

Jeff Downing Statement

Murrayana Reliquary - relic: Donner Lake, California

I was lucky enough to grow up in New England, “on the water.” A childhood spent along the coast has influenced my sculpture, with water a constant in my life and my work. As a teenage do-it-yourselfer, I made money selling fresh lobsters I caught in handmade traps constructed out of scrap materials. This self-reliance is reflected in my habit of making my own tools, clays, and glazes. These elements of coastal life and references to water reappear time and again in my sculptures.

On a recent artist’s residency in Mexico, I witnessed first-hand some of the devastating effects of drought. The work I created there I designed to mark the depletion of the water. The project opened my eyes to the power of public art in addressing critical environmental issues.

The region where I live, Northern California, is experiencing a perpetual drought with progressively extended, almost year-round dry seasons. The fiery landscapes of this drought are daily realities that reverberate across the entire ecosystem. This past year, on a road trip across the American Southwest, my view moved inland, but I became even more focused on the water, or, increasingly, on the lack thereof. The evidence was everywhere I turned, dried-up lake beds, dead fish, and acre upon acre of brittle, dying trees—the tinder of inevitable wildfires.

I look behind while looking ahead in this work. With clean, abundant, life-giving water rapidly becoming a thing of the past, a relic of a long-ago age, I chose to inter my watery “relics” (drawn from California’s Mono Lake, Arizona’s Colorado River, Oregon’s Rogue River, and Washington State’s Columbia River, and other threatened environments) in age-old reliquary boxes. At the same time, the ancient symbology of the two-sided diptych reflects decisions made and choices to come.

Over the centuries, in shrines, churches, temples, stupas, and ancient wonders like the pyramids, reliquary boxes have housed relics, from the bones of saints to articles of clothing and other sacred objects. This work in this series embraces water as a relic. There is nothing more sacred than the water that sustains us, and this work stands as both dire warning and solemn memorial for an irreplaceable, precious resource.