

Neo-Baroques

From Latin America to the Hollywood Blockbuster

Edited by

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Artist's Essay: Towers, Shipwrecks, and Neo-Baroque Allegories

Patrick Mahon

Invested in the relationship between human culture and nature, my works demonstrate the potential of graphic art to foreground critical rhetoric through printed visual language. My artworks are highly embellished, printed wall sculptures meant to operate according to a Benjaminian conception of allegory. Alluding to baroque art, the structures and vessels I produce are caught between destruction and becoming. I argue that they are neo-baroque objects that embody a past while simultaneously suggesting the possibility of a future—albeit a fragmentary one.

The two series presented within the accompanying portfolio, respectively titled *Water and Tower Allegory* and *Voyager*, each speak directly to Walter Benjamin's conception of allegory. To articulate the preoccupations inherent to these works, I rely upon Benjamin's essay, "The Origin of German Tragic Drama," in which the author evolves a conception of baroque allegory based on his interest in the 'ruins' of history. According to Benjamin, with the "baroque it is common practice ... to pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal" (in Broadfoot 9). Yet, as Lisa Broadfoot notes, Walter Benjamin also acknowledges that, "the paradox of the fragment (rips) the work from its context, yet also ensures (it as) an adequate reflection of its context." (2)

In my artwork, references to the ruins of modernity are not merely about repurposing what has been disassembled, but also embody nostalgic allusions to a freighted history that poses an imagined, if unlikely future. Or, as Svetlana Boym suggests, a future promised by the past, which never came into being.

The specific cultural and environmental preoccupation with which I am involved is water. I acknowledge the present socio-cultural moment as one in which water is a subject of discussion and contestation in public discourse. As a Canadian I recognize it as a resource that is ubiquitous within our history and an increasingly desirable international commodity. In light of this, some of my work originates within a collaborative research project regarding water and culture, *Immersion Emergencies and Possible Worlds*, whose title draws on my earlier research on baroque representations of baptism. The water project uses research and practice in visual art to address the subject regarding its simultaneous identifications within culture and the environment. At its base,

the project links the historical practice of *picturing nature* with the potential of visual representation to offer urgent contexts for aesthetic, socio-cultural, and political engagement.

Locating the Neo-Baroque

Situating my artistic practice within a neo-baroque framework necessitates my engagement with larger questions as to what constitutes neo-baroque in contemporary art. One of the principle investigations that informs my thinking was a project I developed with Canadian curator, Susan Edelstein, that resulted in the exhibition, *Barroco-Nova: Neobaroque Moves in Contemporary Art*, presented in London, Canada, in 2011.¹

To establish the conceptual terrain of the exhibition, Susan Edelstein and I turned to a previous landmark show, *Ultrabaroque: Aspects of Post-Latin American Art* (2000–2003), which fashioned a visual and conceptual matrix regarding the neo-baroque and representation, and was therefore an important paradigm for our initiative. Here I want to review some of the findings that informed *Barroco Nova*, especially because they bear heavily on my preoccupations as an ostensible neo-baroque artist.²

The exhibition *Ultrabaroque*, organized and circulated by the Museum of Contemporary Art in San Diego, was important for audiences throughout the non-Latin world because of the significant complexity its wide range of contemporary art emphasised. Elizabeth Armstrong, one of the curators, noted in her essay for the exhibition catalogue that, “the baroque has been a Eurocentric cliché in reference to Latin American art and culture, [but] the exhibition [looks at] the validity of the baroque as a means of examining our globalizing impulses, particularly in the area of visual culture.” (3) Armstrong further offered that in assembling the show the curators aimed to suggest “the baroque as a model by which to understand and analyze the processes of transculturation and hybridity that globalization has highlighted and set in motion.” (4) The curators sought to propose the baroque as an “attitude rather than a style interdisciplinary in nature and not restricted...to...the fields to which it has traditionally been confined.” (4)

1 The exhibition, *Barroco Nova: Neobaroque Moves in Contemporary Art*, curated by S. Edelstein and P. Mahon, was mounted in three galleries in London, Canada, (Museum London; McIntosh Gallery and ArtLab, Western University), in 2010–11. The exhibition was a project of *The Hispanic Baroque: Complexity in the First Atlantic Culture*.

2 A portion of this essay first appeared in Mahon 2011.

The interests manifested within *Ultrabaroque* point to the complex socio-political as well as aesthetic terrains within which the works in the exhibition are located. In light of those frames, it is useful to acknowledge the importance of the specific geographic and social context from which the works emanate; their situation whereby the site of the production of the works was largely Latin American, while the eventual exhibition settings were purposefully set in the North. Clearly, the geopolitics attached to such a reality cannot be underestimated, including as it relates of what was, at the time of the exhibition, the recently signed NAFTA Agreement. To push this line of thinking further, as a North American artist I ask whether, given that *Ultrabaroque* had at its heart a politically oriented agenda, neo-baroque as a conceptual frame is defensible from my own socio-political and aesthetic standpoint.

I argue that such an 'other' neo-baroque conception can be supported. Paul Herkenhoff's contribution to the *Ultrabaroque* catalogue acknowledges the complexity this position demands: "The baroque was profoundly marked by the world it sought to justify... [and because it was] an inherited conception of the world, [it] often work[ed] as an empathic escape from the malaise of the present." (138) The foregoing alludes to a complex of histories and situations where cultural advances are contrived from messy inheritances, and are therefore ripe for and demanding of expressive approaches involving reflexivity and hyperbole. This conception readily accommodates the Canadian/North American cultures of the twenty-first century with their seeming 'post-everything' preoccupations, and proposes the possibility for artists, such as me, to engage the neo-baroque to both political and poetic ends.

Other background questions pertaining to the legitimacy of my neo-baroque practice arise. Eugenio d'Ors argued that the baroque appeared during a period of European social crisis, and other authors suggest that in its Latin-American incarnation baroque was actually an expression of resistance to the power structures that its aesthetic programs appeared to reinforce. (Herkenhoff 137) It follows that I question whether in North America the contemporary neo-baroque is an expression of resistance or capitulation regarding the political and social challenges of our times. And, as an artist, I also wonder whether its political effect is uniform across the multiple fields with which it is identified, especially regarding decolonialism and the environment, for example. My initial response acknowledges these as pressing questions with respect to globalization and transculturation and also posits that such questions can be unpacked via engagements with the artworks themselves. In that regard, preceding the images from the two projects under consideration are my commentaries on the specific terms of the various works, presented as 'notes.'

Neo-Baroque and the Return of a Repressed Modernism

Even as I argue for the validity of claiming the neo-baroque as a frame for my practice, I am simultaneously wary of being thought to identify primarily with an aesthetics of decoration and excess, with which neo-baroque is regularly associated. In that light, I am particularly committed to grounding my project in relation to the socio-political precedents of *Ultrabaroque* while intending, as I have indicated, to clear a space in which to articulate a non-Latin-centric approach. This latter aim necessitates a reading of the neo-baroque as a broad framework that, rather than being determined according to a specific geopolitical locations, takes on complexities introduced by sundry post-modern discourses—with the intention of shifting paradigms, and inferentially, spatial references. In that respect, Walter Moser's essay "The Concept of the Baroque" is germane in asserting that "in contemporary criticism, affinities between the neo-baroque and post-modernism occupy a privileged position." (30) Moser also claims that "a specific way of linking the neo-baroque with the postmodern uses the argument of a return of the repressed. Modernity is then seen as a paradigm that set itself up with the high cost of repressing the intensely esthetic side of aesthetics, that is, with a biopolitics intended to control the body. Consequently, the return of the baroque brings liberation of the repressed and is thus seen as an emancipation from modernity." (31) Moser argues for the potential of neo-baroque to offer tools with which to reproblematicize Modernism to culturally complex and critically productive ends. It is within this discursive field, where a revisiting of Modernism with its promises and transgressions is possible, that I situate my artistic investigations.

Notes on "Water & Tower Allegory"

In *Water & Tower Allegory* (figures 9.2–9.10) one observes printed sculptures that extend my longstanding commitment to intersecting art and design, decoration and expression, and the singular with the multiple. Here, I index water as both a natural and socially inscribed material, and towers as paradigms of human enterprise and intervention.

In the works, the grid-based and the florid, which include photographic details of a carved baroque church ceiling in Brazil, and references to solids and liquids, intersect to produce formal inventions. The objects I fabricate with printed wood—embellished using hand-stamping methods as well as digitally—are meant as dialogical, and to transit between representation and abstraction, poetry and politics. I am ultimately interested in the potential of these works to propose aesthetic engagement that can lead to speculation and discussion concerning the social and environmental moment.



FIGURE 9.1 *Research Image (Mahon): Water Tower, Rajasthan, India, 2011*
PHOTOGRAPH BY PATRICK MAHON.

Regarding the development of this work, in 2010 I travelled to India where I photographed water towers (figure 9.1). On the coast of Southern India, I observed the towers in the area where tsunami flooding had occurred in 2006. So, in that setting, the conception of water as both contained and uncontainable became



FIGURE 9.2
*Patrick Mahon, Water and
Tower Allegory #1. Ink on
wood. 155 × 105cm. 2012*



FIGURE 9.3
*Patrick Mahon, Water and
Tower Allegory #2. Ink on
wood. 175 × 92.5cm. 2012*

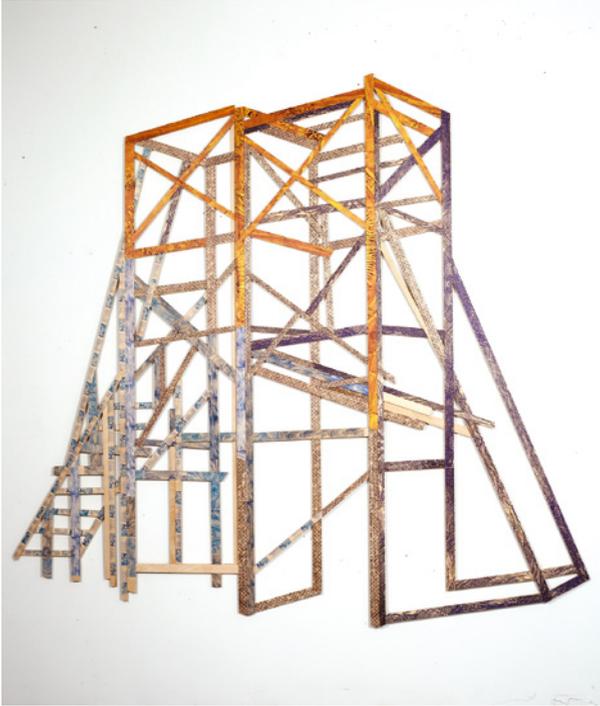


FIGURE 9.4
*Patrick Mahon, Water and
Tower Allegory #4. Ink on
wood. 190 × 195cm. 2013*



FIGURE 9.5
*Patrick Mahon, Water and Tower
Allegory #3. Ink on wood. 150 × 130cm.
2012*



FIGURE 9.6 Patrick Mahon, *Water and Tower Allegory #3. Detail*, 2012

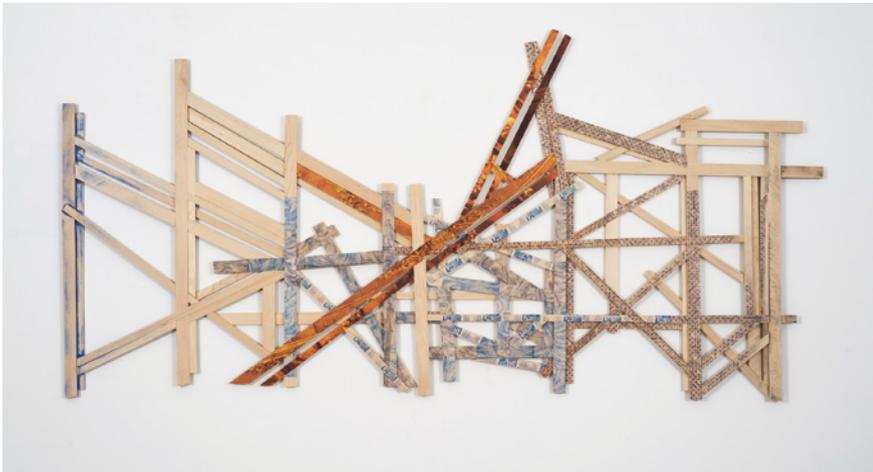


FIGURE 9.7 Patrick Mahon, *Water and Tower Allegory—Water Fence. Ink on wood. 84 × 100 cm.* 2013

compelling as a premise for a series of works. In light of my interest in water towers, I turned to the photography of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the German artists who concentrated on the subject for a sustained period. Surprisingly though, it was their series on ‘mining tipples,’ provisional wooden structures

built over mine shafts in America in the nineteenth century,³ that served as a more direct analogue for my works. I wanted them to bear a significant complexity regarding water, given its problematized connections with human culture and notions of sustainability—and also its conflicted status that now situates it within commodity capitalism while also directly connecting it with questions of human rights.

Speaking parenthetically, as an artist I am convinced it is important to address 'art problems' with the intention of leading publics towards other intellectual and social issues. Admittedly, I am fascinated by the 'formal' and material characteristics of water (fluid/flowing) and towers (built structures), and I attempt to intersect the respective 'visual' characteristics of each entity. In that regard, I think of my towers as provisional structures to 'address' water—though only one of my works suggests the possibility to be used for containment. The rest of the structures propose other possibilities: opportunities for rising above a torrent, or sites of play. Canadian critic, Meeka Walsh, postulated an identification of one of the pieces with a gallows.⁴



FIGURE 9.8 Patrick Mahon, *Water and Tower Allegory—Water Fence. Detail*, 2013

3 See, for example, *Mining Tipple*, 1920's Bernd and Hilla Becher, Frailey Coal Co., Donaldson, Schuylkill County, Pennsylvania, USA, 1978, gelatin silver print, Konrad Fischer Galerie.

4 Conversation with the artist, January 16, 2014.



FIGURE 9.9 Patrick Mahon, *Water and Tower Allegory #3. Detail*, 2012



FIGURE 9.10 Patrick Mahon, *Installation View: Water and Tower Allegory #1-3*, (University of Winnipeg Gallery 1Co3), 2014

Notes on “Voyager”

This project also circulates around water-related narratives and extends a neo-baroque allegory (see figures 9.11–9.15). I was invited to dig into the collection of the McMaster Museum of Art, (McMaster University, Hamilton, Canada) in 2012, and to produce an exhibition involving works from the collection and my own production. When I came across an Albrecht Dürer print entitled *Of Taking Offense at, but Learning From Fools*, from the *Ship of Fools* series,⁵

5 For the curatorial component of *Voyager*, I chose to focus on works in the collection by Renaissance engraver, Albrecht Dürer, and English (Baroque) engraver, William Hogarth. The four woodcuts attributed to Albrecht Dürer are illustrations for Sebastian Brant’s *Ship of*



FIGURE 9.11 Patrick Mahon, *Installation View (panorama): Voyager* (McMaster Museum of Art), 2014.



FIGURE 9.12 Patrick Mahon, *Shipwreck Study #3*, ink on balsawood, 28 × 31cm, 2013.

I thought it had particular significance in alluding to the engagement of artists in the modern world, among its other operations.

Fools/Narrenschiff, the first version of which appeared in 1494. The Durer pieces are important forerunners to the eighteenth century Hogarth prints, which were singularly important critical works of their time. My treatment here, though brief, bespeaks my admiration for all these graphic works and their continued importance.

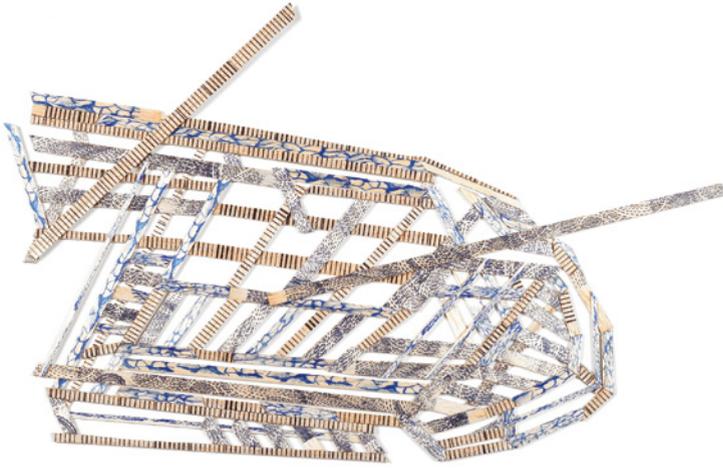


FIGURE 9.13 Patrick Mahon, *Shipwreck Study #1*, ink on balsawood, 30 × 56cm, 2013.

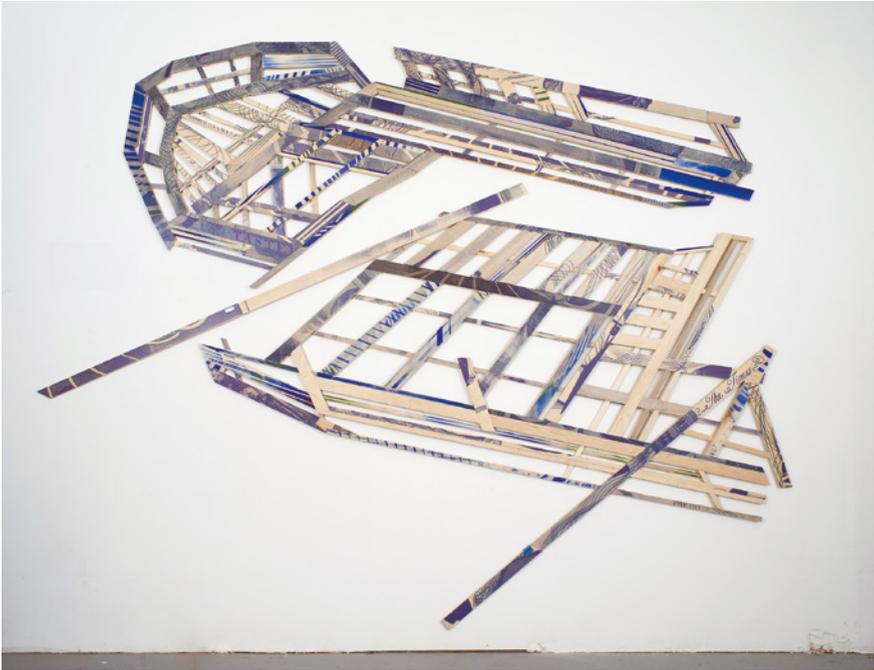


FIGURE 9.14 Patrick Mahon, *Voyager #1*, ink on hardboard, 230 × 260cm, 2013.



FIGURE 9.15 Patrick Mahon, *Voyager #2*, ink on hardboard, 2013.

As a contemporary artist, I am interested in my role as a social critic and also fascinated at the idea of the artist as a suspicious figure in culture. In our contemporary context, where the relationship between aesthetics and critique is often misunderstood and undervalued, and art's function as a commodity appears at times to undermine its critical capacity, I think of artists as curious passengers on the 'ship of fools.'

Given this, I chose to present works by Dürer alongside the complex, critical engravings of William Hogarth, amidst my new graphic/wall sculptures, produced for the exhibition that I hoped would function dialectically in that context. My works included a series of six studies and two large-scale 'printed stick drawings'/relief sculptures of *voyagers*—nominally, shipwrecks. The graphic details on the sticks make reference to some of the Hogarth prints on display in the exhibition.

For a publication accompanying the exhibition, I wrote an essay focusing in particular on the numerous Hogarth works presented, including some from the series respectively entitled: *The Rakes Progress*, and *The Harlot's Progress*, and *Industry and Idleness*, and *The Times, Plates 1 & 2*. An excerpt from my essay notes that the spectrum of graphic works by William Hogarth in the exhibition conjures the social anxieties and political challenges of the mid-eighteenth century in England during an era that was burdened internationally by the



FIGURE 9.17 Patrick Mahon, *Study: The Times (Submerged)*, digital photograph, 2014



FIGURE 9.18 Patrick Mahon, *Submersible (Hogarth) #2*, ink on hardboard, 260 × 200 cm, 2014

Hogarth print (*figure 9.18*). In the case of these works, the surfaces display marks from an historical graphic image as seen *through* water: a critical tableau that is seemingly unfixed, ostensibly illegible, and yet preserved.



FIGURE 9.19 Patrick Mahon, *Submersible (Hogarth) #1*, ink on hardboard (detail), 245 × 240 cm, 2014



FIGURE 9.20 Patrick Mahon, *Installation View: Hogarths and Bounty with Water Table* (Rodman Hall Art Centre, St. Catharine's ON), 2014

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