

Beneath Stilled Waters

Artist Statement

Elise Richman

Beneath Stilled Waters is an exploration of sites around the Columbia River Basin with relevance to debates over salmon, dams, and how we view and manage our rivers. These landscapes represent stories, cultures, and lenses on history that will determine the future of the inland Northwest's rivers, salmon, and the ecosystems they support. *Beneath Stilled Waters* represents places at the heart of political, economic, and cultural debates and decisions that are grounded in the past, unfolding in the present, and that will ripple into the future.

Landscape painting can help highlight sources of tension between human values/beliefs and natural systems, as well as suggesting how this tension might be lessened. Richman's ongoing series of paintings, drawings, and videos engage with this tradition that visually represents how the natural world is valued. Her works are encounters with place, their visual manifestations are informed by direct experience of each site, multi-disciplinary research, and a commitment to representing the character of each place through specific and responsive processes.

Bio

Elise Richman received a BFA from the University of Washington in 1995 and an MFA from American University in 2001. She has exhibited her work locally and nationally in a variety of spaces including the Katzen Art Center and the Addison Ripley Gallery in Washington, DC, The Mazmanian Gallery in Massachusetts, Gallery 4 Culture, SOIL, and the Center on Contemporary Art in Seattle, and the Kittredge Gallery, Pacific Lutheran University Gallery, and the Woolworth Windows in Tacoma. Her paintings are included in private collections in San Francisco; New York; Washington, DC; Baltimore; and Seattle as well as The Hallie Ford Museum, King County, the Greater Tacoma Community Foundation, and the City of Tacoma. Richman was a recipient of the 2014 Greater Tacoma Community Foundation art award, 2014 and 2017 Davis teaching awards, and was finalist for a 2015 Neddy Award in painting. She is also active in the campus and broader community, serving as a co-chair of the 2010 and 2014 National Race and Pedagogy Conference's Arts and Special Events committees, the Advisory Board of The Tacoma Art Museum's *30 Americans*, and co-convener of the inaugural and second PNW Painting symposia in 2017 and 2020.

This video documents the act of observing and witnessing rivers whose very movement is central to current environmental debates. Water that flows freely fosters the survival of salmon who depend on cold, clean, moving water to make their lengthy journeys from birth streams to the ocean and back again.

Currents is a composite of ten second videos capturing the way water moves at the sites represented in the surrounding paintings and drawings including creeks at the headwaters of the Salmon River, Icicle Creek below Eight Mile Lake, and Similkameen River at and near Enloe Dam.

Eight Mile Lake, which feeds Eight Mile Creek, Icicle Creek, and the Wenatchee River, is located nearly 5,000 feet above sea level on the east slope of Washington's Cascade Mountains. Eight Mile Lake's outlet was dammed in the 1920s to control water supply for downstream orchardists. Fifty years later, in 1976, the lake -- and several other dammed lakes in the area -- became part of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. The dam on Eight Mile Lake is currently in disrepair. Some argue it simply ought to be repaired at its current scale, others that it should be expanded to provide more water supply for farms and communities in the face of climate change and population growth, while still others believe the dam ought to be removed entirely because it is in a Wilderness Area. There are multiple entities that depend on the water released from Eight Mile and several other nearby lakes including the town of Leavenworth, local orchardists, and the Leavenworth National Fish Hatchery on Icicle Creek. The hatchery is intended to mitigate for the loss of salmon blocked by Grand Coulee Dam, and provides a fishery for the Yakama Nation and the Colville Tribes.

The debate surrounding Eight Mile Lake highlights enduring and pressing considerations at the heart of this and many other environmental debates. Do humans have a responsibility to preserve or even regain "untrammelled" environments in federally-designated wilderness areas and national parks? How can the needs of tribes and stakeholders be taken into account while protecting the high level ecological function of relatively pristine habitats? How does climate change affect the overall balance of needs as snowpack diminishes and water becomes less available when it is needed most for downstream fish, farms, and communities?

Enloe Dam, like a few others in Washington state and dozens around the country, is abandoned and longer serves a purpose. Enloe was built on north central Washington's Similkameen River -- a tributary of the Okanogan River -- in the early 1900s to power a local mining industry that no longer exists. The dam, which has not produced power since 1958, continues to block salmon, steelhead, and lamprey from accessing up to 348 miles of spawning streams that extend into British Columbia's Okanagan region. Removing the dam would play a major role in protecting upper Columbia steelhead and spring Chinook from extinction. The Okanogan County Public Utility District (PUD) currently owns the dam.

After a failed, approximately \$20 million effort to repower the dam, the PUD has stated that it is open to removal of Enloe Dam if another entity takes on the liability for removal and disposal of any toxic sediment that has settled behind the dam. The Colville Tribe and British Columbia's Similkameen Band support dam removal and the return of fish that swim above the dam site, but not artificial fish passage like a fish ladder around the dam. Before the dam was built, the river was partially blocked to fish passage by a large rapid that a tribal story attributes to a Coyote legend. Cultural history, mining contamination, and local politics all have played and will continue to play a role in the future of the Similkameen.

The watershed of Idaho's Salmon River, a major tributary of the Snake River, contains some of the most expansive intact salmon and steelhead habitat in the lower 48 states. Thanks (or no thanks) in large part to eight dams on the lower Snake and Columbia rivers, only a small and decreasing number of these iconic fish are able to utilize their high elevation, climate resilient spawning and rearing grounds in central Idaho. Creeks such as Johnson, Kelly, Elk, and Bear Valley will play a key role in the persistence of interior Columbia Basin salmon and steelhead if survival rates past the lower Snake and lower Columbia dams are improved. Removing the four lower Snake River dams and replacing their energy, irrigation, and freight transportation benefits is technically feasible (more so than would be removal of the larger lower Columbia dams), and would give these fish -- which migrate up to 1,000 miles and up to 7,000 feet above sea level -- a fighting chance in the face of climate change and other ecological degradation.

Bear Valley and the *Meadow* series represent the gentle, high elevation headwaters of Salmon River tributaries like the Middle Fork Salmon and South Fork Salmon rivers that serve as a nursery and spawning area for Snake River salmon and steelhead. The Alaska-like habitat in these creeks is currently underutilized by salmon because of the impacts of downstream dams.

Sunbeam Dam, featured in *Sunbeam*, was built on the upper main Salmon River in 1909 to power local gold mines. The dam only operated for one year, but remained until 1934 when it was blown up to restore sockeye salmon habitat in the lakes -- including Red Fish, Petit, and Alturas -- at the headwaters of the Salmon River. Will the lower Snake River dams -- built over half a century after Sunbeam Dam -- follow in Sunbeam's footsteps? Will they be removed for the benefit of the ecosystem, federal obligations to tribes, and the survival of fishing and recreation-dependent communities?