

Devolution or Evolution?

by Jimmy Patel

Crawl into your conscience and think of the impact your life has on the environment. Will you think of global warming? The depletion of resources? The contamination of water? This list goes on and on because the effect we have on the environment is immense. The *Sip. Do Not Gulp.* exhibit, created by the Bay Area artist Michele Guieu, at Santa Clara University's de Saisset Museum highlights our dependence on water. Illuminating the history of water in the Santa Clara Valley, the exhibit, on display from January 17 to March 16, compels us to consider the impact we have on the valley's water supply. Unlike traditional art exhibits where various works of art are displayed, the *Sip. Do Not Gulp.* exhibit is a chronological timeline of water in the Santa Clara Valley. Painted on the walls of the museum, this exhibit is unquestionably worth the time because taking one look at the display will leave you standing speechless and guilty.

The viewers, facing the exhibit, can see the mural begin on the left wall and extend to the right wall. To the casual eye, the mural simply begins on the left wall and extends onto the right wall. However, to a more informed viewer, the extension of the mural from one wall to another represents a distinct shift in time periods. The mural begins during the time of the indigenous Ohlone tribe, progressing to the Mission and Rancho periods, finally ending in present day Santa Clara. Throughout the mural, Guieu depicts the necessity of water and shows how the once plentiful resource is becoming scarce. The entire mural is composed of only two colors along with the white surface of the wall. The water is colored in blue, the landscape is in black, and the streaks of white add a sense of depth to the mural. The text, loaded with information on each wall, describes not only the history of water but also its purposes within the time period. In the middle of the exhibit, a small metal table with a pitcher of water is visible to symbolize that without water, we would not survive.

The abundance of the blue paint on the left wall shows the vast amount of water available in the region during the lifetime of the indigenous Ohlone people. Water dominates the landscape on this portion of the mural, as is the most plentiful resource on Earth. Describing the belief held by the Ohlone people, Guieu writes on the mural that at some point in time "the world was entirely covered with water apart from a single peak." To display this belief, blue is the dominant color on this wall. The bright blue water is gathered in an immense lake encompassed by black paint resembling a mountain. Water's function during this time period is to be natural and support life.

The scenic setting on the wall shows that water supports life through its depiction of wild, roaming animals akin to wolves and birds. Like an etching, the white surface of the wall is only visible to add contrast. Without the white, the black animals would not be seen with the black mountain in the background. The coyote, standing majestically at the foot of the mountain, bursts out to viewers with white highlights and slowly vanishes into the mountain as you look down.

Unlike the left wall, the middle wall is dominated by masses of black paint with a small stream of blue running across. Towards the left of the wall, an image of the Santa Clara Mission is indicated and towards the right, ranchers are working away on fields with water flowing through. Despite the little detail that is seen on the wall, it is recognizable that the amount of blue paint has significantly diminished. Not only is there less water but the water has also developed a new purpose: to irrigate the fields. The mural shows the water stored in massive containers and used to irrigate the fields during the Rancho period. The ranchers living in the Santa Clara Valley controlled the flow of water and used it to grow crops. In doing so, the quantity of the resource diminished greatly during this time.

The painting on the right wall is immensely different from the wall on the left. With a scarce amount of blue, the mural is dominated by black-and-white man-made creations such as skyscrapers and dams. A small amount of water flows from mountain peaks, dams, and aquifers, to the buildings as if it is following narrow piping with random right angles. On the bottom of the wall, Guieu notes the new purpose of water by painting interesting facts about the correlation between water and food. The purpose of water on this wall that represents the modern day Santa Clara Valley is farming. She writes that farms would not be productive without water because every “pound of beef needs 1800 gallons of water” and every “pound of chicken needs 470 gallons of water.” Clearly, the food industry is heavily reliant on water to produce food. By using statistics like these, Guieu tells visitors that without water, food would not exist.

The history of water, depicted by the mural, has been a process of evolution and devolution. We have used water differently throughout history. Originally used to support life, water evolved for irrigation, and finally evolved again for the food industry. While the roles of water have increased, water has also undergone a process of devolution because it is becoming more and more scarce. Michele Guieu’s exhibit *Sip. Do Not Gulp.* informs us that the once abundant resource is becoming more limited. According to Guieu, the Santa Clara Valley was once an enormous producer of fruits with nearly 40 canneries. Now, due to the decreased supply of water, the region is no longer one of

the largest fruit producers. With limited resources and the state of California already in a drought, it is up to us to conserve water because every drop counts.