Capital City Arts Initiative

The Capital City Arts Initiative [CCAI] is delighted to present The Driest State: Nevada Watersheds, *a solo exhibition by artist Nolan Preece at the CCAI Courthouse Gallery from February 6 – May 28, 2015. In conjunction with the exhibition, CCAI commissioned writer Mary Webb to write the following essay. CCAI extends its sincere appreciations to Nolan, Mary, the Carson City Courthouse, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, NV Energy Foundation, and all those involved in the exhibition.*

From a Desert Sky: Capturing Nevada Watersheds

"There it is: Take it," William Mulholland, engineer for the Los Angeles aqueduct, on viewing Owens River water flowing through the canal into the San Fernando Valley, California, November 5, 1913.

I80 - Fernely Sink Wetlands near Fernley, NV, digital archival pigment print, 2014

Nolan Preece's photographic work on western watersheds documents how we live within the driest state. Preece's stark images show myriad ways in which human activity has altered the Nevada desert, where rainfall averages fewer than seven inches per year. We have transformed parts of the Nevada desert into a wetter, greener, more productive place, but as Preece's work shows, many of these actions have imperiled our watersheds. Rivers transformed by damming no longer support native fishes or plant habitats; riparian areas no longer flood; landscapes altered by mining are threatened by contaminated water and fugitive dust both of which can trigger serious health effects. Drought, fire, invasive species, and climate change have further transformed the land.

Nolan Preece, a Utah native, has spent his lifetime taking photographs of iconic western vistas, from Alaska to the Grand Canyon. Preece uses photography to promote environmental advocacy and awareness. His exhibition bears witness to the importance of water and watersheds in the arid west, particularly in the desert landscape of Nevada. Preece credits his interests in photography and the environment to his father, Erland's, influence: "We always had a darkroom in the house. I remember well my father setting up his 4x5 camera and waiting patiently for the clouds or light to change," Preece writes. Erland Preece studied the work of Ansel Adams and modeled environmental

activism in his rural Utah community. In the 1950s, his father's photographs promoted awareness of a controversial dam project, Echo Park, in the Dinosaur National Monument in rural Utah. At that time, the Bureau of Reclamation's dam projects proliferated throughout the west. Nolan recalls that his politically conservative father understood and wanted to alert the public to the damage that a dam such as the one proposed in Echo Park would create. Erland's photos, published in the local newspaper, helped educate his neighbors about the dangers of the proposed dam, which was relocated to another site at Flaming Gorge. Nolan Preece's early exposure to the power of photography to speak for wild places launched his life work in both photography and environmental advocacy.

Nolan Preece is Professor Emeritus of Photography and former Gallery Curator at Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno, Nevada. Preece earned an MFA in photography at Utah State University and has devoted his career to fine art photography, printmaking, and digital photography. Just after earning his degree, Preece worked as a field technician for a Utah oil exploration company.

The Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge - Carson River Sink, NV,
digital archival pigment print, 2013

This experience involved photographing large tracts of undeveloped land in eastern Utah, solidifying Preece's environmental interests. As these photographs show, Preece sometimes works from a small plane to shoot aerial images, and this process enables us to see the breadth Nevada watersheds. In sharp contrast to Mulholland's arrogant words, "There it is. Take it," Preece "takes" the opportunity to capture the desert's beauty and compel viewers to consider the costs of living in a fragile landscape.

Preece's twenty-nine images in *The Driest State: Nevada Watersheds* demonstrate an artistic vision that is both "splendid and condemnatory," as art critic Jonathan Goodman has written. The images portray the costs of occupying an arid land. Many of us know from these past drought years what happens to the yard or garden when the water is turned off, but we may not realize the importance of *our watershed*, the geographic term for an area that is divided or bounded by a source of water draining to the same place. It seems appropriate to quote famed river explorer and scientist John Wesley Powell here. Powell described a watershed as "[an] area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community."

Powell's definition underscores the word community, a word that evokes human interdependence and mutual support. Communities hold each of us, human and non-human alike; each drop of water that falls as snow or flows from lakes or streams into this community means life itself. Our

watershed is not “a building out back,” as Nolan joked. Rather, the Truckee, Carson, and Walker River watersheds tie each community to waterways that rise in the Sierra Nevada. Damming these desert rivers alters the ecosystems that depend for survival on that water; diverting these rivers exacerbates the effects of drought (a constant in the Great Basin). These overtaxed waterways reveal the effects of a changing climate.

The Truckee River flows from jewel-like Lake Tahoe to Pyramid Lake in the desert. This unusual watershed—a river connecting two lakes—was forever altered in the early twentieth century, with the building of Derby Dam, east of Reno. This watershed compels us to see connections: from Pyramid’s briny depths, the famed Lahontan Cutthroat Trout would migrate upstream, following the Truckee’s cool waters to spawn. Historically, the perception of deserts as wastelands engendered the view that water flowing into a desert lake was “wasted” and should be put to more beneficial use. Thus Derby Dam (the first of many Federal irrigation projects)was completed in 1905. For first half of the twentieth century, Derby Dam diverted nearly fifty percent of the Truckee’s water for irrigation, decimating Pyramid Lake and combining the waters from two rivers, the Truckee and Carson. This

Anaconda Mine Site near Yerington, NV, digital archival pigment print, 2014

single dam nearly wiped out the Lahontan Cutthroat Trout and the pre-historic Cui-ui of Pyramid Lake even as it helped develop agriculture in the Lahontan Valley. This complex waterway terminates at Stillwater National Wildlife Refuge, a major bird and wildlife oasis in the desert. Thanks to legislation passed in the 1990s, expanded water flows into the Marsh to protect the refuge and restore natural biodiversity.

Other desert rivers such as the Carson and Walker have paid the price of such alterations for human use. So much water has been taken out of the Walker River that the level of Walker Lake has dropped over 140 feet. Preece’s view of Walker Lake on a windy day illustrates how much airborne dust an exposed lakeshore produces.

Not far from Walker Lake lies the now-abandoned Anaconda copper mine, the source of another, more tainted dust. Preece’s “Anaconda Mine” image shows a “lake” that formed when the mine ceased operations and stopped pumping groundwater. Some of Anaconda’s threats to the watershed include “contaminated groundwater and contaminated fugitive dust that could impact human health and surface water,” according to the Environmental Protection Agency (http://yosemite.epa.gov/r9/sfund/r9sfdocw.nsf/vwsoalphabetic/Anaconda+Mine).

Preece's aerial views of the Quinn River in the Black Rock Desert remind us that we live in "the driest state." Photographed from several thousand feet above ground level, the Quinn's intermittent flows and occasional floods etch sinuous patterns into the desert. As writer John Hart observes about the Black Rock, "*these* are the deserts where "mountain streams lay down their salt sediments and evaporate away," (*Hiking the Great Basin*, 346). The Quinn River views evoke the desolation that many of us feel when we think of the Nevada desert.

Preece also focuses our attention on the Fremont cottonwood trees near Fort Churchill to demonstrate the consequences of drought and climate change on a desert ecosystem. The montage juxtaposes beautiful fall color in the cottonwood trees with a dry riverbed. The Fremont cottonwoods are threatened, unable to regenerate without the episodic flood events that once characterized the Carson River flows. Without flooding, the familiar white fluffs have no muddy bank in which to implant and grow. Diminished water flows lower the water table, starving tree roots. These conditions, combined with increased heat, make the trees vulnerable to insects and other pathogens. Native plant communities protect the watersheds.

The Quinn River Sink – Black Rock Playa, NV, digital archival pigment print, 2009

The Driest State photographs present stunning and solemn images of Nevada watersheds, both the scenic and controversial. Despite an overwhelming sense of our negative impacts on desert land and water, an optimistic perspective emerges. We can imagine Preece, strapped into a small plane, flying over desert land forms, "always looking for the next opportune shot," as he recently remarked. Whether shooting images on the ground or from the air, Preece "takes" the opportunity to capture for his viewers the life-giving watersheds "out back."

Mary Webb
Reno, Nevada
January 2015

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www.arts-initiative.org

CCAI is funded in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, John Ben Snow Memorial Trust, Nevada Arts Council, City of Carson City, NV Energy Foundation, U.S. Bank Foundation, Nevada Humanities and the National Endowment for the Humanities, Comstock Foundation for History and Culture, and the John and Grace Nauman Foundation.