

WATER

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Water Works: An Introduction by Danielle Wu

Pipes are leaking
I'm taking a leak
Time to turn on
the water works



Spanning a wide range of disciplines and cultures, the artists featured in the exhibition *Water Works* lend us the opportunity to consider the washroom beyond its immediate function. Hana Al-Saadi turns bidet sprayers into a pair of plump lips. Laurie Kang coats metal steamers with a layer of fleshy pink skin, and Mia Raadik fills basins with foamy shaving cream. Ajay Kurian strings lights into a toothy grimace behind a shower curtain. Pauline Shaw denatures wool in water before drying it into abstract shapes. HaeAhn Woo Kwon's line drawing emerges from the drain of her porcelain shower-base sculpture.

Even as the last century has witnessed the rise of private plumbing and showers at home, the current zeitgeist has rekindled an interest in bathing as a social practice. We see this in the popularity of spas, from the sauna to the hammam, and in the spread of feminist “self-care” discourse. Originally encouraged as a way for the poor working class to get clean, and later disparaged as a sexually deviant site, the public bath, at once communal and intimate, has also provided a ripe breeding ground for artistic imagining. What are the possibilities—naughty or otherwise—offered by the opacity of steam? How does racial and gendered Otherness supply the sensual appeal for one of life’s most intimate daily rituals? Can personal embetterment be entwined with political change?

As a phrase that references both civic irrigation systems and a crying fit, *Water Works* draws a line between one’s own flesh and the broader social body. It also reorients perspectives to consider

the invisible labor of the nonhuman—the work that water does—and how our subsistence on the diminishing natural resource is vital for both life and art making. Whether one is bathing in it, drinking it, or listening to its healing sounds, water serves as a timeless reservoir of inspiration.

Historically, the world of hygiene is as personal as it is political. Trans access to bathrooms, Jim Crow-era segregated water fountains, and Asian massage parlors have all been battlegrounds for racial and gendered violence. Commingling in the water has long evoked what Edward Said criticized as the mythic Orient, a land filled with more erotic and effeminate pleasures than the civilized West. In 2021, the public bath as the Orient cascaded across national news when white gunman Robert Aaron Long targeted multiple Asian spas and massage parlors near Atlanta, in an attempt to eliminate his self-proclaimed sexual temptations. He fatally shot eight strangers, six of them Asian women.

4 Our experiences of being vulnerable and exposed in a public space can shape the very fabric of who we are, even after we have long gone or as civic designs change. Still, the body returns. Most of us begin every day before our bathroom mirrors, trusting it to provide a truthful reflection before stepping outdoors. *Water Works* asks us to reenter that room we trust, to feel safe while completely naked and bare, and ask: how has it shaped the contours of who we are?

Bath Time

by Summer Kim Lee

When I take a bath, I measure how much time is spent soaking in the tub by whether or not my fingers and toes have started to wrinkle in the water, turning into fleshy prunes. My mom used to say that this was a sign of dehydration—it was time to get out of the bath. This didn't make sense to me. How could your body become dehydrated while lying in a body of water? Wouldn't your body have no other choice but to drink up its surroundings? When I was older, I discovered another explanation, one to do with how our skin retains water and is reshaped by it.

The top layer of our skin that we see and touch, that prevents our bodies from losing water, is the *stratum corneum*, which is composed of dead keratin cells. When these cells absorb water, they swell. Since the skin's top layer is still attached to the living tissue underneath, it must make up for the skin's expanded surface area by clinging and shriveling, like shrink wrap. Our fingers and toes wrinkle from an excess of water, not a lack of it. When I take a bath, I clean my skin's deadened barrier that is necessary for protecting my living tissue and retaining water, which makes up roughly 60 percent of the human body.

Baths are for luxury, pleasure, comfort, and respite as much as they are, if not more so, for the work of getting clean. Some like to take baths alone, treating the tub as an inner sanctum with bubbles, candles, and paperbacks that somehow never get too wet to read. Bathing can also be something sensual and romantic shared with another person. And baths can be more social beyond the solo time of self-care or the closed circuit of a couple. When I was very young, my mom kept me company during my baths. She would pull up a chair and read a book either silently on her own or out loud to me. She would follow my directions as we played with my toys and sang made-up songs together. She'd also watch me to make sure I was actually cleaning myself, because otherwise I would only entertain

myself by throwing cups full of water in the air, trying to get the liquid to hit the ceiling so I could watch the weight of each droplet slowly form as it fell back on my head. If she was not there, if she had a phone call or something else to do, I would happily stay in cold water for hours, lips turning blue, prune-like all over, looking up at a constellation of droplets falling from the sky.

Cleaning ourselves is usually thought of as something done in private, but we learn how because we have first been taught by someone else—in front of someone else—following their example or instructions and discovering what we like, what feels good and efficient, to develop our own practice and routine. The bathroom, then, whether at home or in public, is a social, pedagogical space where our own body is not always ours. How we wash ourselves is shaped by the teachings and tests of another, like my mom, who would check to see if the hair at my nape was wet after I washed, and rub my forearm to see if the friction of her skin against mine caused little pills of dirt to form—proof I had not scrubbed myself hard enough.

6 Yet, the history of hygiene complicates rather than affirms how we think of care, for it is also intimately linked with the dispossession and colonization of racialized subjects via their bodies as sites of regulation and discipline. In the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for instance, the US federal government, in concert with the Catholic and Protestant churches, ripped Native American children from their families and placed them in white homes and boarding schools as a practice of forced assimilation under the guise of care. In what were often abusive environments, children were taught the so-called moral values of good hygiene, and their new enforced daily routines changed their relationship to their communities, as well as to their own bodies. To be clean is to be pure, civilized, in good health, and in service to society. To be anything else outside societal standards of what constitutes cleanliness and bodily care is to be dirty, uncivilized, morally suspect, and threatening: a public hazard to the community as contagion and contaminant.

The stakes of keeping clean can be high for those whose vulnerability and marginalization means they cannot afford to be accused of being impure, written off, and discarded from respectable social life.

The bathroom, then, is a space of refuge that simultaneously harbors our anxieties around the many ways our bodies are perceived and determines how, once we cross the threshold of the bathroom door, we present to the public. The inside of the bathroom is for cleaning and gathering oneself in anticipation of an outside that always leaks and makes its way in. It is where we try to contain ourselves and leave behind our body's waste, detritus, and unwanted remains.

Humans shed around five million dead skin cells daily. These discards become dust that accumulates around us—in the air, on our clothes, and in and under our bed. The particles that catch the light when they float in the sun could be you or me. We breathe them in, move through them, and watch them waver in the air. Thinking about this can make you feel a little claustrophobic. Does your skin start to itch and crawl, and does the air feel thicker, packed in and pressed by the unknown bodies that surround you? Or does it make you feel expansive, as if your body has reached beyond its limits? Beyond the bathroom?

We hydrate and exfoliate our skin to shed more efficiently and to encourage the creation of new skin cells to replace the old. I think about this when I scrub myself with my Korean washcloths, which are made in Japan, and which I buy in bulk at Korean grocery stores in Los Angeles and pack with me when I travel. The washcloths practically have the texture of sandpaper; they can sometimes hurt. The packaging, adorned with the image of a smiling Asian woman holding the washcloth against her back, tells me that its contents are good for hygiene and circulation.

Underlying the feel-good language of washing and exfoliation is a discomfort and disgust with the thought that we are encased by dirty, dead skin: this is what separates our bodies from our impure world of pollution and toxins. Perhaps this is what can feel unsettling about wrinkled fingers and toes. They look like skin that is barely hanging on, surely too flimsy to keep us inside of ourselves, in one clean, well-hydrated piece. Yet, our wrinkled parts might be reassuring. They are not a sign to get out of water and drain the tub, but a way of knowing that no matter how much we scrub, spray, wash, and soak, the body does what it can to hold us together while losing parts of us along the way.

Works in the Exhibition

1. Hana Al-Saadi
Sneaky and Pure, 2022
Rubber
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

2. Laurie Kang
Earth Surge, 2021
Slippers, cast aluminum lotus root, and pigmented silicone
3 × 9 × 7.5"
Courtesy of the artist and Franz Kaka

3. Laurie Kang
Bodied, burgeon, 2019
Stainless steel steamer, pigmented silicone, dried lotus root, polymer clay,
and fruit mesh bags
8.5 × 21.5 × 21.5"
Courtesy of the artist

4. Ajay Kurian
Bather, 2019
Vinyl, grommets, curtain hooks, LEDs, and steel
64 × 20 × 20"
Courtesy of the artist and 47 Canal

5. Mia Raadik
Self-care, 2019
Beauty products, buckets, and stools
Dimensions variable
Courtesy of the artist

6. Pauline Shaw
Tombsweeper's Mosquito Bite (water), 2021
Glass, silver, and water
14 × 7"
Courtesy of the artist

7. Pauline Shaw
Predator, 2019
Hand-dyed wet and needle-felted wool, silk, and milk fibers with cotton gauze
84 × 62"
Courtesy of the artist

8. HaeAhn Woo Kwon
It Gives Skin, 2022
Fiberglass shower base and dry erase ink
Dimensions variable
Shower base: 36 × 72 × 2.75"
Courtesy of the artists and Franz Kaka

Biographies

Hana Al-Saadi is a Qatar-based artist whose work explores aspects of culture, society, and social media to generate discussions about what remains anonymous and private, and what is public.

Laurie Kang is a Canada and United States-based artist who uses sculpture, photography and site-responsive installation to explore the body as an ongoing process and environment.

Ajay Kurian is a United States-based multimedia artist whose work deals with mythologies of American life.

Summer Kim Lee, essayist, is an assistant professor of English at University of California, Los Angeles. Her writing has been published in *Artforum*, *ASAP/Journal*, *The Nation*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Social Text*, and *Women & Performance*.

Mia Raadik is an Estonia-based conceptual feminist artist whose work challenges social norms and highlights their underlying causes.

Pauline Shaw is a United States-based artist whose work questions how personal history and cultural knowledge is acquired, preserved and rendered.

HaeAhn Woo Kwon is a Canada-based artist whose installations and assemblages bring together disparate materials and means of production, including hand-built, manufactured, found, and organic objects and images.

Danielle Wu is the curator of *Water Works* and a writer based in Brooklyn, New York. Her reviews have been published in *Art in America*, *Artforum*, and *The Offing*.

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