Water is the driving force of all nature.
~Leonardo da Vinci, Italian Renaissance artist

Saving our planet, lifting people out of poverty, advancing economic growth...these are one and the same fight. We must connect the dots between climate change, water scarcity, energy shortages, global health, food security and women's empowerment. Solutions to one problem must be solutions for all.
~Ban Ki-Moon, South Korean Secretary General of the United Nations

Sant Khalsa integrates her art and life gracefully and completely. Her spiritual, political, and aesthetic concerns intersect in artwork that ranges from photography to sculpture to installation. Khalsa’s exhibition at Pasadena City College includes examples from several projects throughout her career. All of them address the connected issues that Ban Ki-Moon discusses--"climate change, water scarcity, energy shortages, global health, food security and women's empowerment"--with emphasis on the centrality of water and our planet's health. As the artist reminds us, "Nature and humans are connected. The water that flows in rivers is the same water that flows through our bodies."¹

Born Sheila Roth in New York City in 1953, the artist changed her name to foreground her commitment to a life of meditation, vegetarianism, social justice and community service. Khalsa moved to San Bernardino, California, in 1975 to work as a yoga teacher. Over time, she began to use the skills developed through yoga in her art practice and in her teaching career. As a professor at California State University, San Bernardino since 1988, Khalsa focuses on the development of art as a tool for both personal introspection and ongoing reflection of the artist's relation to society. She leads her students into careful consideration of how their work mirrors their perspective and their experience of being in the world.

The "Intimate Landscape" series (1982-83) was Khalsa's first sustained photographic look at the landscape of Southern California. The small, vintage-looking black and white photographs were triggered by the 1980 Panorama Fire in the San Bernardino area. (Her work for the previous five years, i.e. 1975-80, had focused on her spiritual community and women's issues.) Khalsa started documenting evidence of the devastating fire and this exercise led her to thinking about our relationship with the landscape, with place. She considered "Intimate Landscape" a meditation on the region in which she lived, on her relationship with nature. She

¹ Author interview with artist, December 2015
used the small format so viewers would have to get close to examine details often overlooked in our everyday encounter with our environment. The experience of viewing the art thus paralleled the experience of getting close to nature.

Khalsa has worked on her "Paving Paradise" series for 30 years now. The photographs comprise an ongoing visual exploration of the 96-mile-long Santa Ana River and its watershed. The artist writes,

"My work is intended to create a contemplative space where one can sense the subtle and profound connections between themselves, the natural world and our constructed settings. My often disquieting photographs address complex environmental and societal issues and reflect upon my various ideas concerning my/our relationship with the river--as place of community, economic resource, recreational site, natural habitat, sanctuary, and both source of life and destruction."

For the "Western Waters" photographs, Khalsa documented the water stores that punctuate our urban landscapes. She realized that many of the stores are patronized by people who see the stores as both entrepreneurial enterprises and replications of "natural" experiences. Khalsa arranges sixty of the "Western Waters" photographs as a gridded, map-like installation. As the artist notes,

"The success of these stores is based on consumers’ fear that their tap water is not safe to drink and on providing an alternative to bottled water. Today, plastic bottles have replaced earthen vessels, and to fetch our water, we travel in polluting automobiles to and from this fabricated representation of a river, well, or spring."

I was honored to work with Khalsa on her "Sacred Spring," first exhibited in the "Muses" exhibition at the Pasadena Armory Center for the Arts in 1995. "Sacred Spring" was the artist's first work in a long time that did not include photography. Instead, Khalsa installed nine plumbed spigots in a gallery wall; viewers partook of the artwork by pouring and drinking the water that gushed forth. Rather than simply looking at the art, viewers interacted with the art by imbibing it. Each spigot was labeled with a desired quality--creativity, abundance, grace--so "Sacred Spring" allowed viewers to consume art and spirituality simultaneously.

"Trees and Seedlings" is a series of photographs embedded in pillars of glass and wood. Light moves through the glass and projects the photographic images on the wall behind them.

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2 Taken from the artist's website: http://santkhalsa.com/Portfolio.cfm?nK=2481.
3 http://santkhalsa.com/Portfolio.cfm?nK=2543.
so that the mixed media sculptures evoke lost and destroyed trees. The works refer to
generations of natural materials, the birth, life, death, rebirth cycle of the forest.

One of Khalsa's most recent works is the "Pray for Rain (Prayer Wheel)" glass sculpture
from 2015. A hollow, clear-glass cylinder is topped by a pale blue glass sphere. The cylinder is
half full of water, with tiny containers floating on its surface. Each of the miniature bottles
contains a blessing message. Khalsa notes that the sculpture is based on a Tibetan Prayer Wheel.
The object itself is elegant and quite beautiful. As the cylinder spins slowly on its pedestal, light
shines through the glass and projects an ethereal shimmer on the wall behind it.

Khalsa notes that "Pray for Rain" solidifies many of the ideas of her 35-year engagement
with the Southern California landscape, water issues, and her spiritual practice. Finding meaning
in the world and giving it physical form are two of Khalsa's paramount concerns. As an art-
maker, she seeks to be a heightened observer, to use her creative practice to engender in
viewers a heightened sensitivity, an intensified awareness, of the meaningful miracle of our
existence on this water world.

In addition to creating an impressive oeuvre which has been widely exhibited to much
critical acclaim, Khalsa has been the recipient of prestigious fellowships, awards and grants from
the National Endowment for the Arts, California Arts Council, California Council for the
Humanities, Arts Foundation of San Bernardino County, Center for Photographic Art in Carmel,
and others. In March 2012 she was honored as the first recipient of the SPE Insight Award from
the Board of Directors of the Society for Photographic Education for her significant contributions
to the field of photography as an artist, educator, and mentor.