

Earth Island Journal

News of the World Environment

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St. Louis continues to bear
the brunt of the A-Bomb

COLLATERAL DAMAGE



Also:

Fukushima –
Living in Limbo

Repurposing
Rocky Flats



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Lest We Forget

“Drinking a glass of water shouldn’t be risky business,” I wrote in the previous issue of this magazine. Sadly, the unfolding crisis in Flint, Michigan — where people’s drinking water has been poisoned with dangerous levels of lead, where officials failed to notify residents for months after they learned of the problem — shows that a glass of water continues to be risky in many places across the United States.

We now know that anywhere from 6,000 and 12,000 children in Flint have been exposed to the contaminated water, which could leave them with irreversible developmental setbacks and other health complications.

I would like to say that it’s shocking how almost every level of government failed the people of Flint, but this kind of stuff happens too darn often for shock to be an adequate response anymore.

This issue’s cover story, “Collateral Damage” (Page 18) reveals a similar tale of negligence and denial by the very agencies charged with protecting the American public.

As reporter Lori Freshwater reveals, the people of St. Louis County have, for decades, been exposed to radiation from thousands of tons of World War II-era atomic waste that was dumped in the area some 70 years ago. Radionuclides from these wastes have leached into the local soil and waterways and could be the reason behind what seems to be an unusually high number of cancers and other rare illnesses afflicting the people there.

At one landfill, a 300-degree Fahrenheit underground fire smolders barely 1,000 feet away from where some 8,700 tons of this waste lies buried, posing the imminent threat of

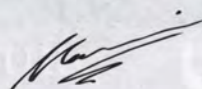
radioactive fallout. No one, it appears, has a clear idea what will happen if the underground inferno reaches the waste. Hopefully, we will never have to find out.

In Flint, it took resident Lee-Anne Walters’s amateur research into the chemicals the city was adding (or not adding) to its water for the whole can of worms to spill open.

In North St. Louis too, it’s been dogged research by an incredible group of local women and men that’s helped shine a light on a serious environmental problem that should have been addressed decades ago. Their persistence has paid off. Last year, the Army Corps of Engineers finally began testing the soil around their homes for radioactive contamination, and the Centers for Disease Control has just begun a public health assessment to evaluate people’s potential exposure to nuclear waste.

In Flint, the question of who’s ultimately responsible is still being parsed out. But in North St. Louis County, there’s little doubt: The area’s radioactive legacy is a byproduct of the US government’s nuclear war program. Ultimately, the buck stops at the White House.

But you and I have some responsibility in this too. We need to get out there and hold our government accountable. And we need to make sure that these stories of egregious injustice are not forgotten. That’s what Mary Oscko, who has stage-four lung cancer and is still fiercely fighting the powers-that-be, wants. “Please tell our story,” she entreated me recently. “Please tell it because our lives have worth.” ■



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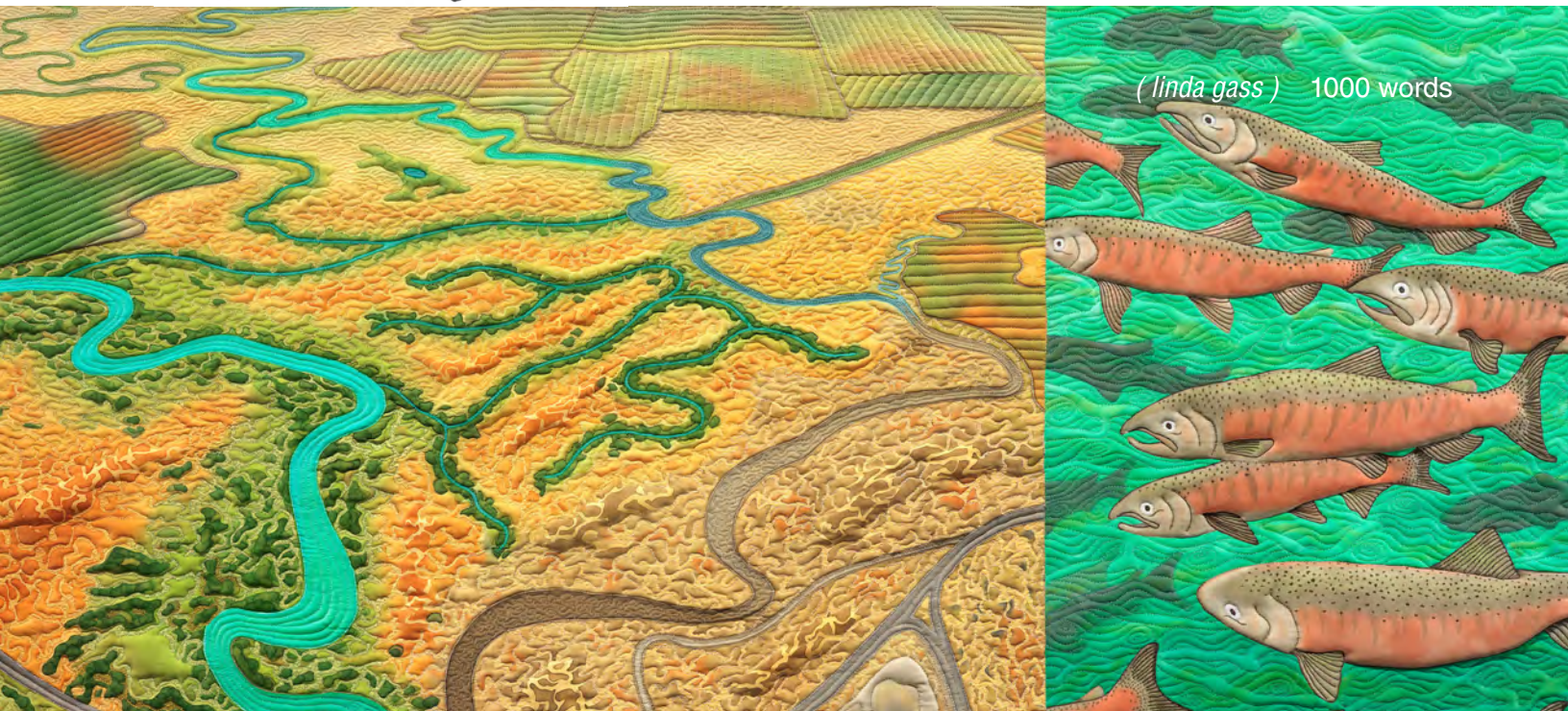
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San Joaquin Merced Revival (Confluence Series) depicts how the San Joaquin River has been so dammed that it dries up before it meets up with the Merced River. A bird's eye view of the two rivers is paired with Chinook salmon, a species endangered by the disappearing confluence.

Beauty in Truth

Linda Gass grew up in Los Angeles in the 1970s at a time when California was, pretty much like now, going through a prolonged drought. How then, she often wondered as a young girl, was everything so green? What's with the lawns, the trees, and the swimming pools? Years later, she learned that it was because the City of Angels pulled water from the eastern Sierra Nevada Mountains, Northern California, and the Colorado River via hundreds of miles of pipes and reservoirs. Since then, Gass says, she has been on a quest to understand "the relationship between humans and water and land that sustains us."

Gass's "stitched paintings" are informed and inspired by her research into the history of water use in California and the American West — where it comes from, how it gets moved around, and how we use (and abuse) it. They are also informed by her technical background — Gass has a masters in computer science and she spent 10 years working in the software industry.

Using a mix of painting and quilting techniques, Gass creates colorful, textured

landscapes and maps that reveal how we have manipulated and, more often than not, polluted, one of our most precious natural resources.

Sanitary, for instance, offers an aerial view of Newby Island Sanitary Landfill in Milpitas, right by the San Francisco Bay. The landfill takes in 4,000 tons of garbage daily. Its 342-acre pile of trash is close to reaching the maximum permitted height of 120 feet. Refined zooms in on the Chevron Refinery in Richmond, the largest industrial polluter in the California Bay Area, which has released untreated toxic wastewater into the Bay several times in the past. Gass's body of work does also include more hopeful stories. Take, for instance, Cooley Landing: Life in Water, which shows an ecosystem rebounding to life at a former landfill site.

Each of these intricate, 30x30-inch pieces takes the Palo Alto-based artist about two months to put together. Despite the seriousness of her subject matter, Gass prefers to engage viewers through pleasure. Which is why she uses bright, saturated colors and luminous silks. She especially likes to

convey the "familiar and comforting feel of textiles that comes from the integral and basic part they play in our lives." That feeling of comfort, she believes, helps draw viewers in and encourages them to reflect on the contradictions between the beautiful piece of art before them and the ugly reality it portrays. The idea is not to overwhelm people with the sheer magnitude of the environmental problems we face, but to inspire them to action.

Linda Gass is an artist in residence in the Palo Alto Cubberley Artist Studio program. Her work has been shown at various galleries and museums, including The Oakland Museum, The Textile Museum in Washington, DC, and the Yosemite Museum Gallery. To learn more about her work go to www.lindagass.com

More Online: See a slideshow at www.earthislandjournal.com