Perret has explored the interlocked fates of the disappearing prairie habitat in the American Mid-West and the spreading sprawl of suburbia, by employing interactive media and highlighting the cultural representations of landscape, suburb and habitat. Following in the footsteps of such projects, *Floating World* is a dialog with the built environment, a work of public art that intervenes in both architecture and landscape, shifting and expanding the perceptions of a particular urban/natural location. The site that they chose for this project is the point of most intense contact and overlay between two seemingly opposed systems: the artifice of intense urbanity, layers of recent bridges and restless automotive traffic, and the never-quite-tamable life of an ancient watershed which has run its course to the San Francisco Bay long before the town that would become modern San Jose was ever conceived. Beyond the opposition between concrete channel and fluctuating flow, *Floating World* alludes to the much deeper interdependence of river and city and, beyond this, the interdependence of human life and what ecologists call the biosphere.