An essay about Sant Khalsa’s project “Western Waters” by Glenn Harcourt

At the heart of the seemingly infinite web of roads that crisscross the American southwest, there is an intersection: a conceptual crossroads, to be sure; yet nonetheless descriptive of our basic existential situation. A barren, rocky landscape where tumbleweeds bounce along in the gusty wind, it marks the point where the twin trajectories of water and gasoline meet.

There are at least a couple of buildings marking the site: certainly a gas station, and also an anonymous white storefront, mostly comprising big glass windows covered in hand-painted advertising and illegible handbills. The white painted framework reflects the hot sun. The inside looks cool, dark, refreshing. The painted signage announces the store’s primary merchandise with clarity and simplicity: AGUA PURA – CRYSTAL FRESH DRINKING WATER. And where one buys water, one may also acquire HIELO – ICE. The water on offer here is neither branded nor fancy nor designer nor mined from glaciers on Greenland or Iceland. It is simply “pura” (pure) or “crystal fresh” (in reality produced by reverse osmosis filtration from water derived straight from the tap). Nor is it pitched to a high-end clientele, for, as the signage also proclaims, “WE ACCEPT FOOD STAMPS.”

Although the store that I have just described is meant to perform a metaphorical function, it is also an actual building (nestled in a strip mall) and an actual business: CRYSTAL FRESH DRINKING WATER at 1627 Indian Hill Boulevard in Pomona, California. And my own description of it comes from one of the marvelous black-and-white studies in Sant Khalsa’s photographic series, Western Waters (2000-2002/2010).

Western Waters is a chronicle of small-time entrepreneurship. It records a selection of store-front businesses scattered literally by the hundreds across California and the American southwest. These businesses deal in water, but they lie at the other end of the entrepreneurial spectrum from the producers of fancy European mineral waters and the mega-corporations like Nestlé, whose ReadyRefresh subsidiary seems relentlessly determined to corner the world-wide bottled water market. Their product is essentially “purified” tap water, filtered through a reverse osmosis system. It is not particularly “safer” than untreated tap water, although it can certainly taste better; but it definitely appeals to people who view municipal water as the product of a cumbersome and hence untrustworthy governmental or quasi-governmental bureaucracy. It also often appeals to immigrants, many of whom have actually come from places where untreated drinking water is a real danger, and where the results of drinking it can be deadly. Hence, these businesses often cluster in ethnic neighborhoods (there are two in the Armenian neighborhood near my own house) and they often attempt to project an image of water that is “cool,” “pure,” “crystal clear,” even suggestive of the waters of “paradise.” This kind of projection may represent a triumph of advertising over reality; but it can also be an aspect of ethnic or communal solidarity, and an assertion of a certain life-giving power over at least one aspect of what can easily be a hostile environment, both natural and man-made.
As photographs, the individual images that make up the Western Waters series are deceptively simple. Shot with a standard 35 mm camera mounted with a 50 mm lens, all similarly composed in strict frontality, and printed in the darkroom to standardize their overall tonality, they can appear, at least at a distance, to display a stripped-down homogeneity. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since they are clearly connected to the stark modernism and the serial minimalist aesthetic that infuses such work as the water and gas tanks of Bernd and Hilla Becher, and, more locally, work like the Twentysix Gas Stations (1963) of Ed Ruscha – to which they make a striking pendant.

Indeed, it may well be that Ruscha is the more telling comparison, and for a number of reasons. While the Becher tanks are iconic, and comprise work with real originary power, they are also relentless in their concentration on the dialog between sameness and difference that constitutes the identity of the individual tanks as pure products of engineering. As forms, they might almost be called Platonic; certainly, as anyone who has seen such tanks in real life can attest, they inhabit a world that is supra-human in its scale, and beyond any but the most apocalyptic narratives (see, for example, the climactic scene in Raoul Walsh’s classic 1949 film White Heat).

Ruscha’s Gas Stations, by contrast, are in a way much more intimate: at least we can recognize his structures as potential sites for the unfolding of mundane personal narratives (the apotheosis of this vernacular subject did not occur until the 1966 screenprint version) and this is a characteristic that his gas stations share with Khalsa’s stores. According to the artist, her own sense of narrative was also honed through her exposure to the equally iconic work of Walker Evans, and we can see this as well; although in Western Waters, the narrative often remains implicit, a resonance or echo rather than a straightforward dramatic statement.

In addition, Ruscha’s Gas Stations are connected as a group by a single narrative thread: a trip that the artist made along Route 66 from Los Angeles to his home in Oklahoma City, a road trip during which the original shots were taken. Probably few people would argue that during the early 1960’s (as it might still be today) such a trip could legitimately be seen as a kind of hip secular pilgrimage, a pilgrimage through the literal and figurative heartland of America.

Sant Khalsa’s Western Waters can also be described in terms of pilgrimage – indeed the project has been so described by the artist – although in this case, the idea of pilgrimage should be seen as carrying a more overtly spiritual resonance. Indeed, the sixty photographs that comprise the finished project were culled from 200 images made over the course of two years (2000 – 2002) on a series of trips across California and the southwest, trips explicitly taken to visit and photograph these sites precisely because of their location at the intersection of so many “lines of force” that between them chart the complexities of scarcity and abundance, of politics and ethnic identity, of community and playa that define the place of water within the world of our experience.

It is perhaps no accident that the most often visited site of Catholic pilgrimage in the United States is the Sanctuary of Chimayó, New Mexico, whose reputation for healing attracts close to 300,000 pilgrims a year to the small village north of Santa Fe. That healing reputation is itself tied directly to the land, to an aspect of Nature that has been blessed (as believers aver) with a special sacredness. The sites of
purification by reverse osmosis recorded in Sant Khalsa’s *Western Waters* might not be described in such overtly ecclesiastical or doctrinal terms; but they are nevertheless locations that serve to remind us of the particular sacredness that inheres in the waters whose flow is so central to life in the dry expanses of the desert.