

PATRICK MAHON

MANITOBA: *Water Memory Table*, Jan. 16 to Feb. 15, Gallery 1C03, University of Winnipeg

Like the tide flooding in, a welter of blue and curving lines flows up the towers in Patrick Mahon's newest work, a collaged hybrid of sculpture and printmaking. His wall-mounted and freestanding pieces address climate change, incorporating both site-specific elements and research from a larger multidisciplinary and collaborative project, *Immersion Emergencies and Possible Worlds*, funded through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. A professor at Western University in London, Ont., Mahon is an artist and curator who grew up in Winnipeg. His work has been exhibited across Canada, and internationally in China and France.

Mahon visited India after the 2004 tsunami, where he saw both cataclysmic destruction and signs that people were rebuilding, particularly infrastructure such as water towers. It seemed emblematic of humanity's complex relationship with water, something, he says, that has proven uncontainable, yet also requires containment. "Water is precious, yet so very capable of destruction, as we are coming to know so well."

Using digital technology as well as silkscreen and stamps, Mahon printed various marks on sheets of wood – basswood and balsa for smaller works, and white maple for larger ones. He sliced these boards into long, narrow strips and then glued them onto a backing of rice paper or thicker millboard. To finish, he reinforced tenuous junctures and cut away any backing that was still visible. The result: a collage in low relief with open spaces, much like a trellis.

His *Water and Tower Allegory* series presents silhouettes of utilitarian structures such as towers and platforms, partially inspired by the industrial sites documented in the spartan images of German photographers Bernd and Hilla Becher. Elements printed on the wood are drawn from art historical narratives of aspiration and ruin: golden sections are from a carved and gilded baroque ceiling that Mahon photographed in Brazil, and blue waves were digitally sampled from Titian's massive wood-block print, *Drowning of the Pharaoh's Host in the Red Sea*.

Mahon's *Water Memory Table* is a freestanding lattice, four-and-a-half feet by nine feet, that floats at table height on nearly invisible steel legs. Based on a map of the devastating 1950 Winnipeg flood, it charts the Red River as an irregular mud-brown line. Blue textured slats that suggest the contours of a lake outline the flooded area. The surrounding land is represented by a grid that's printed with reproductions from Manitoba's archives, a collage documenting floods dating back to the 1800s. The grid suggests human industry – the survey lines that section land into farms, and the utility networks that provide heat, power, water and information. Humans build the grids, and nature washes them away. Climate change is speeding up this cycle of destruction and renewal.

– Margaret Bessai

Water Memory Table (Study),
2013, ink on basswood,
11" x 20"

